

Youth Perspectives on Pakistan's Foreign Policy

A data-driven exploration of young people's perceptions on geopolitical and sociocultural aspects of foreign relations

Adil Sultan



CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

 Data Overview 1

SECTION 1: SOCIOCULTURAL DYNAMICS 3

SECTION 2: GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT 6

SECTION 3: YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF PAKISTAN..... 11

CONCLUSION 14

INTRODUCTION

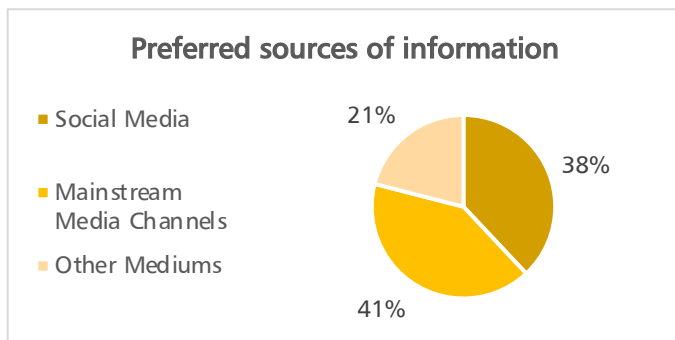
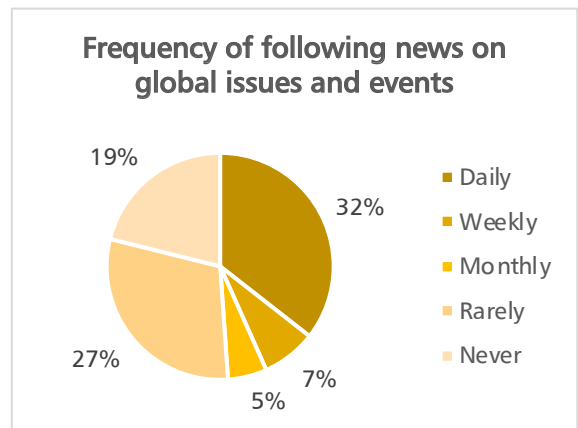
In an era marked by rapid geopolitical shifts and technological advancements, the perspectives of youth are not just relevant but essential for shaping effective foreign policies. Pakistan, with one of the largest youth populations in the world, stands at a unique crossroads. The views of Pakistani youth on international relations and foreign policy are increasingly influential, as they will soon be the stewards of their nation's political, economic, and social future.

This report, titled "Youth Perspectives on Pakistan's Foreign Policy," seeks to unearth the nuanced views held by young Pakistanis. The data presented in this report may help policymakers and stakeholders to gain insights into the priorities, concerns, and aspirations of the youth, paving the way for more inclusive and forward-thinking foreign policy strategies that resonate with and empower the younger generation.

DATA OVERVIEW

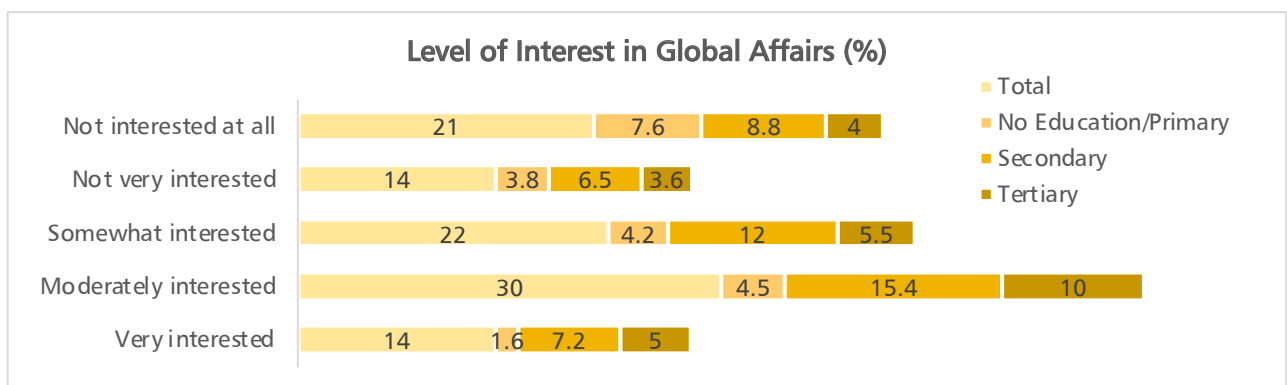
The perceptions and attitudes of Pakistani youth on international relations and foreign policy were assessed in this study through a field survey and the questions asked ranged from cultural influences, preferences as travel destinations, education destinations, trade potentials, and overall how they view various countries in terms of their relationship with the Pakistani state and its people.

In this section, an overview of the data has been shared. Approximately 66% of young Pakistanis show varying degrees of interest in foreign policy issues and around half of the respondents follow news and information on global issues and events on a regular (daily or weekly) basis.



41% of respondents prefer to consume information through mainstream media channels while 38% prefer social media.

