

# Pakistan's Relations with West African Countries

## The Necessity of Economic Diplomacy



### Seminar Report



Institute of Policy Studies  
Islamabad

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## Executive Summary

Pakistan and West Africa share a long history of bilateral relationships. Pakistan's longtime engagement with Africa is marked by warmth, cordiality, mutual trust, and understanding. Pakistan had supported freedom movements in Algeria, Kenya, Sudan, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Morocco, Libya, Egypt, and Nigeria, both morally and materially. This support has earned Pakistan a lot of goodwill in the continent.

Pakistan also supports Africa in the UN. This support has been very consistent throughout the different governments; whether it was a democratic setup or a military regime. Pakistan also gave a proposal for the formation of a nuclear-free zone in Africa during the eleventh Islamic conference of OIC. Furthermore, it has always played a major role in peacekeeping efforts on the African continent.

Pakistan's growing military ties with some African countries are also noteworthy. Pakistani armed forces have played an important role in satiating the defense needs of the African region. This is highlighted by the fact that Nigeria has bought Super Mushshak aircraft and JF-17 Thunder jets from Pakistan. Besides, institutional engagement with the African Union helped Pakistan earn \$4.18 billion in 2019-20.

Despite that, with all the changing global scenarios and political dynamics, there is a need for Pakistan to have a strong diplomatic presence in Africa, without which the country cannot expect any big development in bilateral relations with the African states. In this regard, economic diplomacy must be the priority of Pakistan's foreign policy vis-à-vis West African countries, having a special focus on domestic production and promotion of exports, trade, and investment.

As West Africa presents many trade and investment opportunities, Pakistan needs to make effective use of its resources for effective economic diplomacy in order to take the ties to new heights.

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), Islamabad, held a webinar titled, "Pakistan's Relations with West African Countries", on March 3, 2021. The aim of this session was to look into the potential aspects of cooperation, explore opportunities, and underline challenges for Pakistan vis-à-vis West African countries. The session was addressed as keynote speaker by Ambassador (r) Haroon Shaukat.

The webinar was held as part of a five-series program, titled "Reviving the Past: Pakistan's Relations with African Countries", on the country's relations with the five geographical regions of Africa, organized by IPS under its "Understanding Africa" project. The project envisages building an in-depth knowledge and multidisciplinary study on African countries and to revive Pakistan and Africa relations in the 21st century.



*Ambassador (r) Haroon Shaukat, Senior IPS Associate Ambassador (retd) Tajammul Altaf and Ambassador (r) Najam us Saqib*

## Takeaways from the Roundtable

### *Q- What is the brief profile of Western Africa as a region?*

The region consists of Benin, Burkina Faso, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Chad, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. The region is bounded on the west by the Atlantic Ocean and on the north by the Sahara Desert. Most of the states in this area are coastal while some are landlocked.

With an area of 5,112,903 km<sup>2</sup> (1,974,103 square miles) and a population of 419 million (2021 est.), West Africa is demographically and economically one of the fastest-growing sub-regions of the African continent.

The official language of many West African nations is English. These countries include Nigeria, Ghana, The Gambia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. The region also has more than 70 billion French-speaking population, besides Arabic, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba speaking people. West Africa has extensive language diversity and density. Also, the region is extensively diverse in ethnicity.

### *Q- How have Western powers affected Africa in the colonial and post-independence era?*

During the 15th century, the Portuguese arrived in the region because of their geographical proximity to the African continent and started black slavery. After that, the British, French, Spanish, and Dutch followed, each to exploit the continent, i.e. the scramble for Africa.

Western African kingdoms opposed the colonialist forces but failed to sustain the struggle. After years of exploitation by foreign powers, all Western African states eventually got independence in the second half of the 20th century, i.e. by 1974.

But by then and afterwards, the African states were embroiled in internal conflicts. Since then, Africa has always been afflicted with poverty, hunger, socioeconomic crisis, and low human development.

During the Cold War era, the region again became a playground for the big powers like the US and the USSR in an effort to expand their influence and dominance in the area. This great power involvement, series of proxy wars, and over-exploitation of natural resources largely affected the economic progress of the region and caused growing political and social instability.

Even after the decolonization and the Cold War, the region remained home to a number of problems. This sub-region of Africa is also a witness to a number of civil wars. However, with the passage of time and with the help of its European allies, Africa started growing and developing in economic and political fields.

