

IMPACTS OF GEO-ECONOMIC PRIORITIES ON PAKISTAN-UAE RELATIONS: IMPERATIVES, CONSTRAINTS AND POTENTIALS

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Abstract

Guided by neoliberal theory, this study examines Pakistan and the UAE's geo-economic shift, per Pakistan's 2021 National Security Policy and UAE's Vision 2021. Using qualitative supported by quantitative data, it highlights trade exceeding \$10 billion (2023-24), 41% export growth, \$6.7 billion remittances (2024) and \$10 billion UAE FDI as considerable strong impacts. Imperatives like economic stability and connectivity drive this, while constraints such as geopolitical tensions and institutional barriers challenge it. Potentials in diversification; renewable energy and the digital economy offer greater chances of growth. This partnership reflects middle-power economic statecraft in a multipolar world.

Keywords: Geo-Economics Shift, Pakistan-UAE Relations, Neoliberalism, Constraints, Potentials

1. Introduction

In the last few years, Pakistan has moved from focusing on traditional security in its foreign affairs to considering economic factors. The need for economic security at the heart of national security was formalized by the introduction of Pakistan's National Security Policy (NSP) in December 2021 (Jahanzaib & Khan, 2024; Hussain, 2024). The vision set out in the NSP is to make Pakistan a hub for trade, transit and production, substituting aid from others for partnerships in trade and investment in the region (Salik, 2023).

The evolution in the global economy means that traditional ideas about power are now based more on a country's economic resources than on its military capacity (Scholvin & Wigell, 2018). Pakistan has been working on using its strategic location to develop regional connectivity which includes projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and initiatives like the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) (Jahanzaib & Ahmed, 2024; SIFC, n.d).

In these circumstances, Pakistan's ties with the UAE become especially important. After the UAE was formed in 1971, its relationship with Pakistan has remained multifaceted, involving trade, investments, cultural exchange and strategic planning (Ministry of Foreign Affairs UAE, n.d). There is a large trade relationship between the UAE and Pakistan and the UAE's Pakistani expatriates transfer large amounts of money back to the country. Because of shared religious and cultural beliefs, their relationship has adapted well to local challenges (UAEStories, 2024).

Both the UAE and Pakistan now use geo-economics as an important part of their national strategies, thanks to their distinctive economic and geopolitical situations (Jahanzaib, 2025). For the UAE, geo-economics supports the Vision 2021 and Projects of the 50 which aim to diversify the economy, take part in international investments and form important partnerships to reduce the nation's reliance on oil. The UAE spends its money on building infrastructure and clean energy plants in other countries like Pakistan to safeguard future profit and improve its standing in the region (Eurasia Review, 2025).

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In Pakistan, geo-economics plays a big role in the National Security Policy (NSP) which changes the emphasis from military security to economic security, looking to make the country a center for global trade (Hussain, 2024). The UAE is an important part of this vision, supporting much of the economic activity and FDI, mainly in energy and logistics (UAEStories, 2024). By sharing resources and information, they address both ways they need to move forward - securing fuel, accessing markets, improving trade links - and handle barriers like power shifts and efficiency in institutions (Salik, 2023).

The neoliberal view provides a helpful way to interpret the shift in geo-economics. According to neoliberalism, nations can achieve stability and growth by working together economically, using the market and forming international organizations (Scekic et al., 2016). Basically, geo-economics means that countries attempt to influence geopolitical matters by economic and finance as part of their foreign policy (Scholvin & Wigell, 2018).

The majority of research on UAE-Pakistan relations discuss geopolitical relations and cultural bonds, but little is written about how their partnership is changing economically. While it is accepted that Pakistan and the UAE have a strong two-way economy, few studies examine the effects of Pakistan's new economic focus, announced in its 2021 NSP, on cooperation with the UAE. Besides, the liaisons between neoliberal policies and structural issues are not sufficiently researched particularly post 2021. To fill these gaps, this study analyzes the way geo-economic factors, constraints and opportunities play a part in the contemporary state of UAE-Pakistan relations.

A qualitative case study method explores UAE-Pakistan and uses both kinds of data sources (primary and secondary). Quantitative data of trade and FDI supported the examination qualitative research. First, this design examines economic trends statistically and then adds qualitative insight to help understand all the effects of the geo-economic shift.

The objective of this paper is to look at how Pakistan's shift in geo-economic policy is affecting its ties with the UAE, studying its influence on trade, security partnerships and regional areas. Moreover, the study examines what drives, limits and supports the best possible geo-economic relationship between Pakistan and the UAE.

Two primary questions guide this investigation: (1) What are the impacts of the geo-economic shift on Pakistan-UAE relations? (2) What are the imperatives, constraints and potentials for attaining better geo-economic relations between Pakistan and the UAE?