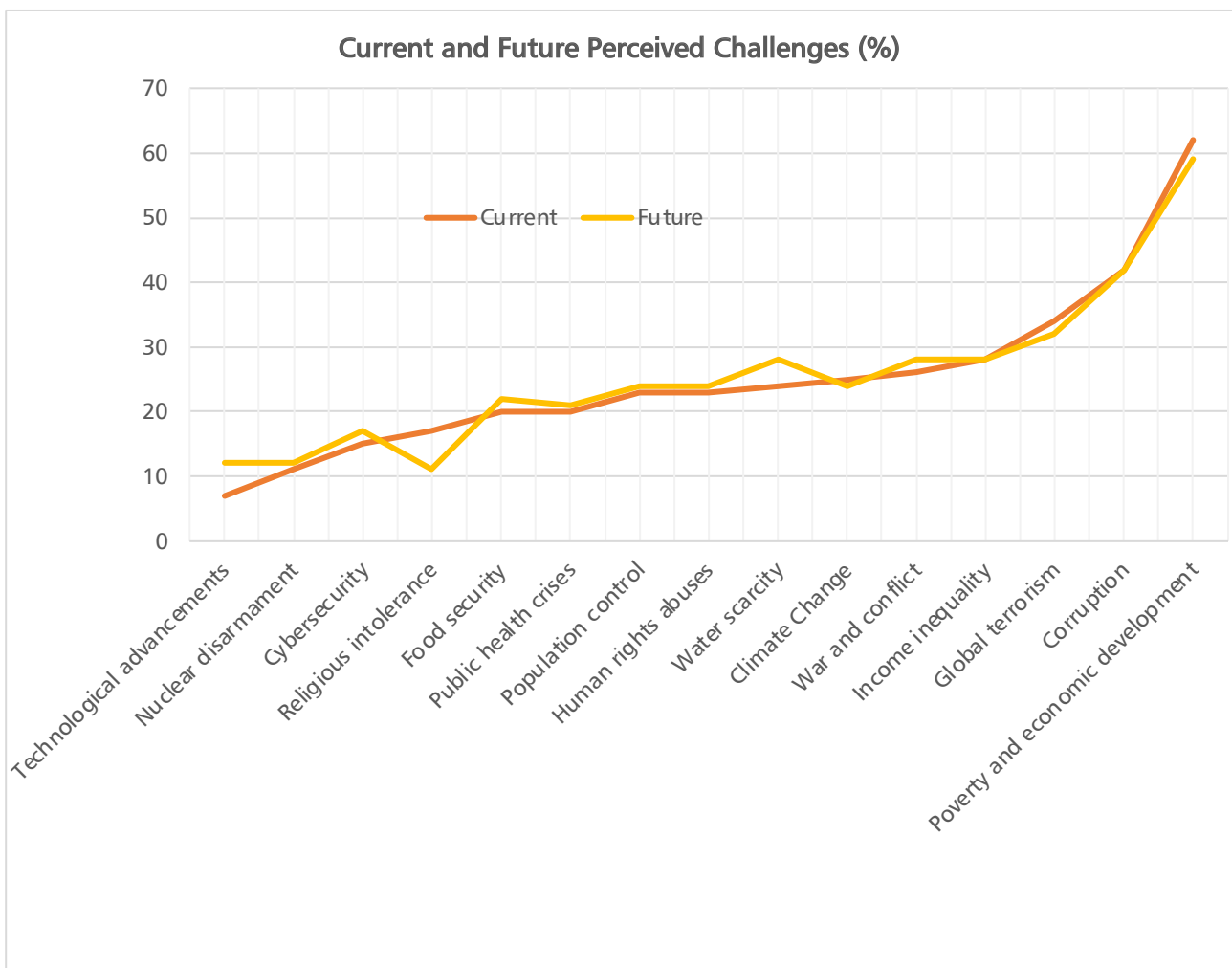
Educational background plays a critical role in shaping the depth of understanding and interest in foreign policy, with higher education correlating with a more nuanced view of international relations.





In terms of perceptions of Pakistan's relationships with governments across the world, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and China were among the most trusted, while India stood out in governments that are considered rivals by Pakistani youth.

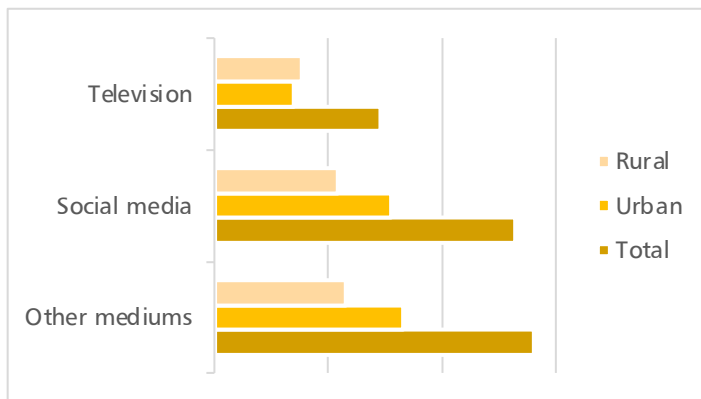
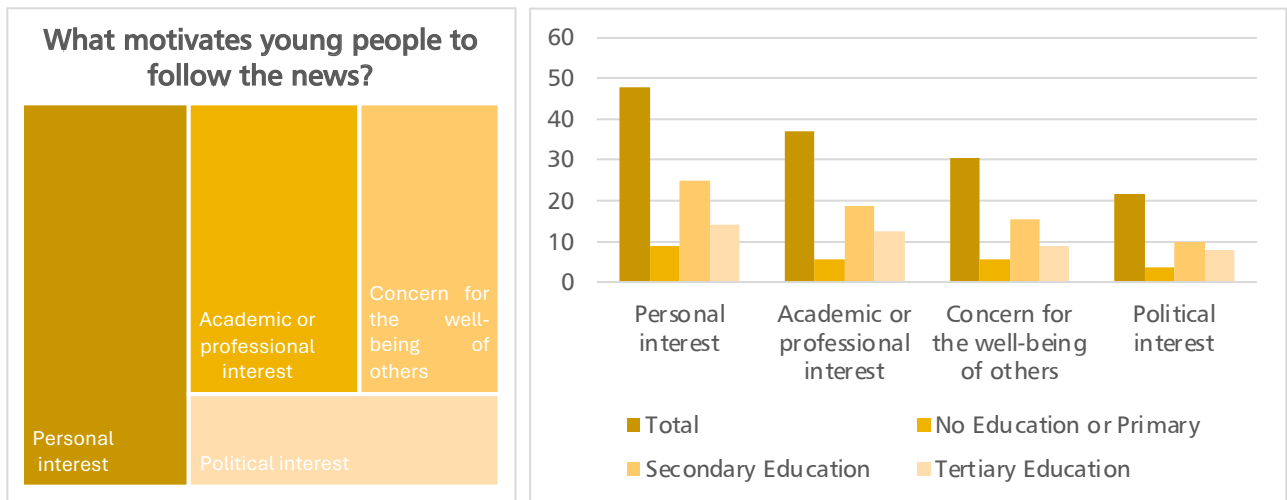
Current and future perceived challenges were fairly similar, with poverty and economic development challenges taking the lead concern, followed closely by corruption. Technological advancement and nuclear disarmament were ranked low in perception in both current and future trends.