However, it again made Africa the focus of Western and European countries on account of its auspicious economic potential, vast investment opportunities, and presence of massive natural resources.

Due to the presence of a substantial amount of natural resources and economic opportunities, big powers like the US and China are still trying to exert their influence in the region for their own economic and political interests. This may, however, lead to another great power game.

### *Q- What is the significance of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) for Western Africa?*

To foster the ideal of collective self-sufficiency, 15 West African states agreed to establish an economic community, called the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). It is a regional, political and economic union of 15 countries established in 1975. Its vision was revised in 1993 in Cotonou, Benin. Its member states include Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal, and Togo.

As a trading union, it aims to unite all nations into a single, sizable trading bloc with integrated economic activities including industry, transportation, telecommunications commerce, monetary and financial issues, energy, agriculture, natural resources, social problems, and cultural issues, among other things.

The community works towards raising the standard of living for its people, maintaining and improving economic stability, fostering relations among member states, and contributing to the advancement and development of the African continent. It is also a troop-contributing region for peacekeeping operations within Africa.

Moreover, ECOWAS has its own institutions and special agencies to ensure the fulfilment of its objectives. For example, there is a West African Economic Monitoring Institute (WAMI) within ECOWAS. It has a currency called the CFA franc which is common in eight French-speaking West African countries.

***Q- What is the status of Pakistan-Africa relationship?***

Pakistan has a longstanding engagement with Africa, marked by warmth, cordiality, mutual trust and understanding. Both share common concerns and aspirations. As of 2021, Pakistan has 15 resident missions in Africa with concurrent accreditation to another 39 countries. Eleven African states have their missions in Pakistan.

Pakistan has historically supported Africa's freedom movements in Algeria, Kenya, Sudan, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Morocco, Libya, Egypt and Nigeria both morally and materially. This support has earned Pakistan a lot of goodwill which continues to this day.

Pakistan's armed forces' participation in a number of UN peacekeeping missions has fortified this goodwill. The first contingent as a peacekeeping mission was deployed in Congo in 1996, and later in Somalia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Central African Republic, South Sudan, Mali, etc. Pakistan's armed forces have a significant role in the promotion of defense equipment. Nigeria has bought Super Mushshak aircraft and JF-17 Thunder jets from Pakistan, which is a good move forward.

Pakistan and Africa share common views on politics, arms control and disarmament, human rights, and environmental issues. Pakistan also has close cooperation with African countries in the UN General Assembly, human right forums, and other international bodies.

Pakistan has commenced institutional engagement with the African Union resulting in \$4.18 billion during 2019-20. All in all, Pakistan's ties with Africa are on a steady growth path, and the continent is emerging as a big market for Pakistan.

***Q- State the economic significance of Western Africa for Pakistan.***

The economic importance of West Africa relies in its natural resources and emerging investment and trade opportunities. Economic engagement with the West African states can be very beneficial for the straggling economy of Pakistan.

Pakistan's dismal economic growth or progress is linked to its overreliance on traditional market strategies and dependence on the US, European, and Middle Eastern markets. With the shifting economic dynamics of the world, it is important for Pakistan to shift its focus toward other resource-rich zones like Africa to protect its sovereignty and reduce its dependency on big powers, particularly the western forces.

Regarding natural energy resources, the continent holds 10% of the world's proven oil resources and almost 8% of gas reserves. Africa has become one of the fast-growing oil-producing regions in the world and some experts believe that there are still some areas with great potential for oil production which have not been discovered yet.

The good thing about West Africa is that a significant amount of oil is located in offshore areas which can be accessed easily and extraction is also much cheaper. Africa is also very rich in mineral resources as it possesses around 60% of the world's diamonds, 40% of phosphate, and 30% of cobalt reserves.

***Q- How are Pakistan's relations with the West African states having a Muslim majority?***

Niger and Sierra Leone are West African states with a majority Muslim population of 99% and 78%, respectively. A brief overview is given below.



## **Niger**

Niger is a sub-Saharan landlocked country with a population of 23 million and a GDP of \$13 billion. Niger's economy primarily depends on subsistence agriculture. In recent years, its agricultural economy has been affected by terrorist activities in Mali. It is ranked very low in the UN Human Development Index.