The significance of examining Pakistan-UAE relations through a neo-liberal geo-economic lens extends beyond bilateral considerations to regional and global implications. As Pakistan implements its geo-economic vision, understanding its relationship with the UAE provides insights into the practical application and challenges of this strategic shift (Salik, 2023). Moreover, the UAE-Pakistan relationship serves as a case study for examining how traditional ties can be leveraged for economic advantage in an increasingly competitive global environment.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 elaborates on the theoretical framework of neoliberalism in geo-economics. Section 3 outlines the methodology employed. Section 4 contextualizes historical trajectory of bilateral relations; Section 5 examines UAE-Pakistan geo-economic dynamics. Section 6 analyzes the impacts of geo-economic prioritization. Sections 7, 8 and 9 explore the imperatives, constraints, and untapped potentials in UAE-Pakistan relations, respectively. The paper concludes with key findings and policy recommendations.

2. Theoretical Framework: Neoliberalism in Geo-Economics

The philosophy of neoliberalism puts stress on market freedom, less government control and decreased regulations as the better approach to success. Essentially, neoliberals maintain that strong economic and political liberalism should exist, along with a small

number of constitutionally limited regulations and only a moderate welfare state (Scholvin & Wigell, 2018). Neoliberalism argues in international relations that countries must cooperate economically through interactions made less complicated by institutions (Scekic et al., 2016).

The idea of neoliberalism explains economic relationships between nations using trade, investment and interconnectedness. By these means, countries link together through financial activities and the operation of supply chains. Yet, the use of neoliberal policies has brought about a mixed outcome. Those who favor trade liberalization believe it improves how efficiently the economy works, but some argue that it actually increases inequality, mainly for countries that are still developing (Fahim, 2023).

As the world shifts towards having multiple important powers, middle powers have become even more important. Both the UAE and Pakistan illustrate this situation as they try to control their course in the world and have alliances with multiple countries (Elmali, 2024). Pakistan wants to keep balance and maintain economic connections with China and also with the US for optimal gains. Likewise, the UAE have showed interest in BRICS but keep its strong relationships with the West as well (Mladenov, 2023).

A neoliberal framework allows insight into the nature of UAE-Pakistan relations. It shows that neoliberal ideas guide liberalized trade, attracting investments in special zones and relying on market forces for cooperation. The new MoU that brings together Pakistan's Board of Investment and the UAE International Free Zones Authority is an example of this way of working (Eurasia Review, 2025). But the partnership also points to limitations because efforts in these policies have not been materialized completely. Nevertheless, their economic partnership represents a shift from geopolitical considerations to geo-economic priorities, allowing both middle powers to enhance their positions in the multipolar world (Ministry of Foreign Affairs UAE, 2025).

3. Methodology

The results in this study are based on qualitative methods supported by quantitative data taken in a case study style (George, 2023). By applying this approach, this examination pondered upon the impacts of Pakistan's geo-economic change on UAE-Pakistan ties while considering both tangible, subjective, and the context of policy actions and understandings.

In this paper, the study primarily explores how changes to Pakistan's foreign policy have strongly impacted the bilateral economy. International relations scholars find this method useful because each country's setting strongly influences the results they observe. First, the study looks at the data on trade, investment and remittances to see what patterns emerge and then it analyzes government documents, agreements and expert advice to shed light and meaning on those patterns (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). With this design, data help us understand the facts of UAE-Pakistan economic interactions and help us understand the reasons and prospects to Pakistan's geo-economic optimization.

Both primary and secondary materials are used as data sources in this research. To examine UAE-Pakistan relations well, the study relies on official government documents, including Pakistan's National Security Policy, Bilateral agreements, UAE Vision 2021 and MoUs, Economic cooperation frameworks and related agreements, government statements (from both countries) and reports and statistics from data sources such as SBP and PBS. To complement and triangulate the primary data, the study incorporates several secondary sources including international organizations' databases and reports, research and academic sources along private sector reports.

4. Historical Trajectory of UAE-Pakistan Bilateral Relations (1970s to 2020)

The close relationship between the UAE and Pakistan, based on shared values and cooperative geo-politics, has developed since the UAE was created. Although economies cooperated, what mostly drove bilateral relations was cultural exchange, religious affinities

and the diaspora engagements. However, economic factors specially at state level entered the picture later, even as geo-economics started gaining importance over recent years of 21st century.

The long-standing friendship between the UAE and Pakistan is a result of common religious and cultural heritage, as well as years of successful joint work (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, UAE, 2025). Among all countries, Pakistan was proud to be one of the first to accept the creation of the UAE in December 1971 which helped set the stage for an ongoing bond built on mutual trust and a desire to stabilize the region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs UAE, n.d). Thanks to this early acceptance, a deeply meaningful partnership grew and now extends into defense, trade and exchanges between people.

