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Beyond Strategic Partnership: The Impact of Osama bin Laden's Killing on Pakistan–US Diplomatic and Security Relations

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Abstract

This study has examined the profound impact of Osama bin Laden's killing in Abbottabad on Pakistan-US relations, revealing it as a critical turning point that exposed deep structural weaknesses in the bilateral partnership. While the event was a triumph for the US, it represented a crisis for Pakistan, magnifying mistrust and undermining long-term cooperation. The relationship, historically fragile and marked by cycles of alliance and estrangement, shifted after the raid from strategic partnership to transactional engagement, with weakened intelligence sharing, reduced aid, and intensified political backlash in Pakistan. The operation also accelerated Pakistan's strategic realignment toward China and Russia and reinforced US-India ties, reshaping regional dynamics. Ultimately, the sustained legacy of mistrust has defined post-2011 relations, with cooperation continuing primarily out of necessity and constrained by skepticism. This study analyses Pakistan–USA relations before and after Usama bin Laden's killing in May 2011, and grounds the argument by focusing on the subsequent years from 2011 onward to examine, thematically, the patterns relating to mutual trust, sovereignty, counterterrorism cooperation, and bilateral diplomatic tensions. The paper argues that the killing of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad widened the already existing fault lines in tensions between Pakistan and the United States by undermining counterterrorism cooperation and fomenting distrust in bilateral relations.

Keywords: Pak-US Relations, Sovereignty, Foreign Policy, Diplomacy, Counterterrorism

Introduction

Pakistan and the United States established diplomatic ties shortly after Pakistan's independence in 1947, with their relationship largely shaped by geopolitical interests during the Cold War. The US viewed Pakistan as a strategic ally to contain Soviet expansion, while Pakistan sought military and economic support to strengthen its state and address security concerns (Council on Foreign Relations, 2005). In 1954, Pakistan signed the Mutual Defence Assistance Agreement with the US and joined regional defense pacts like SEATO and CENTO, solidifying its role in US Cold War strategy. During this period, Pakistan received considerable US military and economic aid aimed at bolstering allies against Soviet influence (McMahon, 1988). However, the relationship experienced strains, such as during the Indo-Pak war of 1965, when Pakistan felt the US did not fully support its efforts, creating early mistrust. (Gul et al., 2025).

Pakistan's pursuit of nuclear capability increasingly worried the US, leading to diplomatic friction and sanctions due to concerns about proliferation (Council on Foreign Relations, 2005). The 1970s also saw Pakistan tilt closer to China, especially following India's 1971 war, which shifted regional alliances (Smith, 2013). The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 renewed US interest in Pakistan, which became a critical base for covert and overt US support to mujahideen fighting the Soviets, marking a high point in strategic cooperation (Huffman, 2012). After the Soviet withdrawal, Pakistan's US strategic importance declined somewhat, but nuclear proliferation issues and the rise of the Taliban brought renewed scrutiny. Pakistan was among the few countries to recognize the Taliban regime (Faheem & Khan, 2022).

The US imposed sanctions on Pakistan following its nuclear tests in 1998, which strained bilateral relations. Nonetheless, the US continued to see Pakistan as important for regional stability and counterterrorism efforts in South Asia (Mistry, 1999). After the 9/11 attacks, Pakistan became a key US ally in the War on Terror, providing bases, logistical support, and intelligence cooperation in exchange for increased military and civilian aid (Katz, 2016). Despite this cooperation, tensions persisted around US drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal areas and concerns over Pakistan's alleged harboring of militant groups (Refworld, 2011). In 2009, the US Congress passed the Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act, or Kerry-Lugar Bill, authorizing increased civilian aid focused on governance and countering extremism, marking a shift toward development-oriented assistance (Bakht & Ejaz, 2023)

War on Terror and role of Pakistan

Since 2001, Pakistan and the United States have maintained a tense yet indispensable partnership in the global War on Terror. Pakistan emerged as a frontline ally, receiving billions of dollars in military and economic aid in exchange for providing logistical support and intelligence cooperation (Kronstadt, 2009). Despite this cooperation, mutual suspicions plagued the relationship: Washington frequently accused Islamabad of "double-dealing" by allegedly maintaining ties with militant networks, while Pakistan criticized the US for actions perceived as violations of its sovereignty and for overlooking the country's sacrifices in combating terrorism (The Express Tribune, 2011).