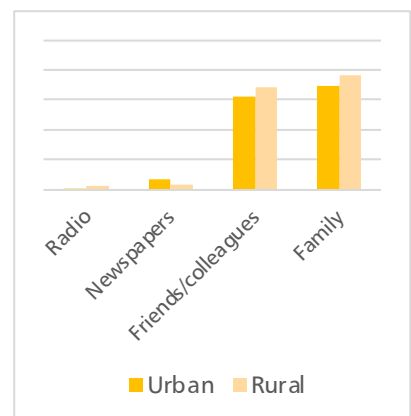
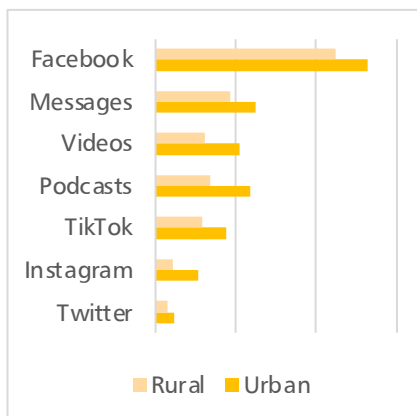
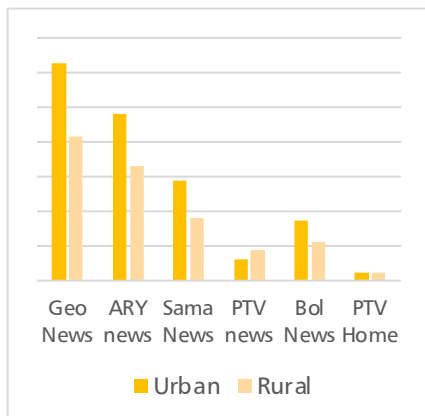
SECTION 1: SOCIOCULTURAL DYNAMICS

In exploring the sociocultural dynamics that shape young Pakistanis' views on foreign policy, it becomes evident that culture, media, and education not only influence but actively shape perceptions and engagements with international relations. This section delves into how these elements interplay to mold the foreign policy perspectives of Pakistan's youth.

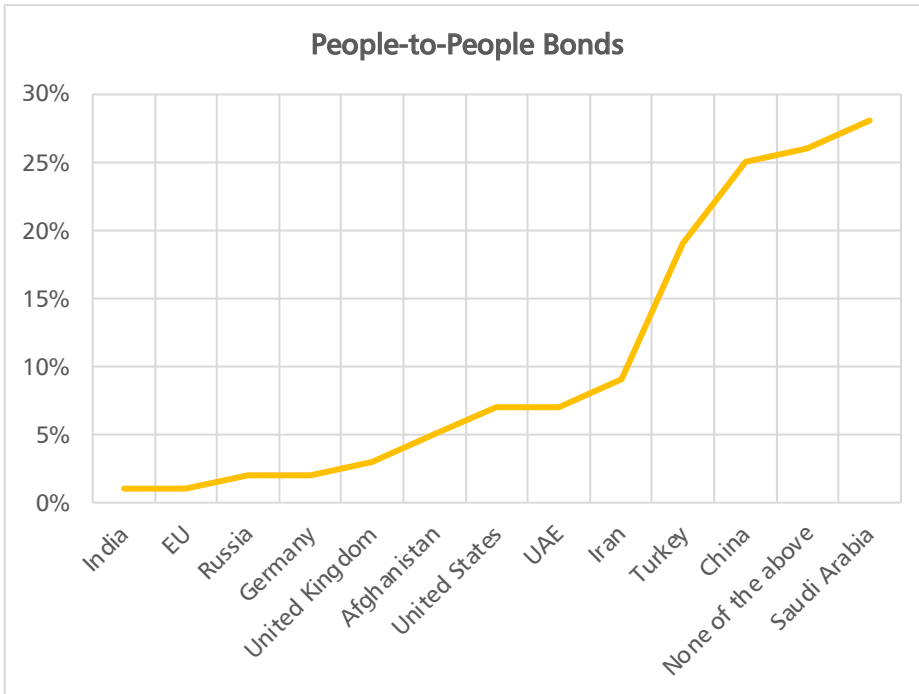
Sources of information: Respondents were asked what motivates them to follow the news, to which a substantial 66% expressed interest for various reasons. Personal interest (48%) was the leading cause. Academic and professional interests (37%) follow closely, constituting respondents who recognize the value of staying informed. Notably, 30% of respondents express a commendable concern for the well-being of others globally. Political motivations account for 22% of respondents.



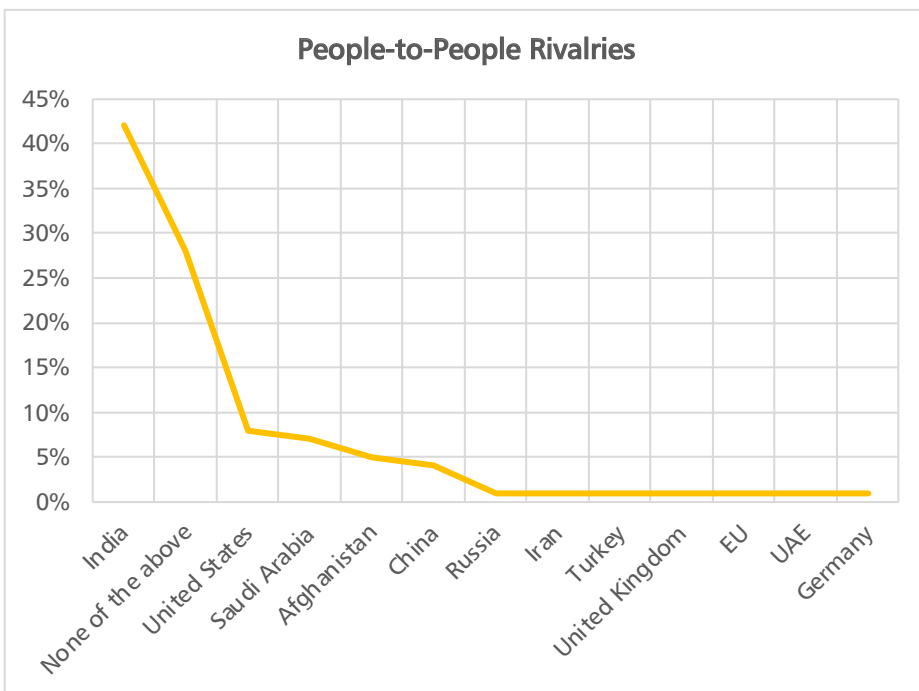
Private television remains a predominant source of information, with specific channels taking center stage, notably Geo News (51%), ARY News (39%) and Sama News (23%). In social media, Facebook is the leading choice of 48% of respondents. Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and podcasts each contribute to varying degrees, reflecting a diversified digital landscape. Video streaming platforms such as YouTube and mobile messaging services, such as WhatsApp, were also popular choices.