Between 1971 and 1979, the two countries began diplomatic relations and started cooperating closely, majorly in defense. Both countries recognized and officially formed diplomatic ties on January 13, 1972, only a month after the UAE became independent (The News, 2024). Pakistan supported the UAE's start and also suggested Bahrain and Qatar become part of the union. Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan wanted to strengthen the relationship between the UAE and Pakistan.

Because the UAE was just entering as a new country, Pakistan supported its security goals by agreeing to be a key partner in defense. Building on this, Pakistani forces have given military training to Abu Dhabi troops since 1968, well before the UAE's official founding. This early collaboration was formalized with the signing of a defense protocol in the mid-1970s, solidifying a long-term commitment to mutual security (Kamran, 2013). Notably, Pakistani Air Force officers played a pivotal role in the initial development of the UAE Air Force, highlighting the depth of this early strategic alignment (The News, 2024).

During the years 1980 to 1999, the relationship became more solid, thanks to expanding trade links and a rise in Pakistani expats in the UAE. The UAE helped Pakistan a great deal, particularly during the times oil prices hit new highs by providing credits (Hilal, 2018). The signing of the Agreement on Avoidance of Double Taxation in the 1990s increased the economic partnership between the countries. At the same time, lots of Pakistani workers applied for jobs in the quickly developing UAE, playing a major role in its growth and continuing to send remittances to their home nation (Federal Board of Revenue, 1993). What drove people to migrate were cultural and religious similarities that went deep.

Starting in the new century and accelerating after 2008, the UAE and Pakistan began to deepen their strategic relationship. Investments by UAE in Pakistan expanded greatly during 2004 to 2010, touching important sectors including oil and gas, telecommunications and real estate raising a niche for state level geo-economics (Hilal, 2018). The UAE became the main foreign investor in Pakistan. The two nations continued to collaborate politically and diplomatically and Pakistan received significant financial aid from the UAE for natural disasters like the earthquake in 2005 and the floods of 2010, thanks to the UAE Pakistan Assistance Program (UAE-PAP) (Snider & Jan, 2022). The UAE backed the sale of F-16s from the United States to Pakistan.

Despite these strong bonds, this relation deteriorated when Pakistan did not join alliance with Saudi Arabia in the Yemen war, the UAE showed discontentment and highlighted the fact that states may have differing foreign policies (Dawn, 2015). The practice of naming institutions in Pakistan after Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan serves as a tangible symbol of cultural recognition and exchange (Hilal, 2018). During this time, experts have observed that both countries have experienced differences at times but they commonly agreed later on a beneficial relationship built on similar pasts and future goals (Snider & Jan, 2022).

Both countries have cultivated a close and growing relationship since the 1970s. At the outset, Pakistan supported the UAE in its early days and also shared strong defense

partnerships. This relationship then broadened with the UAE's significant investments and the important Pakistani diaspora providing significant remittances. Based on common cultural and religious values, the friendship faced some different points of view on political and strategic matters. All in all, the years showed that UAE-Pakistan relations remain strong and sustainable because of the rewards and commitment on both sides to preserving stability in the region.

5. Contextualizing UAE-Pakistan Geo-Economic Dynamics

The UAE has taken steps towards economic diversification as early as the years 2000 and formalized this vision through Vision 2021 and Projects of the 50. Mubadala and Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA) are part of this vision and they all allocate most of their investments to infrastructure, renewable energy and technology (Abu Dhabi Investment Authority, 2024; Mubadala Investment Company, 2024). Strategic alliances helped the UAE become a leading place for world trade and logistics which is shown by its participation in BRICS and the Belt and Road Initiative (Mladenov, 2023). Investments from the UAE into Pakistan focus on energy and logistics, with DP World operating Karachi Port terminals as an example, all aimed at working with geo-economic strategies (DP World, 2025).

According to the 2021 National Security Policy (NSP) released by Pakistan, safeguarding the energy supply, encouraging remittance money from abroad and advancing infrastructure are key areas in the country's economic plan. To combat regular energy problems, the country has formed agreements with the UAE (Salik, 2023). Remittances sent by Pakistanis living in the UAE is important for Pakistan's economy (UAEStories, 2024). At the same time, as part of the CPEC, China is adding infrastructure and UAE is investing in SEZs and Gwadar Port to enable Pakistan to take part in the supply chains between Asia and the Arabian Gulf (Al Bawaba, 2015).

6. Impacts of Geo-Economic Prioritization

The importance of geo-economics has made important changes to trade and investment between UAE and Pakistan (Jahanzaib & Khan, 2024). According to Pakistan's Ambassador to the UAE, Faisal Tirmizi, putting more focus on geo-economic cooperation has greatly strengthened the relationship between Pakistan and the UAE. Tirmizi shared with the Emirates News Agency (WAM) that during the last fiscal year 2023–24, trade in goods and services between the two nations rose to an impressive US\$10.9 billion. In 2024, remittances from Pakistani expatriates in the UAE totaled \$6.7 billion and experts project they could grow to over \$7 billion in 2025 (APP, 2025).