Overview of the Abbottabad Operation.

The Abbottabad operation, in which US Navy SEALs killed Osama bin Laden in a compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, on May 2, 2011, was a pivotal event in Pakistan-US relations with multidimensional significance. One of the most direct consequences was a serious breach of Pakistan's sovereignty. Pakistani political leaders and the public viewed the unilateral US raid carried out without informing Pakistani authorities in advance as an infringement on international norms and state sovereignty. Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani explicitly stated that the United States "should not have bypassed Pakistan" in executing the raid (Dawn, 2011).

The operation exposed lapses in Pakistan's intelligence and defense systems. Investigations, such as the Abbottabad Commission, revealed that radars on Pakistan's western border were

operating in a "peacetime mode," which reduced the detectability of foreign helicopters or aircraft entering Pakistani airspace (The Express Tribune, 2013). This revelation strained trust between US and Pakistani intelligence agencies and fostered greater US suspicion regarding Pakistan's negligence or possible complicity in harboring bin Laden deep inside its territory (Al Jazeera, 2011).

Domestically, the operation triggered intense political debate and pressure. Pakistan's Parliament responded with an in-camera joint session where military, intelligence, and civilian leaders were questioned. A consensus resolution was passed demanding an independent commission to investigate the breach and call for accountability (CRSS, 2013). The operation marked a low point in bilateral trust and diplomatic relations. US officials questioned Pakistan's role, either through incompetence or complicity, in sheltering bin Laden for years (The Express Tribune, 2011). Conversely, Pakistan condemned unilateral US actions and the dangerous precedent they set (Jinnah Institute, 2011). Coordination failures around US operations inside Pakistan contributed to a deepening "trust deficit" between the two countries (Daily Times, 2017).

Globally, the operation bolstered the US image as decisively combating terrorism by eliminating the most-wanted terrorist leader. However, it also complicated US relations worldwide by raising concerns about the precedent of conducting similar operations without host-state consent. For Pakistan, the discovery of bin Laden near a major military academy raised serious questions about oversight, accountability, and the integrity of internal security institutions (Jinnah Institute, 2011).

The killing of Osama bin Laden marked a critical turning point in Pakistan–USA relations because it questioned the very sovereignty of Pakistan, the intelligence-sharing mechanism between the two countries, and proved that there is an asymmetry in strategic relations. Although both countries shared and cooperated in the US-led war on terror, there were differences in their perceptions of counterterrorism. Thus, the primary argument is to explore how the Abbottabad operation intensified already fragile bilateral relations between Pakistan and the USA. There remains an opportunity to explore this critically to understand the interaction between sovereignty, intelligence cooperation, and power asymmetry in bilateral relations by focusing on the diplomatic repercussions of the operation. Primarily, this study assesses how the Abbottabad operation widened diplomatic tensions, and it also highlights why cooperation between strategically interdependent states can persist despite profound disagreements over security priorities and the limits of unilateral action.

Research Objective

The study aims to examine the effects of the Abbottabad operation on Pakistan–US diplomatic trust, intelligence and counterterrorism cooperation, domestic political debate, and bilateral economic relations. It also seeks to assess how far the incident contributed to subsequent strategic adjustments within the regional security environment.

Research Question

How did the Abbottabad operation affect Pakistan–US diplomatic trust and security cooperation, through what political and economic mechanisms did these effects emerge, and to what extent can subsequent regional strategic adjustments be attributed to the operation rather than to wider geopolitical developments?