People-to-people connections: Respondents were asked which countries shared the strongest bonds with Pakistan, in terms of people-to-people connections. The survey reveals a strong perception of a people-to-people connection with Saudi Arabia (28%) and a notable lack of consensus on a single country among 26% of respondents. China received a significant mention at 25%, and Turkey and Iran garnered percentages of 19% and 9%, respectively.

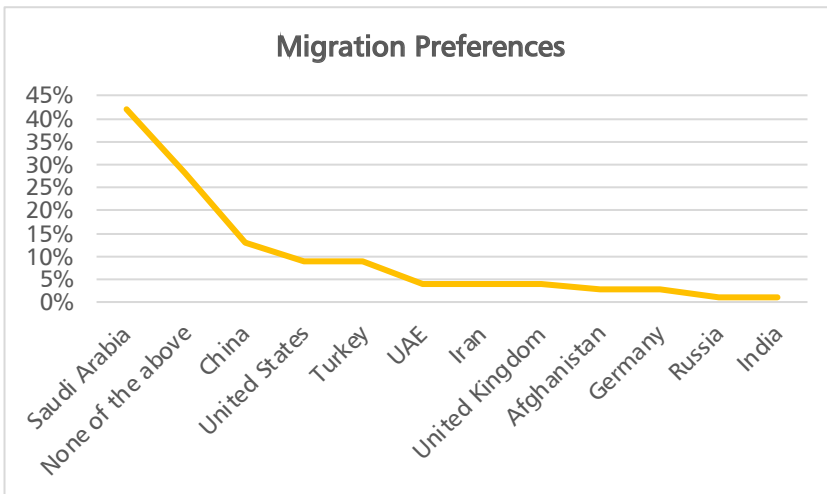
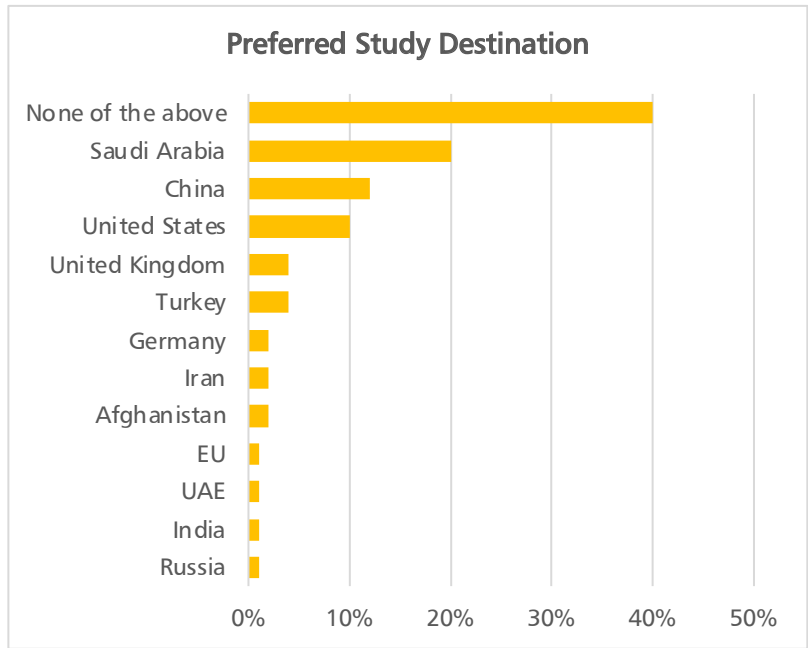


Regarding strained people-to-people connections between Pakistan and its rivals, 42% of respondents perceive India as the most strained connection. This sentiment is consistent across gender, education levels, and rural-urban divides, with respondents from Punjab and Islamabad Capital Territory expressing relatively higher percentages (45% and 51%, respectively). 28% of respondents do not think that any specific country has the most people-to-people rivalries. The United States is identified by 8% of respondents, with notable differences between urban and rural areas, where urban respondents (11%) express a slightly higher perception of strained connections with the US.



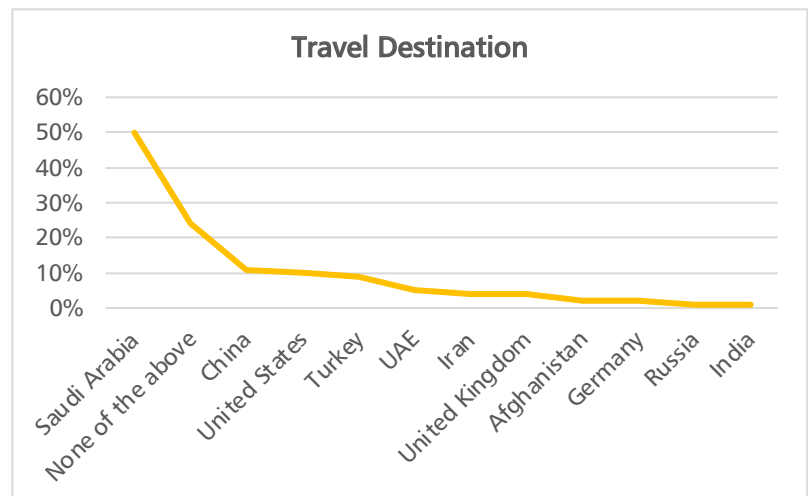
Overall, respondents were more positive about foreign people-to-people relations.

Study destinations: Interestingly, 40% of the respondents prefer not to study abroad. However, among those inclined to pursue education internationally, Saudi Arabia emerges as the top choice, capturing 20% of the interest. China follows closely with 12%, underscoring its growing prominence as a study destination. The United States, a traditional hub for international education, secures 10% of the preferences. It is worth highlighting that Germany, with a 2% share, appears to have relatively lower traction for study purposes. Notably, respondents from Islamabad exhibit a higher interest in studying in Germany, constituting 8% of the preferences.



Migration preferences: Regarding the willingness of the Pakistani youth to consider migrating to different countries in the next 5 years. Saudi Arabia emerges as the top choice (42%). 28% of respondents would not consider migration to the specified countries. Around 15% of respondents want to migrate to China and the United States, and Turkey attracts around 10% of respondents. UAE, UK and Germany remain unlikely choices for the majority.