According to him, the breakdown of trade indicated that the goods trade volume for 2023–24 was \$8.41 billion. Pakistani exports to the UAE climbed by 41.06 to \$2.08 billion, but imports from the UAE fell by 14.45 percent to \$6.33 billion (ibid). Because of this move, Pakistan's trade deficit with the UAE shrank by about 28.28 percent - a signal that geo-economic strategy is making the trade more balanced. Bilateral trade in services was \$2.56 billion, up 20.35 percent from the previous year (Jahanzaib, 2025a; APP, 2025). During this period of July 2024 to January 2025, there was a 21.63 percent rise in goods trade, while Pakistan's exports went up by another 7.53 percent (APP, 2025).

There are currently 26 Emirati companies doing business in Pakistan. The UAE's efforts in investments have spread across fields such as communications, services, tourism, information technology, oil and gas, housing, banking and real estate. Etihad Airways, Emirates, Emaar and Dubai Islamic Bank, top UAE companies, now play a big role in Pakistan. In addition, he said that Abu Dhabi Group had acquired major stakes in Bank Alfalah and UBL while Dubai Islamic Bank and Emirates International Bank now operate in Pakistan as well (MoFA UAE, 2020; APP, 2025).

To highlight the nation's focus on connectivity, Emirati telecom companies invested over \$2 billion in acquiring a significant share in Pakistan Telecommunication Company Limited (PTCL) (APP, 2025). Both Abu Dhabi Ports Company and DP World are now overseeing and developing Karachi Port Trust (KPT) and the associated railway infrastructure (ibid). The UAE has committed financial and construction resources to assist Pakistan with railway development, by spending \$3 billion on the rail sector and creating a new 50-kilometer link from the Karachi Port to the Pipri marshalling yard. It is planned that related logistics and terminal facilities will be built and these will be managed by DP World of Dubai (RailFreight, 2025).

At the same time, food security initiatives in the UAE such as the 2023 UAE-Pakistan Food Security Corridor, have driven the rise in agro-imports and Pakistani rice, meat and citrus are dominating sales in the UAE (Pakistan & Gulf Economist, 2024). Thanks to these flows, both Pakistan and the UAE benefit: Pakistan has stable business activities and the UAE can afford food for its people. CPEC's infrastructure projects that connect the region include critical initiatives from the UAE. The SIFC has led to big improvements in the climate for attracting investments. Offering everything at one office, the single investment facilitation centre is helping the country become more transparent and easier to navigate for foreigners, drawing many investors from the UAE (Eurasia Review, 2025).

Thanks to neoliberal views, governments have focused on deregulating, privatizing and creating policies based on the market. Energy and port investments by the UAE in Pakistan fit with neoliberal policies of letting the market take the lead, seen in distributing power businesses and UAE investor tax advantages (Scekic et al., 2016). However, some argue that these policies actually make inequality worse (Fahim, 2023). Nonetheless, the bilateral relationship exemplifies how neoliberal geo-economics can foster interdependence, albeit with uneven distributive outcomes.

7. Imperatives to Strengthen UAE-Pakistan Geo-Economic Ties

Imperatives essential to strengthening UAE-Pakistan geo-economic ties, fostering deeper cooperation, mutual growth and strategic alignment in an increasingly interconnected and competitive regional and global environment are examined in preceding paragraphs.

Strategic Imperatives

The country's foreign strategy has moved from giving priority to geopolitics to paying attention to geo-economic issues (Jahanzaib & Khan, 2024). The UAE is recognized by Islamabad as a main partner for stability in the economy and the region. Officials point out that Pakistan wanted to depend less on any one power and diversify how it gets its financing. Engaging the UAE thus fits Pakistan's two-track strategy of balancing Chinese investment and IMF support, under the mantra "don't put all eggs in one basket" (Ali, 2024). Tighter relations between the UAE and Pakistan help the UAE look for other dimensions of economy than just oil and gas. According to experts, having a UAE-Pakistan partnership is important to help calm regional uncertainty, especially by providing Pakistan with choices beyond China-backed programs (Modern Diplomacy, 2025). In short, both countries benefit; Pakistan gets a trustworthy Middle Eastern ally and the UAE steps up its economic activity in South Asia.

These big strategic factors have been accepted by leadership. Both Prime Minister of Pakistan Shehbaz Sharif from Pakistan and President of UAE Mohammed bin Zayed of the UAE pledged in January 2025 to work harder to strengthen economic and political ties. They promised to improve partnership across renewable energy, information technology, trade,

infrastructure and skills development (KUNA, 2025). During the same month, the UAE's Deputy PM Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed and Pakistan's Deputy PM Ishaq Dar agreed that the two countries would increase cooperation on trade, energy, security and people-to-people links (Express Tribune, 2025). These gestures underscore that both governments now view the relationship as a broad-based strategic partnership – leveraging geography (Pakistan as a bridge between South and West Asia) and people-to-people ties (1.8 million Pakistanis live in the UAE (Modern Diplomacy, 2025) – rather than merely a transactional alliance. In this strategic context, the imperative is clear: to consolidate a multifaceted alliance that complements national security through economic integration.