Literature Review

The Abbottabad operation, resulting in the killing of Osama bin Laden, has been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis due to its significant impact on international security, diplomacy, and media representations. Wirtz (2022) examines the operation through the lens of special operations theory, highlighting its strategic precision and novelty in modern warfare. This perspective emphasizes how the raid exemplified high-stakes covert action

reshaping counterterrorism paradigms.

Soherwordi and Khattak (2020) analyze the operation's implications for US-Pakistan relations, revealing heightened tensions resulting from sovereignty breaches and mistrust, which complicated collaboration in the War on Terror. They argue that while the operation underscored shared security challenges, it also exposed deep fissures in diplomatic trust, affecting both countries' counterterrorism policies.

Media representation plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions, as discussed by Marwan and Jan (2017), who compare Pakistani, British, and American media narratives. Their study reveals divergent portrayals: Pakistani media highlighted themes of sovereignty violation, while Western media framed the raid as a triumph of justice.

Similarly, Rafique (2013) notes a marked shift in Pakistani print media's portrayal of the US, documenting a transformation from cautious support to critical scrutiny post-operation, reflecting changing public sentiments.

Ethical debates have also been prominent. Hersh (2015) challenges official narratives of the raid, questioning the transparency and moral justification of the operation, while Bowman, Lewis, and Tamborini (2014) conduct a content analysis of US headlines, capturing nationalistic and moral legitimization of bin Laden's killing. Gollwitzer et al. (2014) explore the psychological impact, describing "vicarious revenge" whereby Americans experienced collective satisfaction and emotional closure following the operation.

Strategically, Pande (2011) and Inkster (2011) examine the operation's aftermath for Pakistan, discussing its destabilizing domestic political effects and shifts in regional security dynamics. Pande emphasizes Pakistan's internal challenges regarding accountability and governance, while Inkster highlights broader implications for South Asian security. Ungerer et al. (2011) further focus on international responses and counterterrorism strategies that evolved post-raid.

Rollins (2011) provides a comprehensive overview of the operation's implications, underscoring potential benefits in disrupting terrorist networks but also cautioning about diplomatic fallout and operational risks, particularly regarding sovereign violations and intelligence cooperation reliability.

Zaidi, S. M. S., & Ahmad, A. (2022) explain how Post-9/11 Pakistan–US relations have swung from friends to foes and seen many ups and downs. Occasionally, they aligned for socio-economic and military cooperation, as in the post 9/11, when Pakistan became the frontline ally of the US in the war against terrorism in Afghanistan, and the US granted Pakistan the prestigious status of a non-NATO ally. Soon after, the US started violating Pakistan's sovereignty through drone strikes, and those drew Pakistan into a difficult front at home and abroad.

Hassan, Y. U. (2022) argues that Pakistan had deftly taken advantage of its position in the U.S.-China-Pakistan strategic triangle in countering Indian influence, and the U.S.-China competition puts Pakistan in challenging situations, as it navigates this great-power competition as the role of middle powers increases. He argues that Pakistan's new national policy, with an emphasis on geoeconomics over geopolitics, can count on China's consistent friendship, given Chinese economic and security investments, irrespective of Beijing's own strategic interests in fostering this relationship.

Shahbaz, M. (2023) says that Pakistan has become a frontline ally of the U.S., right from fighting alongside the CIA since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and after. The author claims that Pakistani society got weaponized; the "war on terror" inflicted human, financial, and security losses on Pakistan, and the security alliance with the U.S. demoralized democracy at the domestic level. Besides, that brought terrorism to Pakistan, and consequently Pakistan had to fight terrorism at home.

Faiz and others (2024) explain the historical context of how the Cold War-driven ideological conflict between the US and USSR compelled the newly emerged Pakistan to choose the US as its future partner. They explain that Pakistan

confronted myriad challenges concerning its security, so it could not maintain a nonaligned posture and had to fall into the Western bloc led by the USA against the Soviet bloc led by the USSR. The authors argued that political, strategic, and economic dynamics of the international environment interplayed between 1947 and 1977 in choosing the policy directions for Pakistan. The authors claim that the constraints leading Pakistan to be a strategic partner of the USA and to go into a cost-benefit analysis of this partnership, the complex arrangement of international and regional politics, and Pakistan's internal economic and political instability compelled it to join and stay in the Western bloc, making it hard to quit despite losing its trust in its strategic partnership with the US.