On January 27, 1996, a coup took place. Colonel Ibrahim Baré ousted the first democratically elected President Mahamane Ousmane who had remained in power for three years. Baré promoted himself to the rank of general and arrested Prime Minister Hama Amadou and members of the cabinet. He remained in power for three years and was killed in a counter-coup in 1999. Now, there is a politically elected government.

Niger has always been a part of the OIC's contact group on Jammu & Kashmir. It is a very small group with four other countries – Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey. Niger has unequivocally supported Pakistan on the Kashmir issue. Niger's Hamid Algabid served as secretary general of OIC from 1988 to 1996.

Pakistan has never closed down its embassy in Niger but only met the Nigerien leadership in third countries like at the UN General Assembly meeting in New York. The last presidential meeting took place in 1984 in Pakistan. Pakistan's foreign minister recently attended a 47-member session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of OIC that was held in Niamey.

Pakistan has trained a number of African officials in diplomacy, military, and banking. Pakistan has also provided food assistance on a large scale.

## **Sierra Leone**

Sierra Leone is one of the smallest countries in West Africa. Its total population is 6.6 million and the GDP is \$4 billion. Sierra Leone got its independence from Britain in 1961 and has been through a terrible civil war during 1991-2002.

Pakistan's embassy in Sierra Leone has been accredited to Senegal.

Pakistan participated in the UNAMSIL peacekeeping operation in the late 1990s, which was a large and tricky mission as a revolutionary front had created havoc in Sierra Leone. This was a time when Pakistan was facing a phase of diplomatic isolation, uprising in Kashmir was brewing, and relations with the US were tense.

The situation became very tense in Sierra Leone; the revolutionaries used to arm children and make them kill their parents and cut up their bodies. India had a large contingent over there but it soon withdrew. The reputation of the UN was at stake; if the mission failed in Sierra Leone, the UN peacekeeping missions would come under serious questioning.

The UN secretary general and the US foreign secretary asked Pakistan to participate in this mission. The GHQ sent Brigadier Ahmed Shuja Pasha, who later became the DG ISI, along with one other director, to review the whole situation and they submitted a report on their return. The GHQ considered it as a good chance to improve Pakistan's image with the UN and the US and so it was decided to take part in the peacekeeping mission. Pakistan sent a very robust and well-trained contingent, comprising 2,500 troops. The government demanded a key military post and the UN agreed to give Pakistan the role of chief military observer. This post was given to Major General Akhter Ali, who was Corps Commander Karachi at the time. Brigadier Pasha at the time was the Brigade Commander. The Foreign Office was to liaise between the civilian and military hierarchy, as the civilian side demanded close interaction with the mission.

The mission was a great success. The contingent was self-sufficient, earned a good reputation, and was praised by the UN secretary general and the US administration. Besides, the US also managed to send a large number of equipment on a lend-lease basis.

***Q- What major obstacles do the Pakistani and African cooperation faces?***

The weak economy, lack of connectivity, lack of diplomatic presence, priority differences, and lack of economic diplomacy has been major hurdles in establishing persistent cooperation and ties between Pakistan and Africa, including the West African states.

- Pakistan has a very weak and cash-strapped economy; it has a very narrow basic export of goods with total reliance on its exports.
- Connectivity is also a problem. There are no direct air or sea connections between Pakistan and the African states. Moreover, there are no freight liners going to Africa.
- The other hurdle that comes in the way of establishing favourable ties between the two regions is the lack of Pakistan's diplomatic presence in the African continent. This limits their capability and capacity to cooperate with each other. So Pakistan should try to enhance its socio-economic presence in the continent. Diplomatically, Pakistan has very few resident missions in Africa.
- There has been a deficiency of priority on part of Pakistan. Africa was never given any preference due to its conflict-ridden and Third World status. At the same time, Pakistan's foreign policy has been security centric; the policy priorities start in Kashmir and end up in Afghanistan.
- Economic diplomacy has not been a national priority. Instead of economy, security largely determines Pakistan's foreign policy.

***Q- What should Pakistan do to reinforce ties with the African states?***

Following are some recommendations for Pakistan in order to strengthen its ties with Africa.

**Diplomatic Presence**

Without a strong diplomatic presence, Pakistan cannot expect any major development in its relationship with the African states. Pakistan has to set a five-year goal for the establishment of diplomatic missions.