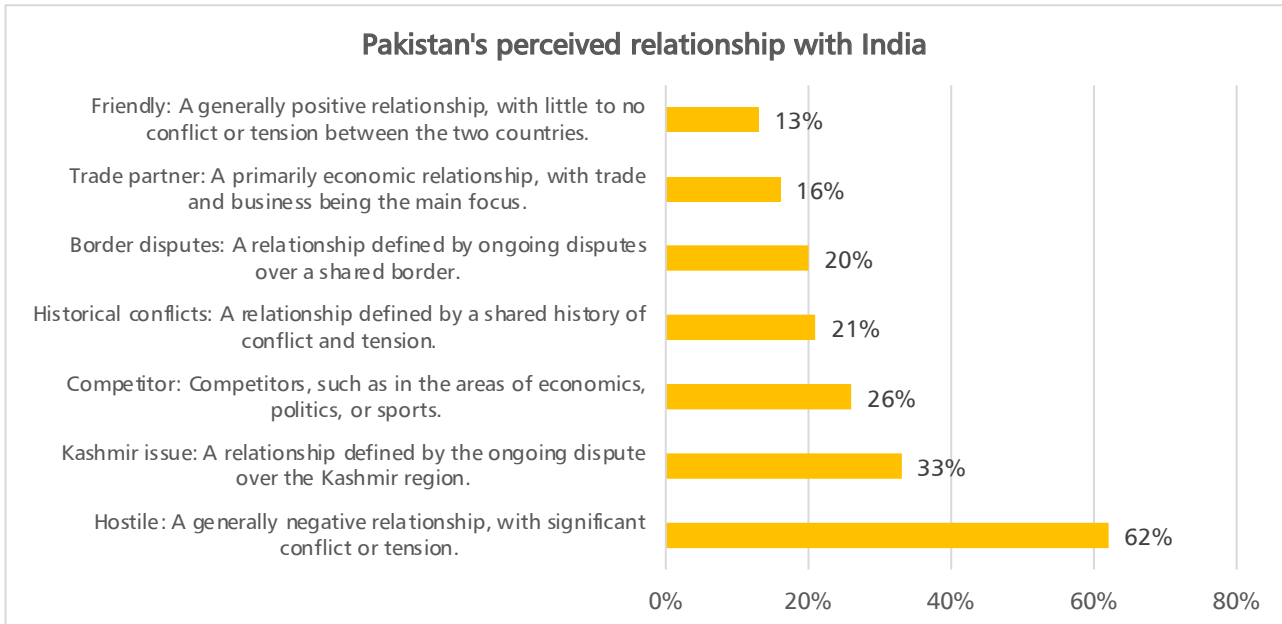
Travel destinations: In terms of preferred travel destinations for the next two years, 50% of respondents chose Saudi Arabia. 24% of participants expressed no interest in traveling to any of the listed countries. Turkey, China, and the United States are also preferred destinations, capturing the interest of 11%, 10%, and 9% of respondents, respectively. On the other hand, countries like Iran, UAE, UK, Afghanistan, Germany, Russia, India, and the European Union (EU) witness more limited enthusiasm, each attracting less than 5% interest.



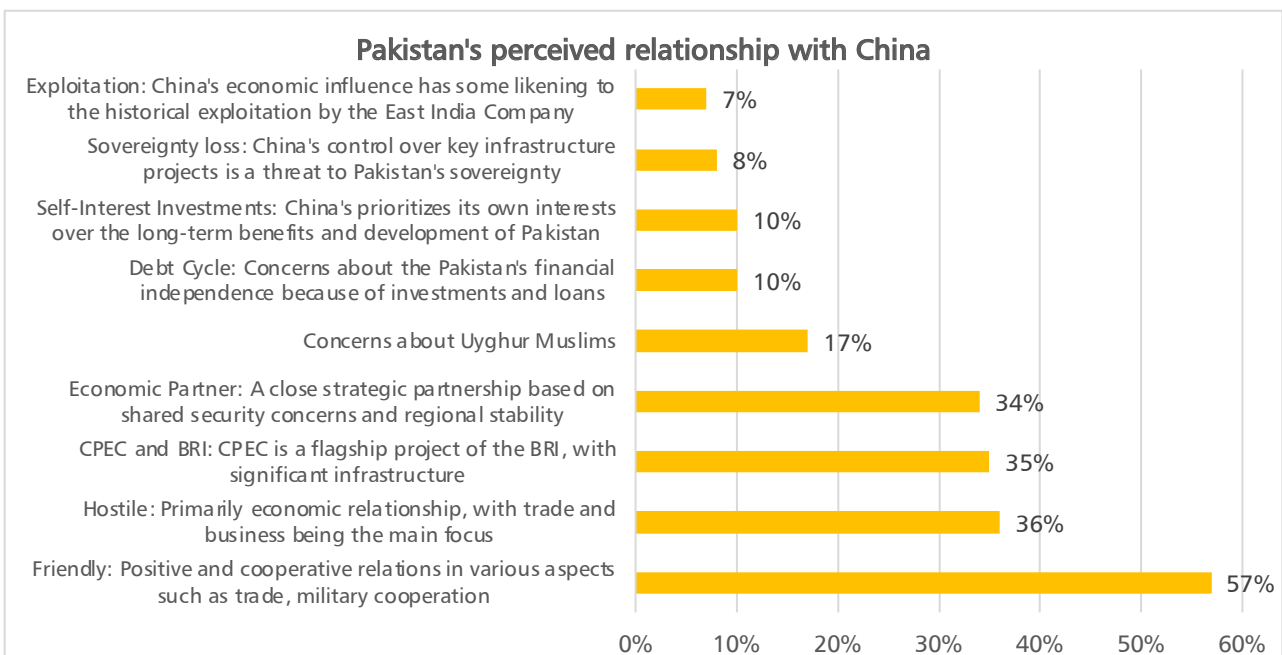
SECTION 2: GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

The geopolitical landscape plays a critical role in shaping the foreign policy views of Pakistani youth. This section examines how regional conflicts, global alliances, and Pakistan's strategic geopolitical positioning influence these perspectives.