Economic Imperatives

The economic relations between Pakistan and the UAE have become more intense. UAE was Pakistan's third-highest trading partner (after China and the US) in 2024, with total trade amounting to over \$10 billion (Express Tribune, 2025a; Dawn, 2025). The gains were made possible by recent major agreements in January 2024, and signed contracts totaling \$3 billion for railway, SEZs and port projects (Express Tribune, 2025a). Strengthening trade linkages is imperative because Pakistan's export potential (textiles, agri-foods, IT services) remains underexploited. Closing the FTA under discussion between the UAE and Pakistan as early as possible would mean lowering tariffs on important products for both parties and probably boosting their trade (Business Recorder, 2024).

Foreign investment is another imperative. The UAE has contributed more than \$10 billion to Pakistan's economy over two decades and its companies are active in main sectors (communications, banking, real estate, tourism, IT, oil & gas) (Arab News, 2025a). For this purpose, UAE firms (like Abu Dhabi Ports Company and DP World) are presently building Karachi's shipping and railroad infrastructure to open Pakistan to business with the Middle East and Africa (ibid). Accordingly, strong investment conditions are needed, as applying these funds will address Pakistan's shortcomings in both infrastructure and energy.

Technology and innovation are also economic imperatives. Pakistan looks to be a leading nation in knowledge-based fields such as increasing the amount of IT exports from \$2.6 billion to \$15 billion by 2030 (Modern Diplomacy, 2025). Because of its focus on technology, the UAE has developed great knowledge in e-governance and electronic finance. The countries have made arrangements to help each other with technology and in a 2025 meeting, Pakistan was to learn from the UAE's AI platforms (such as TAMM) and share its knowledge on big-data services (The News International, 2025). Joint initiatives (like fintech startups in UAE SEZs) could boost Pakistan's competitiveness in emerging sectors. Thus, integrating digital infrastructure and skills – via MoUs on blockchain, AI, smart infrastructure, etc. – is vital to raise productivity and link Pakistan into global value chains (ibid).

Moreover, labor and human capital have an economic dimension. Pakistanis in the UAE sent home roughly \$6.7 billion in remittances in 2024 (Dawn, 2025). This inflow – the second-largest source after Saudi Arabia – underpins Pakistan's foreign exchange and domestic consumption. Maintaining favorable labor mobility (e.g. streamlined visa procedures and worker protections) thus has direct economic impact. Additionally, the Pakistani expatriate community forms a business network; over 3,000 Pakistani companies are now registered in Dubai (2023), using it as a trading and re-export hub (Ali, 2024). Economically, then,

Pakistan must engage this diaspora not only as a source of capital but as entrepreneurs and skilled professionals. In sum, maximizing trade, attracting investment in high-growth sectors (energy, ICT, manufacturing), building modern infrastructure, and leveraging remittances are all urgent economic imperatives for deepening UAE–Pakistan geo-economic ties.

Policy Harmonization

These gains can be achieved by making sure rules and regulations are harmonized. An agreement is near to be finalized between Pakistan-UAE regarding the FTA, as the text is ready. Such an agreement would lower tariffs and smooth out trade processes, according to Pakistani authorities and the UAE consul general (Business Recorder, 2024). As it comes into force, two nations will trade more and pay less tax on the import of many goods to each other. At the same time, authorities have to ensure customs and licensing are working more efficiently. The SIFC is now a single point for foreign investors in Pakistan and a step toward integration between UAE and Pakistan's free-zone platforms could also reduce barriers to projects (Ali, 2025).

Harmonization of regulations is very important. For instance, the SEZs MoU agrees that both sides will ensure fast fixes for conflicts and offer security for investors. It is widely suggested that judicial changes are required to meet the expectations of international arbitration (Modern Diplomacy, 2025). Ensuring consistency in digital economy laws such as data protection and fintech rules, is just as important because of efforts to increase cooperation between governments online. Pakistan was told by UAE officials that there are no entry barriers which can affect Pakistani tourists and workers and emphasized that Pakistani migrants and business people are high in the UAE's list of priorities (Business Recorder, 2024). All in all, tax, customs, labor and digital management rules in both countries require agreement to help reduce related problems. As a result, two countries might form a bilateral agreement recognizing evaluation results, adopt simultaneous customs procedures and work out common standards for new sectors. Such harmonization is very important to turn diplomacy into practical economic integration.

