

Pakistan's Relations with North African Countries Challenges and Way Forward



Seminar Report



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Executive Summary

North Africa is a fascinating and dynamic region, with the most prominent countries being Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya. Due to its proximity to international trade routes and natural resources, North Africa had been the focus of numerous civilizations, religions, and cultures. The Greeks, Romans, Christians, Arabs, and Turks all left a significant mark on the region.

As a result, there are unsolved boundary and territorial issues such as between Morocco and Algeria, Sudan and Egypt, and the issue of the Sahrawi Republic. The commonality between North African states includes their Arab lineage, the Muslim majority population, and liberal and progressive outlook, particularly of Morocco and Egypt.

Every region or country maintains relations based on its interests, which are mostly economic. The greatest strength of the region is its significant population, which is about a combined 242 million. The region covers around 7.6 million square kilometers of land and boasts \$722 billion in foreign trade, including \$200 billion in imports and \$166 billion in exports.

Pakistan enjoys historic relations with this region. In 1931, Allama Iqbal visited Cairo and King Farouk was impressed by his poetry and philosophy and opened an Urdu department at Cairo University. Such Urdu departments were later established in Jamia Al-Azhar and six other major universities. Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah visited Cairo in 1946 and held meetings not only with the king and government officials but also with leaders of Ikhwan al-Muslimin (Muslim Brotherhood).

Pakistan can export its defence equipment, textiles, pharmaceuticals, agro-based goods, services, films, and dramas to North African states because of the importance of growing economic and trade ties with North Africa in juxtaposition to Europe. India has already built a strong foothold in the region, and it is trying to compete with China which remains the biggest investor in Africa to date. Unfortunately, Pakistan is lagging in this regard.

As far as Pakistan-North Africa relations are concerned, these are governed by interests, opportunities, and obstacles. In light of the region's growing strategic significance and economic potential, it is vital for Pakistan to pursue its economic and political goals with dexterity.

In this background, the Institute of Policy Studies, Islamabad organized a seminar titled "Pakistan's Relations with North African Countries" on January 19, 2021, under its 'Understanding Africa Program' to investigate the potential areas of cooperation where Pakistan can build and foster its relationship with the region in terms of strategic, economic, and political significance. The speakers included Ambassador (r) Mushtaq Ali Shah, Ambassador (r) Tajammul Altaf, senior research fellow IPS, and Khalid Rahman, executive president IPS.

Takeaways from the Seminar

Q- What are the geopolitical features of North Africa?

The Nile River, the Sahara Desert, and the Atlas Mountains are three prominent geographical features that increase the strategic as well as geopolitical importance of North Africa.

The North African countries include Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, and Western Sahara. North Africa has a population of 242 million people, which is seen as a strength, and 7.6 million square kilometers of area. The region is rich in several resources and enjoys \$722 billion of foreign trade, which includes imports of \$200 billion and exports of \$166 billion.

A colonial past is the ultimate commonality between the North African states. Other commonalities are the language, Muslim identity, and the liberal and progressive outlook, particularly of Morocco and Egypt. These countries are members of the Arab League. And because Europe considers North Africa as neighbors, these states are also engaged in Euro-Mediterranean partnership by the European Union.

Due to the region's geographical location and significance, these countries have ratified the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which is an amalgamation of all the trade blocs in Africa and would make Africa one of the largest trading blocs in the world.

Q- How has been Pakistan's relationship with North African countries?

Pakistan has maintained good ties with the countries of North Africa from the beginning. Pakistan, as a newly independent state, supported the North African countries in their independence movements and struggle against colonization. This has always been acknowledged by these African states. Later, Pakistan established diplomatic missions in these countries.

With the purpose of goodwill, Pakistan has maintained neutrality in African disputes, for example, the discord between Egypt and Sudan, between Algeria and Morocco, or the issue of Western Sahara. Pakistan also has maintained a convergence of views on major issues of regional and international importance based on common economic interests and global issues like extremism, fundamentalism, terrorism, etc.

Q- There are so many opportunities for Pakistan to engage with African states on the economic front but at the same time, there are numerous challenges. What are the major challenges in this regard?