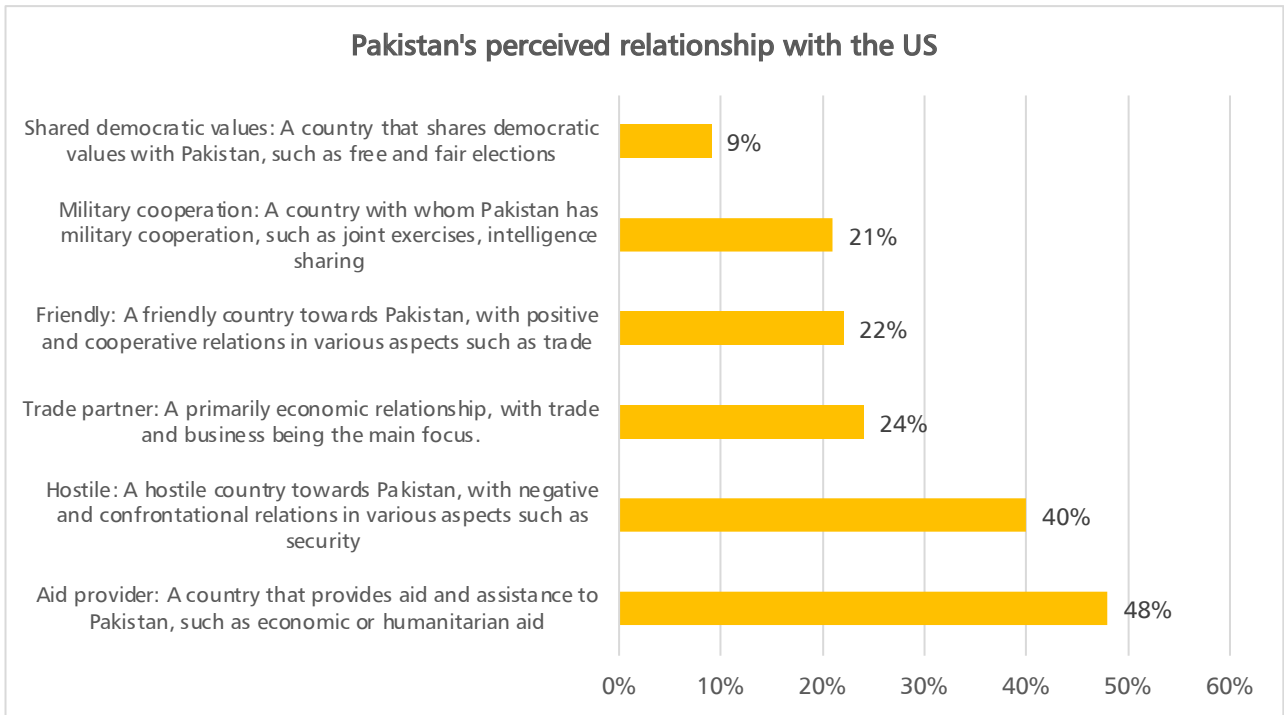
India: The longstanding conflict with India, especially over Kashmir, remains a pivotal factor in shaping youth opinions. Many young Pakistanis view this relationship through the lens of security and historical disputes, influencing their perceptions of peace initiatives and regional stability.



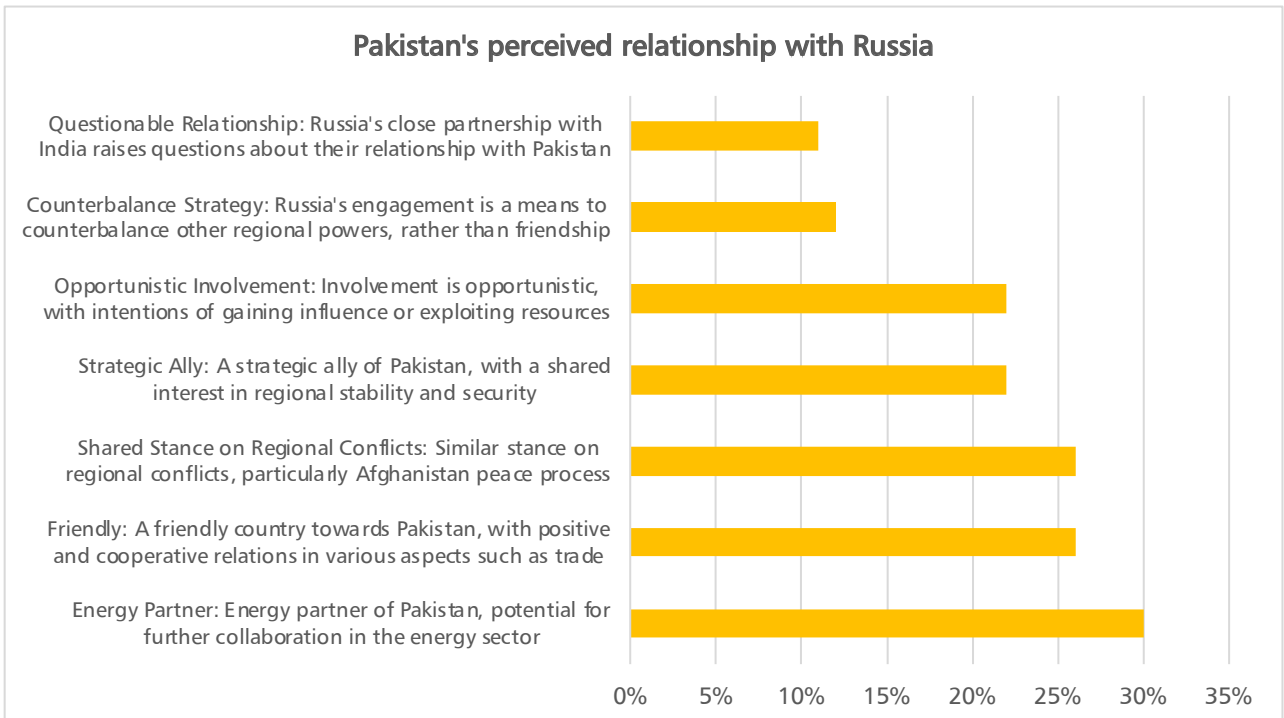
China: The strategic partnership with China, especially through projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), is viewed positively by a majority of the youth. However, there are nuanced views regarding the economic dependencies and long-term benefits of such alliances.