Neo-Liberalism and Imperatives Connections

The current strong relationship between the UAE and Pakistan matches a broader shift in foreign policy towards free market principles. Experts suggest that Pakistan is taking on geo-economic measures due to its adherence to free markets, privatization and liberal trade (Jahanzaib, 2025). With this framework, countries may experience "stronger economic ties, open trade and greater connections through foreign investment". In fact, supporting an FTA, highlighting Special Economic Zones and attracting FDI are all ways that neoliberals believe will make the economy stronger and steadier. It's clear that Pakistan interprets strategic partnership primarily in terms of economic cooperation, as shown by statements made by its foreign ministry and security policy (Business Recorder, 2024; Jahanzaib, 2024).

Alongside, it has been argued that careless liberalization can cause greater inequality or heavier debt in a country. They are aware of this too; UAE investors urged Pakistan to improve the law surrounding capital which incited requests for arbitration reform. Part of the reason for policy harmonization is joining with international standards to ensure that investment benefits both countries, not just one at the expense of the other. Following neo-liberal thinking requires Pakistan to connect market reforms with social programs so

everyone gains from the partnership. As a result, having a strategy to prevent external shocks goes hand in hand with opening the economy for trade. Simply summarizing, UAE–Pakistan geo-economic engagement is strongly neoliberal and its effectiveness will depend on how successfully both countries manage the issues that arise from that approach (Jahanzaib, 2025b).

8. Constraints on Deeper Integration

The following constraints hinder deeper integration between UAE and Pakistan, posing challenges that must be addressed to unlock the full potential of their geo-economic partnership and collaborative development.

Geopolitical Challenges

The close partnership between the UAE and India has influenced UAE-Pakistan relations. As India becomes the UAE's second-largest trading partner, with their bilateral trade surpassing \$83.65 billion in 2024, the UAE is managing a difficult balancing act (Embassy of India, 2025). As a result, Pakistan could lose its involvement in regional connecting projects such as CPEC because of the UAE's work with the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) (Sohail, 2024).

China's dominance in Pakistan's economic landscape sometimes strains UAE-Pakistan integration. As most of Pakistan's FDI comes from CPEC, China is seen as the main backer in important sectors such as ports and energy (Pakistan Today, 2023). What may be worrisome to the UAE is how close its investment in projects such as Gwadar Port would tie it to China politically and its dominance in economic landscape of Pakistan.

Institutional Barriers

As the UAE wants to give Emiratis priority for jobs by 2025, Pakistan's system for exporting labor may be challenged (Raya Al Ameri Advocates & Legal Consultants, 2024). Indian, Bangladeshi and Filipino workers exporting cheap labor make Pakistani workers in UAE in lower-skilled jobs have less work and stricter visa requirements (The New Arab, 2025; Gulf News, 2025).

Often, Pakistan has experienced "growth challenges" and change in reforms because governments keep shifting (Basit, 2025). In reality, each change in government in Islamabad tends to cause unexpected changes in key taxes or subsidies which is off-putting to Gulf investors. The country's lack of policy stability and effective governance increases the danger for those looking to invest in the UAE (Dawson & Locke, 2014).

Socio-Economic and Security Risks

As a result of Pakistan's unstable politics and terrorism, long-term UAE investment is less of a priority (Kaufmann & Mastruzzi, 2024). Attacks targeted at Chinese workers and projects in CPEC areas have increased the risk that UAE investors feel (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2025). Also, the asymmetric type of remittance flow increases the economic concerns especially for UAE.

Differences in the labor market can obstruct integration. While the number of workers in Pakistan is rising, many youth report having either no job or the wrong qualifications that mismatches the requirement of a recruiter. UAE is gearing up towards high-skill jobs in the Gulf, many workers leave for employment overseas, but the UAE is now cautious in hiring related people (Gulf News, 2025).

Neoliberalism Implications

If the two countries implement open markets, decrease regulations and let the private sector guide their growth, they would be able to deal with many of the said problems. For example, when trading favors are expanded and the market becomes easier to enter, companies from the UAE will invest more and take part in more trade, as there's less doubt about doing business. Creating less bureaucracy steps in business (for example, making it

simple to apply for licenses and adjusting who can own companies) would help cut red tape. The UAE has made it possible for foreigners to own 100% of local businesses which can help Pakistan to do the same.

Just as strong, both privatizing state businesses and expanding investment in the private sector encourage new employment, promote stability and lead to development without heavy government spending. According to the IMF, pushing for free trade, better regulations and good governance will allow Pakistan to compete better and attract new private investment (International Monetary Fund, 2025).

9. Untapped Potentials and Opportunities

The following untapped potentials and opportunities offer significant avenues for enhancing UAE-Pakistan geo-economic relations, promising mutual benefits through strategic collaboration, investment, and diversified sectoral engagement.