Every region or country maintains relations based on certain interests, and these interests are basically economic and geopolitical in nature. There lies great opportunity and potential for Pakistan in areas of investment, business, and import-export engagement with the countries of North Africa.

However, there are some challenges in this regard. North Africa is closely linked with the European Union economically, strategically, and politically. So it is difficult for other exporters or investors to establish firm trade and economic presence because these countries want goods made in Germany, Italy, or France and wouldn't normally prefer a Pakistani product over theirs. Therefore, Pakistan is faced with tough competition.

The lack of political contact with these countries is another major challenge. Pakistani leaders have traditionally looked to the countries of Western Europe and North America for any prospects or the Gulf countries and tend to forget other regions including Africa. This lack of political interaction affects the level of trade and economic cooperation.

This also creates a lack of political will. There is significant trade of phosphorus between Morocco and Pakistan. Besides, Pakistan has a good volume of trade with Egypt but again there is not much willingness to utilize this potential to a greater level. For example, in the late 1980s, Pakistan used to import so much phosphate from Morocco that the trade balance remained in favor of the latter. Still,

Pakistan only imports the rock whereas India, having a phosphate plant, has a billion-dollar investment there. Indian imports are seven times more than what Pakistan imports from Morocco. Though Pakistan has good relations with Morocco, there is a need for political will to advance the trade and economic interaction in this industry.

Along with the lack of trade and economic cooperation, the lack of means of communication, i.e. direct flights, shipping lanes, and people-to-people contacts, is also a challenge.

Besides, these countries, kingdoms, or autocratic rulers were known for political stability, but the Arab Spring undermined it. Now there is instability in all these countries. From Morocco to Egypt, everything is under control, but it is not the same guaranteed stability that used to be earlier.

This shows that besides goodwill gestures, there is a need to do some business as well.

There are also some national capacity issues on part of Pakistan that hinders the effective utilization of African potential. Pakistan's exports, imports, and foreign trade are usually the measure of the cooperation or the potential that exists. Africa offers a lot of opportunities but Pakistan's export potential cannot be utilized unless the issues of national capacity are resolved.

In addition, there is a problem of balance in sending Pakistani missions and staffing in African states. It has been the practice to send unsolicited diplomats to Africa; these diplomats then perform their duties with disinterest. There are also some linguistic complications, which are not taken into account, as most North African states speak French.

Q- What are some opportunities on the continent that Pakistan can exploit?

Trade, business, and defense cooperation are some prominent areas that offer opportunities to foster ties. Strategic locations and vibrant economies are the attributes of emerging countries, such as China, India, Turkey, the UAE, and Brazil. Three decades ago Africa's trade with the EU was probably more than 50 percent of the total volume of trade. Now the volume has doubled but the share of trade from Europe has come down to 30 percent. This is because a major trade share is now taken by the emerging economies that require raw materials and need to export their second-grade products. And that is where Pakistan could also take advantage.

There is also a good potential for bilateral trade in goods. As an example, North Africa plays sports and Pakistan makes several sports goods, surgical goods, and other manufactured goods, which it can export.

The African countries appreciate Pakistan's peacekeeping missions in which it has been playing a leading role, along with being the largest troop provider to the UN peacekeeping missions for several years. In the Red Sea, which connects up to Egypt, Pakistan is participating in Combined Task Force 151, which works against piracy. The African states need major defense cooperation for which Pakistan has the potential in terms of exports, trade, technology, etc.

This needs to be exploited further by the business community. The economies in North Africa are business-friendly compared to the rest of the African states because of educated people, who are open to business as well. The masses are also inclined to foster economic ties with South Asian countries including Pakistan.

Q- Africa is focusing on South-South Cooperation. What are the prospects of economic engagement with Pakistan in this backdrop?

Pakistan is the proponent of South-South Cooperation. The nation already has the intention and plans; all that is needed is better focus. Africa is a continent with great potential. By 2050, it would be a vibrant economy. Pakistan is looking towards the African markets and Africa is also eyeing the Asian markets. Africa's trade with the EU has decreased while its trade with Asia has increased. Pakistan's trade was stagnant at about \$2 billion for the past 20 years, but in the past few years, it has jumped by 50 percent.