Collectively, this literature reveals that the Abbottabad operation was a turning point that not only decimated a key terrorist leader but also reshaped bilateral relations between Pakistan and the US. The event highlighted the complexities of counterterrorism efforts conducted within sensitive geopolitical contexts and sparked ongoing debates about sovereignty, ethics, and strategic cooperation.

Methodology

This research paper is based on secondary data collected from academic journals, books, media reports, and credible online sources related to the Abbottabad operation and Pakistan–US relations. The analysis is conducted using qualitative research methods, focusing on thematic and content analysis to explore the diplomatic, political, and security implications of the operation.

Sovereignty and National Humiliation Impact on Pakistan

For Pakistan, the unilateral US operation to kill Osama bin Laden was profoundly humiliating and had far-reaching consequences (Roy, 2022). The mission not only violated Pakistan's national sovereignty but also publicly exposed the country's inability to detect or prevent a high-profile security breach on its soil (Hashim, 2013). This failure called into question the effectiveness of Pakistan's intelligence and military apparatus, particularly as the operation took place just a few hundred meters from the prestigious Pakistan Military Academy (Hersh, 2015). Domestically, the raid ignited widespread anger and resentment among the public and political leaders, who viewed the unilateral nature of the operation as a serious infringement on Pakistan's independence and dignity. Many perceived the mission as a betrayal of Pakistan's sovereignty, leading to a surge of nationalist sentiments and political debates about the country's strategic autonomy. The Pakistani military and especially the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency came under intense scrutiny and criticism both within Pakistan and internationally (Datta, 2014). This reputational damage had lasting effects on Pakistan's domestic politics and its foreign relations, contributing to an erosion of trust between Pakistan and the United States, complicating future cooperation on intelligence sharing and counterterrorism operations (Mazhar & Goraya, 2020).

Diplomatic & Military Assistance

Following the Abbottabad operation, the United States suspended approximately $800 million in military aid to Pakistan in July 2011, reflecting concerns over Pakistan's reliability as a counterterrorism partner (Kronstadt, 2012). This suspension targeted funds under the Coalition Support Funds and included training and equipment assistance, aiming to pressure Pakistan against militant sanctuaries like the Haqqani Network (Fair, 2014). The freeze damaged military cooperation, slowing joint training and intelligence sharing, while Pakistan reduced US personnel and limited counterinsurgency collaboration (Shah, 2012). Although some civilian aid continued under the Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act, its disbursement was delayed amid political tensions and concerns over accountability (Kronstadt, 2012). This aid reduction exposed the transactional nature of US-Pakistan relations, fostering resentment and mistrust in Pakistan and encouraging Islamabad to diversify its alliances toward China and Gulf states (Haqqani, 2013).

Pakistan–USA Relations Before and After the Abbottabad Operation

Analytical Dimension	Pre-2011 situation	Immediate impact	Long-term impact
Diplomatic Relation	Continued cooperation despite disagreements on security policies	The operation intensified diplomatic tensions and scrutiny of the bilateral partnership	Diplomatic Relations got strained, but engagement and cooperation continued
National Sovereignty	Even with disagreement over the operations' jurisdiction, Pak-US cooperated on counterterrorism.	The US operation in Abbottabad raised acute sovereignty concerns	Important questions were raised over national sovereignty and the limits of unilateral action in bilateral engagement
Economic and military assistance	US supported Pakistan in economic, development, and security objectives	Scrutiny increased, and security assistance faced disruption amid the broader congressional debate in the USA	Assistance was made subject to political and security concerns about Pakistan, and engagement was renewed in 2013–2015.
Overall Pak-US Relations	Strategically an important partnership but with uneven and unresolved interests and policy goals	The Abbottabad Operation fomented a diplomatic crisis, and it exposed underlying weaknesses in trust and coordination.	Diplomatic relations strained, and cooperation limited but continued amid unresolved strategic differences.