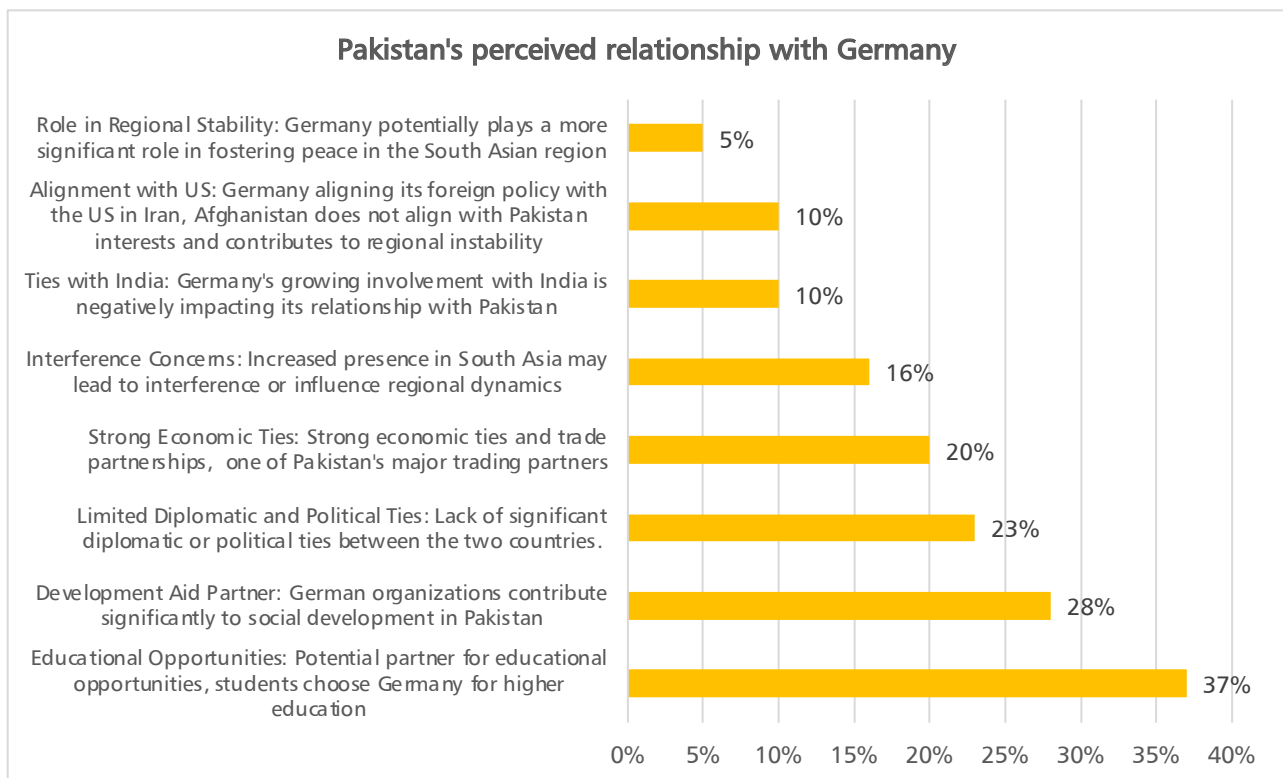
United States: The complex relationship with the United States, characterized by a mix of dependency and distrust, significantly influences youth opinions. Perspectives vary widely, from viewing the US as a vital ally for economic aid and military support to seeing it as a hegemonic power with self-serving interests in the region.



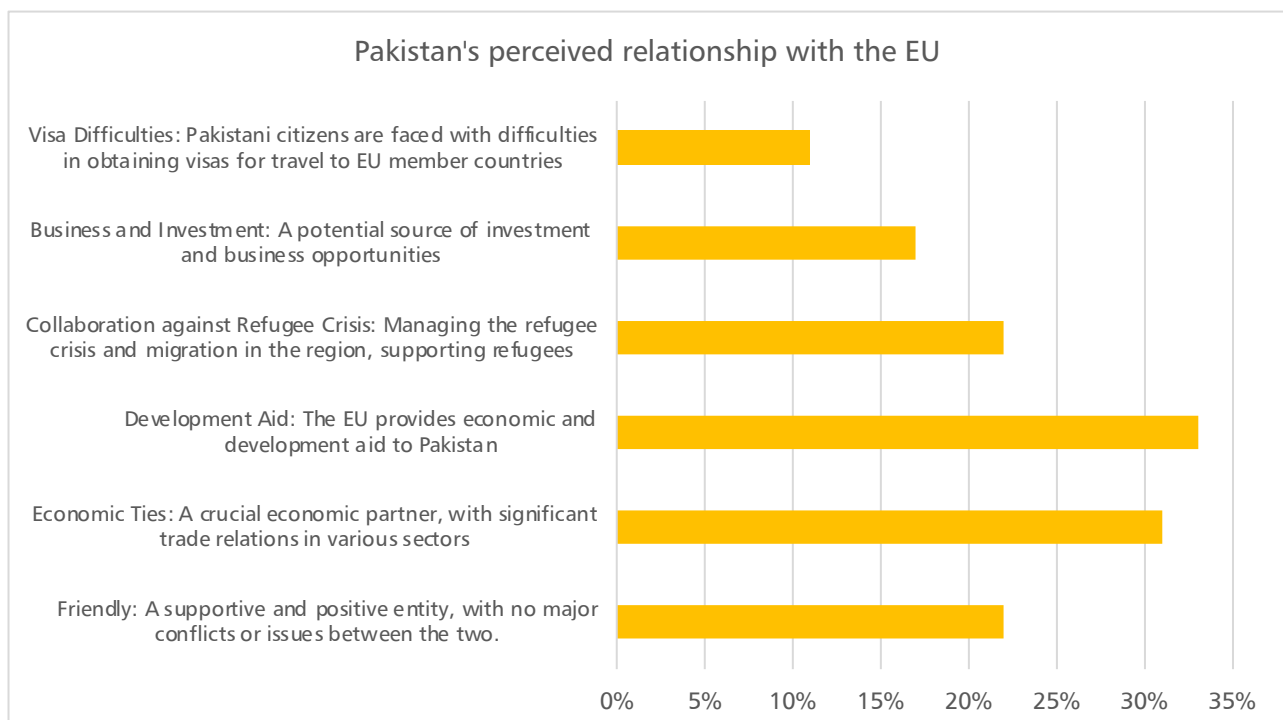
Russia: The perceptions regarding Russia's relationship with Pakistan reflect a multifaceted understanding. Young Pakistanis interpret Russia's relationship with their country in a strategic and wide-ranging manner, acknowledging both opportunities and potential challenges, while expressing a need for further clarity in some instances.



Germany: In evaluating the Pakistani perception of Germany's relationship, a nuanced picture emerges across various demographics. These nuanced insights provide a comprehensive understanding of how the Pakistani public perceives Germany's role in various domains, offering valuable considerations for diplomatic and strategic engagements.