So, this South-South Cooperation with Africa is getting focus and attention and has bright prospects in the future.

Q- What are the implications of the intra-Africa free trade agreement for Pakistan? What prospects will it bring for the African nations and how can Pakistan exploit these opportunities? Please comment on the security issues in Africa, especially Libya.

When Quaid-e-Azam spoke about supporting oppressed states, he was looking at the colonies in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere; he was not looking at the domestic systems. Internal systems of every country are different and it is up to them to decide what is right for them. Foreign policy does not deal with domestic issues; it deals with foreign relations, and, in my view, the civil wars in any of these countries including Libya should be considered their internal matters.

It is true, however, that Pakistan and Muslim leaders of the Subcontinent have traditionally remained in contact with any prominent segments of Muslims who have remained vocal on common Muslim causes, including the Ikhwanul Muslimin. From Morocco to Malaysia, the Muslim states were all colonies and got independence from colonial masters. Pakistan finds it in the interest of Muslims and humanity at large that no group is allowed to drift towards extremes, neither should Pakistan's concerns regarding any segment or organization in any part of the world be understood without putting things in their historical perspective.

Pakistan should continue to stay out of the issues of other countries, the way it stayed out of the Algeria-Morocco conflict or the Sudan-Egypt dispute. Pakistan's embassy is among the very few operating in Tripoli, because there is no single government in Libya. There are counter-governments; different factions control the government of the north, the government of the west, and even parts of Tripoli.

So, it is their internal matter because every country has its own policy. The Muslim countries are supporting particular factions; Turkey, Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia are all supporting certain factions. Turkey used to be the Ottoman Empire. It had bases along the Red Sea in the last century and had interests everywhere. Turkey's trade is rather huge, while the UAE and Saudi Arabia are catching up fast. The Saudi GDP is above \$700 billion and Turkey's is around \$800 billion. So economically they stand at par and are trying to gain more influence.

Intra-Africa free trade means reducing tariffs and removing barriers between the African states. Later all their trade and economy are planned to be taken to the level of the EU, where a commodity from Africa will not only pass the German import regulations but also the EU import regulations.

Regarding the African Union's free trade area, it will take 20 years to materialize. If that does happen, then Pakistan will have to work harder and will have to conclude separate agreements with each country. On the one hand, this will bring prosperity to Africa, it will promote trade and many other things, but consequently, the market will also be bigger. So Pakistan will have to enter a bigger market, but it will not be easy. It would be more difficult for Pakistan as well as the EU, China, India, and any other country. This is because harmonizing the customs regulations, import rules, duties, trade policies, and financial regulations takes a long time and is not straightforward. This is an attempt by the African states to organize themselves in order to promote more economic cooperation so that they can overcome other issues. But whether and when it is going to materialize is yet to be seen.

Q- Should Pakistan develop its economy first and then focus on relationship building with other states? As a developing state how can Pakistan cater to the needs of such a large continent?

Pakistan needs to build capacity because establishing trade with a continent having a GDP of around \$2 trillion requires that capacity. However, bilateral relations can still be built in various ways. It is true that Pakistan's relations mostly involve regional conferences, which might not suffice; but that does not mean that the government is not focusing on the region. Pakistan, nevertheless, is a strong country. It

may not have a foothold in trade but that does not stop relations from moving forward. Foreign policy is a reflection of internal policy; Pakistan should focus on it.

Q- In the last few years, especially in 2020, new governments have come to power in the North African states after political turmoil like in Libya and Morocco. Are these governments favorable in the context of future relations? Could there be more positive and stronger relations between Pakistan and the new governments in the North African states?

A reservoir of goodwill exists in North Africa and the relations are not subject to change with the changes in governments. Pakistan's relations should not suffer at all due to new governments in Africa; the only weakness is lack of attention. There is a possibility of more positive and stronger relations. Islamabad should maintain bilateral relations with every country irrespective of which government is in power and stay away from their internal disputes.

Q- What is the state of the relationship between Africa and regional states like India and China as compared to Pakistan? What should Pakistan do to extend its relations with Africa?