Source: Kronstadt (2011, 2015); US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (2013); (U.S. Department of State, n.d.)

Domestic Pressure on Pakistan

The operation sparked significant political turmoil in Pakistan, leading to a special in-camera parliamentary session in May 2011 where lawmakers criticized the government and military for failing to detect the US raid within Pakistani territory (Shah, 2012). Opposition parties blamed the ruling Pakistan People's Party (PPP) for incompetence, while debates over civilian oversight of security policy intensified, exposing a rift between civilian leaders and the military (Fair, 2014). The military, especially the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and Pakistan Army, faced embarrassment and loss of credibility as bin Laden had lived near the Pakistan Military Academy undetected, prompting public demands for explanations and a rare apology from Army Chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani (Rashid, 2012). Public opinion was deeply divided, with many Pakistanis resenting the sovereignty breach more than bin Laden's presence, sparking widespread anti-American protests led by religious and nationalist groups, while others criticized their government and military for possible collusion or incompetence, eroding trust in state institutions (Shahbaz, M. 2023). Politically, the incident intensified calls for Pakistan to adopt a more independent foreign policy by reducing reliance on the US and strengthening ties with China, Iran, and Gulf states. The event also caused a legitimacy crisis for the PPP government and weakened Pakistan's negotiating position with Washington by underscoring perceptions of unreliability and political instability (Markey, 2013).

Impact on Security Cooperation

Before the operation, agencies like Pakistan's ISI and the US CIA cooperated in counterterrorism efforts despite mutual suspicions (Coll, 2018). However, the unilateral nature of Operation Neptune Spear conducted without Pakistan's knowledge deepened mistrust, leading Pakistan to expel hundreds of US intelligence personnel and impose restrictions, thereby weakening joint counterterrorism efforts (Haqqani, 2013). This erosion limited operations against militant groups like the Haqqani Network and aggravated tensions over US drone strikes, which Pakistan publicly condemned as sovereignty violations despite some tacit approval (Byman, 2011).

Drone warfare escalated after 2004, especially during the Obama administration,

targeting militants in Pakistan's tribal areas. The US justified these strikes as legal self-defense and vital counterterrorism measures with minimal collateral damage (Koh, 2011). Conversely, Pakistan condemned the strikes as breaches of sovereignty, fueling widespread anti-American sentiment and protests due to civilian casualties, thereby intensifying political fallout and mistrust (Boyle, 2013). These tensions further strained bilateral relations, challenging cooperation and encouraging Pakistan to pivot towards regional partnerships (Riedel, 2011).

The Abbottabad operation drastically altered counterterrorism collaboration. While cooperation before 2011 was robust, the raid's secrecy fractured trust, prompting the US to prioritize unilateral actions that sidelined Pakistani agencies (Byman, 2012). Pakistan responded by restricting US intelligence operations and limiting joint efforts, transforming the partnership into a more transactional and conditional relationship marked by mutual suspicion (Fair, 2014). Nevertheless, limited collaboration persisted due to shared security interests, though the bin Laden episode signaled a lasting shift in the dynamics of US-Pakistan counterterrorism cooperation.

Impact on Economic Relations

US aid has played a central role in Pakistan–US relations, especially after 9/11, primarily through the Coalition Support Fund (CSF) and the Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act (KLB). The CSF, established in 2001, reimbursed Pakistan for military and logistical support to US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, becoming a critical source of security funding. However, tensions arose due to allegations of misuse and delayed reimbursements despite Pakistan's significant sacrifices in the War on Terror (Kronstadt, 2012). The KLB, enacted in 2009, provided $7.5 billion in civilian aid focused on governance, socio-economic development, and counter-extremism. While intended to strengthen civilian institutions, many Pakistani political and military leaders viewed the attached conditions as infringements on sovereignty (Haqqani, 2013). After the Abbottabad raid in 2011, growing US mistrust led to suspensions and reductions in aid, particularly under the CSF, with congressional calls for stricter conditionalities on civilian programs as well (Markey, 2013).