There are some financial constraints because of which Pakistan does not have many embassies in these areas, especially in the West African countries. Over the last 15 years, Pakistan has not been able to open some embassies in other regions as well, for instance, an embassy in Chile was opened and later closed. There are certain economic factors, which are restricting the Foreign Office from opening as many embassies as it wants to.

**Economic and Multilateral Diplomacy**

Economic diplomacy must be the priority of Pakistan's foreign policy with a special focus on domestic production and promotion of exports, trade and investment. Although security is important, without economic diplomacy it is not complete. For this, a small Export-Import (EXIM) bank can be established to finance Pakistani goods to the world, especially to Africa. As African countries cannot afford to finance their exports, this presents an opportunity for Pakistan to establish its economic presence to export items. Moreover, development and assistance programs in the African states can also help Pakistan build an economic presence. For that, a small development agency with an appropriate budget should be set up.

Multilateral diplomacy is needed to earn the friendship of African states. Pakistan is very active in multilateral diplomacy with the US, Switzerland, Saudi Arabia, and the OIC but neglects the African states. In case of strong multilateral diplomacy with all 54 African countries, they would stand behind Pakistan and Pakistan would have a strong international presence.

**Role of Private Sector**

The private sector needs to upgrade companies to multinational corporations. In this regard, the MNCs in Pakistan, like the Mansha Group worth \$2.4 billion and Frontier Works Organization, can make a difference.

The companies of Turkey and China have the capability to dominate their industry. Chinese companies, especially those in Pakistan, are all state-owned, underwritten by the banks of China. Turkey has over 200 groups that are doing major construction work, even in Russia. The new Istanbul airport, costing €20 billion and supposed to be the world's largest, was built on BOT (built-operate-transfer) basis by Turkish companies.

If there are four to five Pakistani companies of such stature, the African states would readily invest in them. For this, Pakistan's private sector needs to develop efficient MNCs like NADRA, FWO or similar models and establish its footprint in Africa. However, more work must be done for capacity. In Pakistan, there are multiple potential companies and groups but they are content to remain stagnant at \$100 million or \$200 million. No enterprise is keen to become a billion dollar plus company.

The private sector has a business policy advocacy group called Pakistan Business Council. It is Karachi-based and consists of 70-80 major industrial producers of the country. The sector that thrives the most is construction; China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and the Turkish businesses hinge on it. There are just a few big groups in Pakistan, the rest are very small companies. So the question is rather fundamental: why there is no desire among Pakistani groups to grow beyond \$100-200 million.

It is a question of capacity. Pakistan needs the right talent and ambitious businessmen who have the capacity to go out and invest and who have a good reputation in the international market in order to raise funds from the commercial banks.

It is high time to realize that Africa is actually important. Businesspersons in Pakistan want to do international business only in North America, Canada, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, or other European countries. No businessperson says that he would like to go to Sierra Leone and start a business. This is a two-pronged issue; one concerns the government and the other the private sector. Both need to be cognizant of the fact that Africa is offering a lot.

### **Joint Ventures**

In addition to this, Pakistan needs to initiate joint ventures in Africa in partnership with China. The Chinese have a growing footprint in Africa. In almost every African state, China is working on welfare projects for free and then it creates a niche. China is also close to Pakistan and has a strategic partnership in the form of CPEC. Pakistan should benefit from this relationship with China.

The Chinese are going to overtake the US in GDP soon; they are eager for raw materials, energy, and new markets. BRI is taking off and China has started stepping out into the world. The Chinese companies are present in Pakistan just as they are present in almost every country including in Africa.

It should be the task of major groups to partner with such companies as no small group can make a partnership with a state-backed large group. Although the Chinese state-backed companies are reluctant to form private partnerships, there is a very wide range of private entrepreneurs in China now. It is the dynamics of the private sector to be connected. For instance, the Pakistani government could not offer land to a Chinese group, which was a major producer, so they ended up dealing with the private sector. So, there is a possibility and opportunity for joint ventures.

### **Exploit the Potentials**

Tourism has a very big potential in Pakistan. Pakistan needs to enhance and create infrastructure and facilities and upgrade it to tourism industry. Turkey earns more from tourism alone than Pakistan does from its entire exports and remittances, so there is a need to work on this aspect. It is important to have a plan as Africa is now ripe for opportunities.

Pakistan also has a good education and training potential. Scholarships should be made available to African countries along with training in the fields of military, civil, diplomatic, banking, railways, etc.

## Picture Gallery



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