China hosted the first Sino-African Ministerial Conference which was attended by over 80 ministers from different African countries in 2000. The first Sino-African Summit was held in 2000 and then the third summit in 2006 in Beijing, which was attended by 30 to 40 heads of state from Africa. The volume of bilateral trade between China and Africa is phenomenal; it has grown from \$1 billion in 1980 to almost \$200 billion in 2020.

Although India is a big economy, it began to engage with Africa in 2008. India hosted the third summit of African countries in 2015, and they have regular meetings. Their volume of trade is about \$70 billion.

Both India and China have established a structured framework for dialogue with the African states. The ministers of trade, industry, investment, health, education, and foreign ministers all have bilateral associations at the summit level as well as the official level through technical committees.

On the other hand, Pakistan has just begun to engage with Africa. Last year, Pakistan held just one business seminar in Nairobi, which shows how far behind the country lags in this sphere. For thriving relations between Pakistan and African states, it is crucial to establish a structural and institutional dialogue with these countries including North Africa. Pakistan should also follow the policy of India and China which have separate dialogues for trade, education, defense, and other domains.

In addition, there should be the fostering of political contacts. There should be the exchange of parliamentary delegations, technical cooperation and business delegations. There must be the promotion of production and capacity building. There could be satellite expansion to enhance the reach of the Pakistani TV industry and content. This would prove prospective as Egypt has extended television reach and even the Dar al-Ifta, the governmental Islamic advisory body in Egypt, offers fatwa in 32 languages.

Q- Egypt is the most important North African state for Pakistan. What is the case of Pakistan-Egypt relations?

Egypt is the second largest economy on the African continent and has the third largest population after Nigeria and Ethiopia. The country is important for Pakistan because its dynastic history dates back 5,000 years, and in the more recent past, to the Muslim dynasties of the Fatimids, Abbasids, Mamluks, Turks, and Ottomans.

Relations with Egypt were established with the creation of Pakistan. Even before Pakistan's independence, Allama Iqbal, the visionary behind Pakistan, visited Egypt on his way back from London in 1931. He landed in Alexandria and visited the whole region; he also went to Bait al-Muqaddas. He was appreciated so much that King Farooq asked him to teach Urdu at Cairo University in 1936. Later, Pakistan also established a school in Cairo in 1981. Moreover, Al-Azhar University started an Urdu

department with two faculties, one for males and one for females. Other universities in Alexandria, Ain Shams, Cairo, Mansoura, Monufia, and Tanta also offer Urdu courses.

Egypt got independence in 1922 and the king was overthrown in 1952. From 1952 to 2011, there was complete political stability in the country. Nasser was followed by Sadaat, and then Mubarak before the Arab Spring. In the sphere of foreign policy, Pakistan adopted a moderate stance towards Egypt. For example, in 1957, Pakistan did not remain vocal on the Suez Canal crisis, but after that, both countries had good bilateral relations during both peace and war.

Egyptian politics changed a lot after the Arab Spring. Morsi was elected with a very thin majority. In the first round, he got 19% votes and, in the second, he won with a very thin majority. Morsi accelerated things, changed the constitution, and transferred power from the military to civil, which he could not sustain. The business community was not satisfied and quick changes were initiated. Morsi was overthrown in less than two years.

After 2013, Pakistan and North Africa did not remain in frequent contact because Pakistan's foreign policy is geared towards non-interference in other countries' affairs. However, on the other hand, Pakistan aims to establish brotherly ties with Muslim countries. Therefore, despite alienation, Pakistan sustained its relations with Egypt. In issues of the domestic sphere of another state, it is important that neutrality is maintained because if Pakistan starts censuring Egypt over its internal decisions, there could be a blowback.

When General Sisi came to power in 2014, Pakistan decided not to support him. On May 19, 2015, Pakistan's Foreign Office issued a statement criticizing a court trial verdict against Morsi. This was a deviation from the non-interference principle of Pakistan's foreign policy. All other countries also resisted the change except the UAE and Saudi Arabia which were fearful of the spread of the Arab Spring and felt safe in supporting Sisi. In 2015, the Egyptian defense minister arrived on an official visit to Pakistan amid a tepid welcome.