This shift towards conditionality intensified post-2011, linking aid disbursements to Pakistan's tangible counterterrorism efforts, especially against groups like the Haqqani Network. Payment delays and suspensions became common when perceived cooperation declined, exacerbating bilateral mistrust (Markey, 2013). Civilian aid projects faced increased scrutiny, with demands for greater transparency and accountability, which were resisted in Pakistan as undue foreign interference (Haqqani, 2013). The transactional nature of aid deepened Pakistani resentment and pushed Islamabad to diversify foreign partnerships, notably with China and Gulf states (Kronstadt, 2012).

Economically, Pakistan's longstanding dependence on US aid was destabilized by the post-2011 suspensions, leading to budgetary uncertainties and prompting strategic shifts. Pakistan increasingly sought alternative financial partnerships, with initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor symbolizing this diversification (Fair, 2014). Although US assistance continued selectively, it became more targeted and conditional, emphasizing short-term strategic interests over broad-based development (Markey, 2013). Domestic opposition to conditional aid and economic pressures highlighted the risks of overreliance on a single partner, emphasizing the need for Pakistan to pursue economic self-reliance and broaden its global alliances (Haqqani, 2013).

Fallout on Military and Intelligence Cooperation

One of the most immediate consequences was the strain on military-to-military and intelligence-to-intelligence cooperation. Joint operations became limited, intelligence sharing grew selective, and the US increased its reliance on unilateral actions such as drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal areas (Zaidi, S. M. S., & Ahmad, A. 2022). Pakistan, in turn, expelled US military

trainers and restricted the activities of American personnel.

Strategic Rebalancing

In the long term, the Abbottabad incident nudged Pakistan closer to recalibrating its foreign policy. While ties with the US remained strained, Pakistan began diversifying its strategic partnerships, particularly with China, to reduce dependence on Washington (Hassan, Y. U. 2022). At the same time, US policymakers increasingly viewed India as a more reliable partner in South Asia, further complicating the regional balance.

Impact on Public Perceptions

The episode also had significant implications for Pakistan's domestic politics. Civilian and military leaders faced questions about their credibility, competence, and loyalty. The narrative of sovereignty being compromised by US actions gained traction among nationalist and Islamist groups, further fueling anti-American sentiment.

Anti-American sentiment in Pakistan intensified significantly after the 2011 Abbottabad raid, viewed widely as a violation of national sovereignty and evidence of US disregard for Pakistan's territorial integrity (Haqqani, 2013). This anger was fueled by long-standing grievances over US drone strikes causing civilian casualties, reinforcing perceptions that Washington prioritized its own security over Pakistani lives (Fair, 2014). Pakistani media and political leaders amplified these sentiments, portraying the raid as a national humiliation and sparking widespread public protests (Pew Research Center, 2012). Militants also exploited this resentment to challenge the government's cooperation with the US, further complicating domestic politics.

Simultaneously, the Abbottabad operation deepened the trust deficit among US policymakers, who questioned Pakistan's reliability as a counterterrorism partner due to bin Laden's presence near a military base. Concerns over possible Pakistani complicity or incompetence led to harsh scrutiny of aid effectiveness and a shift towards unilateral US actions, including increased drone strikes, bypassing Pakistani agencies (Riedel, 2012). This mistrust triggered reassessments of the US-Pakistan strategic partnership, with Washington exploring closer ties to India and independent operations within Pakistan (Haqqani, 2013).

Media portrayal in both countries magnified these tensions. US media framed the operation as a decisive intelligence victory and questioned Pakistan's role in harboring bin Laden, reinforcing skepticism about Islamabad (Markey, 2013). Conversely, Pakistani media focused on sovereignty violations and national humiliation, highlighting US disregard for Pakistani sovereignty and the human cost of drone strikes, thus fueling anti-American sentiment and distrust (Fair, 2014). These divergent narratives deepened the communication gap and diplomatic strain post-raid.