SIFC and Its Related Projects: SIFC was established by Pakistan to boost foreign investments, could greatly improve the way UAE and Pakistan conduct business together. When it focuses on renewable energy, agro-industries, minerals and digital infrastructure, the SIFC helps drive sustainable development while dealing with important challenges (Jahanzaib & Khan, 2024; SIFC, n.d.).

Mines and Minerals: There are great possibilities for the UAE and Pakistan to team up in the mining and minerals sector. Estimates put Pakistan's mineral wealth at \$6 trillion, spread over vast areas in different locations of Pakistan (especially Balochistan) and containing 92 known minerals (Pakistan Today, 2025). There is a great opportunity to earn great profits from the Reko Diq project which sits over some of the world's largest undeveloped copper-gold deposits in Balochistan (The Express Tribune, 2025). If the UAE's funds are used for growth, thousands of jobs would emerge and the country's economy and infrastructure settings would improve (PKAlert, 2025). The link between the two countries follows UAE's diversification plan and responds to Pakistan's wish for more foreign investment, helping the economies grow and progress.

Renewable Energy Synergies: As the UAE is a leader in renewable energy, (Masdar and more) it can play a major role in helping Pakistan with clean energy solutions. Pakistan's renewable energy potential is over 40,000 MW generated from sunshine and over 346,000 MW from wind. Around 5,000 MW could be added to Pakistan's grid by 2030 through joint ventures in hybrid wind-solar parks, through the allocated funds of \$20 billion from the UAE's Global Energy Transition Fund which substantially lowers the country's energy import costs (United Arab Emirates, 2024). The UAE's knowledge in green hydrogen also fits well with Pakistan's access to coastal wind resources which could make export-focused hydrogen hubs at Gwadar Port possible.

Digital Economy and Fintech: Due to the growth in fintech in the UAE and digital markets in Pakistan, there are many options for both sides to cooperate. In one example, YAP, a neobank in Dubai, collected \$41 million in funding in 2022 and was given an electronic-money license in Pakistan (Flötotto et al., 2023). Similarly, Pakistani fintech ABHI-Middle East achieved fast growth after its launch in 2021 and soon entered the UAE, joining forces with LuLu Financial Holdings to provide earned-wage-access and remittances for UAE expatriates. Licenses from UAE fintechs operating in Pakistan could be recognized there and vice versa, so cross-border remittance and digital banking services can be expanded. Digital Focused Foreign Direct Investment initiatives such as the WEF/DCO Digital FDI framework, are helping drive this trend (Digital Cooperation Organization, 2025).

Agro-Industrial Value Chains: The agricultural sector is strong in Pakistan and the UAE buys much of its food supplies from abroad. For instance, Pakistan sells about

125,000 tons of dates (for around \$50 million) mostly to the UAE (Shabbir, 2025). As part of the 2025 MoU, the UAE agreed to assist Pakistan with building date-processing plants to make the products last longer and send them abroad. Pakistan's government is also planning to tech up farming practices by using innovation, research and easier credit for farmers (Arab News, 2025). It gives UAE agritech firms and agri-processor investors new opportunities in Pakistan. Cooperation can help create halal meat and high-end crop processing in Special Economic Zones, making use of the UAE's top logistics capabilities in food handling (such as those used by DP World in its cold-chain terminals). It has been reported that Pakistan and the UAE have signed deals worth up to \$25 billion, among which Pakistani agro-produce will go for export to the UAE (GRAIN, 2024).

Regional Connectivity Hubs: Pakistan's ports and airports can function as new links between South Asia and the Gulf. Following the 2024 deal between Pakistan's Board of Investment and UAE's International Free Zones Authority (IFZA), companies based in the UAE will send investments to Pakistan's Special Economic Zones and infrastructure (Arab News, 2025b). At the end of 2024, Abu Dhabi's AD Ports Group signed contracts to explore cross-sector cooperation on ports, airports and rail, as well as updates to customs, new freight lines, improvements increased marine fleet (AD Ports Group, 2024). The UAE is backing the advancement of Karachi's port terminals with a grant of \$400 million during 15 years (ibid). The main aim of Pakistan's new Gwadar International Airport (operational since January 2025) is to link the UAE and regions further ahead (Associated Press of Pakistan, 2025).

Logistics Networks: The logistics relationship between Pakistan and the UAE is quickening. In January 2025 UAE giant DP World signed a strategic deal with Pakistan's state-run National Logistics Cell (NLC) (The News International, 2025). Modern logistics centers will emerge in Pakistan and the flow of container goods from Jebel Ali Port to Karachi and beyond is to expand (ibid). DP World's chairman hailed the deal as a major step forward for Pakistan's logistics field and predicted it would spur significant investments and more trading from the UAE. Thanks to the deal, supply chains are also improved; containers started moving along the new Gulf–Karachi freight route (AD Ports Group, 2024).