Egypt's relations with Qatar and Turkey were frozen and its ambassadors were withdrawn from these countries due to their support to the Muslim Brotherhood. Sisi won in the formal elections and Egypt was readmitted to the African Union; he later became the president of the African Union in 2019. US military assistance was also restored.

The Pakistan-Egypt situation started to improve after 2018. Their foreign ministers met on the margins of a UN session. Pakistan held bilateral political consultations in Islamabad, invitations were exchanged, and then for the first time, Egypt established Parliamentary Friendship Group with Pakistan in 2019.

In February 2019, at the height of the Pakistan-India crisis, the Egyptian Foreign Office was one of the few which issued a statement calling for restraint. No other state, except Malaysia and Iran, did so; even the Gulf countries remained quiet. Pakistan's prime minister and President Sisi met in Beijing and later at the Islamic Summit Conference in Makkah.

In June 2019, Pakistan's Senate passed a resolution on the death of Morsi, which was not liked by Egypt. After some time, things settled down and now both states are on moderate terms.

Q- Students and scholars from Egypt are very interested in learning Urdu. That is where Pakistan can have excellent collaboration. Secondly, sports are a major domain where both countries can cooperate. Thirdly, tourism is one of the major attractions of Egypt and other countries. Pakistan's leadership should also boost tourism and they can learn a lot about the sector from Egypt. Fourthly, there exists very good cooperation between the two military forces and Pakistani institutions also host many military officers from Egypt and other countries. What can be done in these domains to strengthen ties with Egypt?

Military cooperation is one example of excellent collaboration. Pakistan Navy ships regularly call at the ports of Tunisia, Morocco, South Africa, and other ports in the continent. The point is that it has to be in tandem. Pakistan can cooperate in other domains as well but the problem that needs to be addressed is the capacity and resources issues. Another problem is that there is no proper infrastructure including tourist-friendly hotels. As such guests have limited tourism options. On the other hand, Egypt has an open and vibrant tourism sector and everybody can enjoy the different attractions.

Q- What can be done to improve Pakistan's foreign policy?

The execution of foreign policy means actively seeking opportunities to build favorable associations. The biggest challenge for foreign policy makers is to pave a way in the given environment and if this cannot be done then it would amount to failure. The international environment is not friendly for Pakistan given the challenges the Foreign Office is facing, especially after the Cold War and 9/11. The nation's responsibilities have increased in such an unfavorable environment.

The problem is that Pakistan tries to adapt itself in line with the world by changing things in a way that has disturbed the country's domestic landscape. Along with this, there are blame games on the political and policy level, thus giving a chance to other states to exploit the situation. The situation will not improve unless the country improves its policies at all levels.

Given the international challenges, along with policy improvements, Pakistan requires to tackle both the internal and external issues together. Pakistan needs to focus on and rethink the conduct of foreign policy, such as:

- **Political Contacts**

If political contacts are not present at the highest, mid, or even lower level, then relations cannot improve. Parliament needs to establish its political contacts in the foreign policy domain through visits of delegations to certain countries, including those that have not been given preference previously.

- **Establishment of Structures**

Just like China and India, Pakistan should also establish structures at multiple levels. The Chinese even apply this principle in their relations with Pakistan. It is strange that Pakistan, being a close ally of China, has not learned anything from them. China has set up several levels of structures, and they gain much from it. The nation cannot compromise its values and identity in order to fit in with the rest of the world. Instead, the need is to improve the infrastructure to better Pakistan's position.

- **Follow-up/Continuity**

Pakistan needs to maintain continuity in its initiatives for Africa at every level. For example, there has been no practical follow-up to the 'Look Africa Policy'. The need is to be innovative about foreign policy conduct.

- **Perception Building**

With regard to Pakistan's foreign policy conduct, ambassadors are mostly appointed to African countries as a punishment. The mindset about this continent has been formed by the stories that are ingrained since childhood creating the perception that Africa is a tribal and backward society. There is a need to establish a better connection in this case.



Picture Gallery



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Disclaimer

This report outlines the salient points that emerged in the discussion and does not necessarily reflect the views of all the participants or the IPS.



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