Regional and Global Implications

The killing of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad intensified India's longstanding concerns about Pakistan's alleged support for militant groups. Indian officials and media highlighted bin Laden's proximity to a Pakistani military cantonment as evidence of Islamabad's duplicity in the War on Terror, reinforcing the narrative that Pakistan sheltered extremists despite receiving billions in US aid (Pant, 2012). This incident strengthened India's calls for stricter US conditionality on aid to Pakistan and greater recognition of India as a reliable regional partner (Mohan, 2013). The raid also accelerated US-India strategic alignment, deepening defense, intelligence, and economic cooperation, partly as a counterbalance to Pakistan and within the broader Indo-Pacific strategy addressing China's rise (Tellis, 2014). For Pakistan, the growing US-India partnership heightened strategic insecurity, prompting Islamabad to pivot toward alliances with China.

Afghanistan remained central in shaping Pakistan-US strategy. Despite tensions, Pakistan's control over key NATO supply routes and influence over Taliban factions made it indispensable for stabilizing Afghanistan. However, Pakistan perceived growing US-India cooperation in Afghanistan as a security threat, complicating relations and contributing to

mistrust. The Abbottabad raid further eroded intelligence sharing, while Pakistan leveraged its influence over the Taliban amid US pressure for reconciliation efforts. Consequently, the US began exploring direct contact with the Taliban, reducing dependence on Pakistan, while Islamabad deepened ties with China and Russia, illustrating Afghanistan's role as both a bridge and wedge in bilateral relations (Markey, 2013).

Following 2011, Pakistan intensified strategic diversification by pivoting toward China and Russia to reduce reliance on the US. China became Pakistan's most dependable ally, providing diplomatic backing and defense cooperation, including joint military production and economic investment exemplified by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Pakistan also re-engaged Russia, resulting in lifted arms embargoes and cooperation in energy and counterterrorism. This pivot was driven by mistrust toward US unilateralism, economic necessity due to aid conditionality, regional geopolitics involving US–India ties, and a shifting multipolar world order. While not severing ties with the US, Pakistan's new alliances reduced American leverage, reshaping its foreign policy toward greater dependence on China and emerging collaboration with Russia, which has significant implications for regional security and sovereignty dynamics.

Conclusion

This study has examined the profound impact of Osama bin Laden's killing in Abbottabad on Pakistan-US relations, revealing it as a critical turning point that exposed deep structural weaknesses in the bilateral partnership. While the event was a triumph for the US, it represented a crisis for Pakistan, magnifying mistrust and undermining long-term cooperation. The relationship, historically fragile and marked by cycles of alliance and estrangement, shifted after the raid from strategic partnership to transactional engagement, with weakened intelligence sharing, reduced aid, and intensified political backlash in Pakistan. The operation also accelerated Pakistan's strategic realignment toward China and Russia and reinforced US-India ties, reshaping regional dynamics. Ultimately, the sustained legacy of mistrust has defined post-2011 relations, with cooperation continuing primarily out of necessity and constrained by skepticism.

Lessons for future diplomatic engagement involve building trust through transparency in intelligence and counterterrorism efforts and moving beyond aid-driven relations by emphasizing trade, investment, and mutual interests. Respect for sovereignty, institutionalized long-term dialogues, and fostering regional cooperation beyond zero-sum approaches are vital. Managing public perceptions through cultural and academic exchange and acknowledging the multipolar global context will improve resilience in bilateral ties.

For Pakistan's foreign policy, the post-2011 period has underscored the importance of diversifying strategic partnerships, especially with China, Russia, and Gulf states, while striving for greater strategic autonomy and balancing great-power rivalries. Emphasizing regional connectivity, economic diplomacy, and revisiting counterterrorism cooperation on sovereign terms are now priorities. Efforts in soft power and image management aim to counter negative narratives and enhance Pakistan's global standing. These shifts reflect Pakistan's adaptation to evolving regional and international realities, seeking stability through pragmatic and diversified engagement.

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