Other Emerging Opportunities: In addition, other potential areas of cooperation are appearing in addition to the main ones. Other fields are education and healthcare; Pakistani universities and the UAE could collaborate and UAE healthcare providers and funds could team up with Pakistan for medical tourism or on pharmaceutical development (using Pakistan's skill in STEM).

Multilateral Geo-Economic Engagement: Pakistan and the UAE also develop their relationship within international organizations. The nations participate in meetings of the OIC, the UN climate bodies such as COP28, etc. At various global logistics conferences, Pakistani officials have pointed out how these bilateral projects connect to the Asia–Middle East network (Arab News, 2025c). With interest in the CPEC port and pipeline projects, the UAE is exploring their possible links into the growing Middle Corridor trade route (Jahanzaib & Ahmed, 2024).

Neoliberal Solutions and Opportunities: Market-oriented changes can lead to a stronger UAE–Pakistan cooperation. In doing so, the 2025 IFZA–BoI deal emphasize the experience of free zones to develop Pakistan's SEZs. It is noted in industry sectors that the direct involvement of the UAE may help Pakistan follow worldwide regulations and welcomes greater foreign investment (Khan, 2025a). Trade liberalization is another key; the UAE's tariff-free zones and Pakistan's accession to WTO agreements could be leveraged to reduce customs barriers between the two countries. Public-private partnerships should be expanded; for instance, allowing UAE sovereign funds to co-invest in Pakistan's power plants, roads or data centers.

10. Conclusion

The paper highlights deepening UAE–Pakistan economic interdependence; bilateral trade and investment have surged (e.g. trade >\$10 billion in 2023–24, Pakistan’s exports up 41%) and remittances (~\$6.7 billion from the UAE in 2024) remain vital. UAE FDI in Pakistan (over \$10 billion in two decades) has focused on infrastructure, energy and logistics. However, significant constraints endure. Pakistan’s frequent policy changes and governance volatility elevate investor risk and regional geopolitical shifts (e.g. the UAE’s deepening ties with India and cautious stance on China’s CPEC projects) further complicate strategic alignment.

Overcoming these challenges requires targeted policy action. Streamlining investment regulations, harmonizing business rules and creating joint special economic zones can attract UAE capital. Enhancing labor mobility and fintech integration will also deepen economic ties.

Emerging opportunities abound; the UAE can partner in Pakistan’s vast mineral sector (e.g. the \$6 trillion deposits) and its enormous solar/wind potential. Expanding logistics corridors (rail and port networks) will further integrate markets and reduce costs. More broadly, this strengthened geo-economic partnership serves as a strategic linchpin for regional integration. By translating neoliberal ideals into concrete reforms - open markets, public–private investment frameworks and multilateral free trade pacts - both countries can reinforce a mutually beneficial, future-oriented alliance and foster broader regional stability.

Policy recommendations

- Harmonize regulations and provide incentives (e.g. special fintech zones or tax breaks) to attract UAE investment in Pakistan’s digital banks and payment systems (Flötotto et al., 2023; Khan, 2025).
- Create export-oriented agro-industrial parks (e.g. for fruits, halal meats, dairy) with shared UAE–Pakistan ownership, and offer technology transfer programs in precision agriculture and water-efficient irrigation (Shabbir, 2025; Ahmadani, 2023).
- Facilitating open skies agreements and synchronizing port standards (digital customs, e borders) will turn Dubai and Karachi/Gwadar into regional transit hubs (Arab News, 2025).
- Encourage public-private partnerships and joint-ventures with UAE logistics firms to finance rail freight corridors and inland container depots.
- Strengthen digital infrastructure (e.g. e tracking, single-window clearance) so UAE freight services and logistics companies can smoothly operate across the region (Arab News, 2025).
- Launch UAE–Pakistan innovation forums in areas like clean energy and biotech, and negotiate mutual-recognition agreements (e.g. between financial securities exchanges or universities) to facilitate private-sector tie-ups (Ahmadani, 2023; Gupta, 2025).
- Pakistan should use its strategic location and Gulf goodwill to join Gulf trade pacts (e.g. GCC free trade talks) and to attract multilateral financing (e.g. Islamic Development Bank funds) for transnational projects.
- Jointly shaping regional economic frameworks (for instance through the Pakistan–UAE Joint Business Council) can amplify gains from free trade and shared infrastructure (Arab News, 2025; AD Ports Group, 2024).
- Simplify Pakistan’s regulatory framework (through bodies like the Special Investment Facilitation Council) and offer investor guarantees for Gulf capital (akin to the “sovereign guarantee” arrangements announced for food projects).

- Encouraging participation of Emirati banks in Pakistan's financial markets and easing visa/work rules for UAE entrepreneurs, will create a truly open, market-driven environment conducive to mutual growth (AD Ports Group, 2024; Khan, 2025a).

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