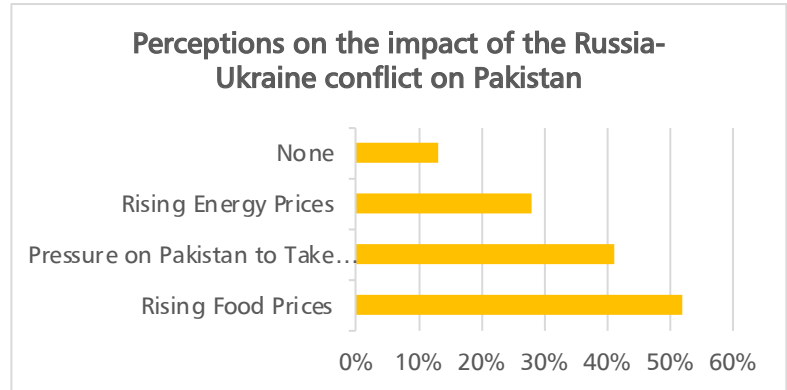


European Union: Perceptions regarding the European Union's role in the region and its relationship with Pakistan, a notable 33% of respondents believe that the EU contributes significantly to Pakistan's development through economic and development aid. These findings underscore the complexity of public sentiment, reflecting a blend of optimism, skepticism, and concerns regarding the EU's engagement with Pakistan.





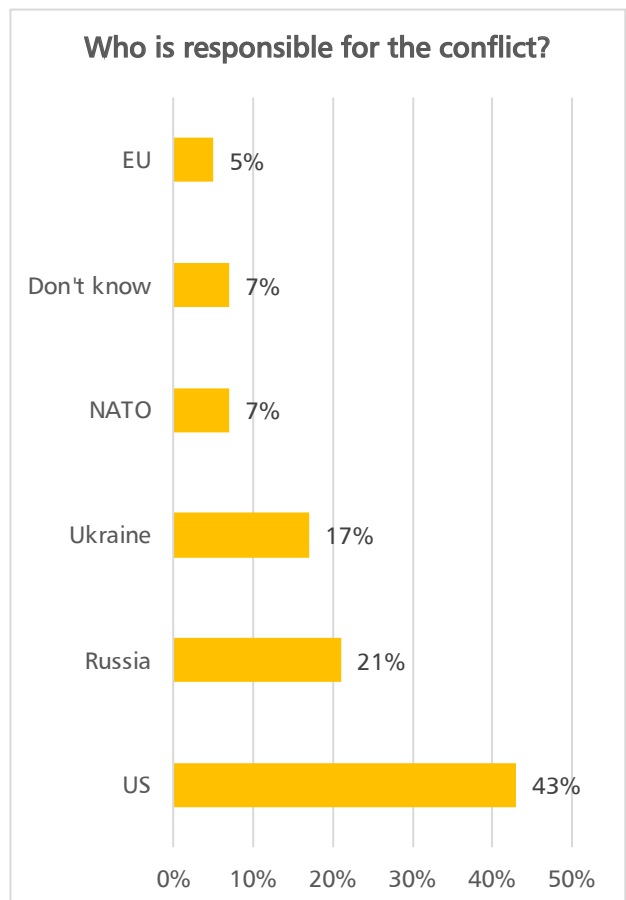
Russia-Ukraine conflict: Regarding the Russia-Ukraine war, a substantial 44% of the overall respondents indicate that they are not following the conflict at all. Conversely, a distinct minority, comprising only 12%, express a keen interest by closely monitoring the news about the war. This stark contrast implies a notable level of disinterest or lack of awareness among the youth.



Perceptions regarding the impact of the war in Ukraine on Pakistan, a majority of respondents (52%) believe that rising food prices are a significant consequence. The pressure on Pakistan to take sides in the conflict is another notable impact, with 41% of the overall respondents acknowledging this consequence. Rising energy prices are perceived as an impact by 28% of the respondents. A noteworthy 13% of respondents believe that the war in Ukraine has not had any discernible impact on Pakistan.

Responsibility for the Russia-Ukraine war presents diverse opinions among the respondents. A significant 43% of respondents believe that the US is responsible for the conflict. Interestingly, the attribution of blame on Russia (21%) is slightly higher than that on Ukraine (17%). NATO and the EU are identified as responsible by 7% and 5% of respondents, respectively.

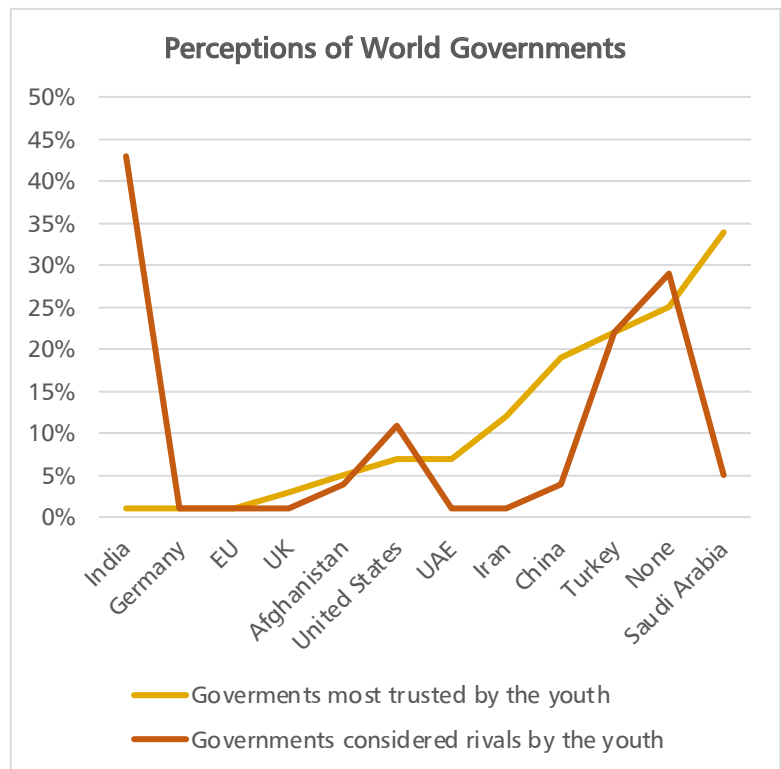
The largest portion of respondents (43%) express a preference for neither side in the conflict. This suggests a significant level of neutrality or reluctance to align with either Russia or Ukraine. This sentiment is consistent across gender, education levels, and urban/rural areas.



Perceptions of world governments:

In terms of government relationships that are perceived positively by the youth, 34% of respondents count Saudi Arabia as the most-trusted government. However, a substantial number of respondents (25%) believe that none of the listed countries can be considered Pakistan's biggest ally.

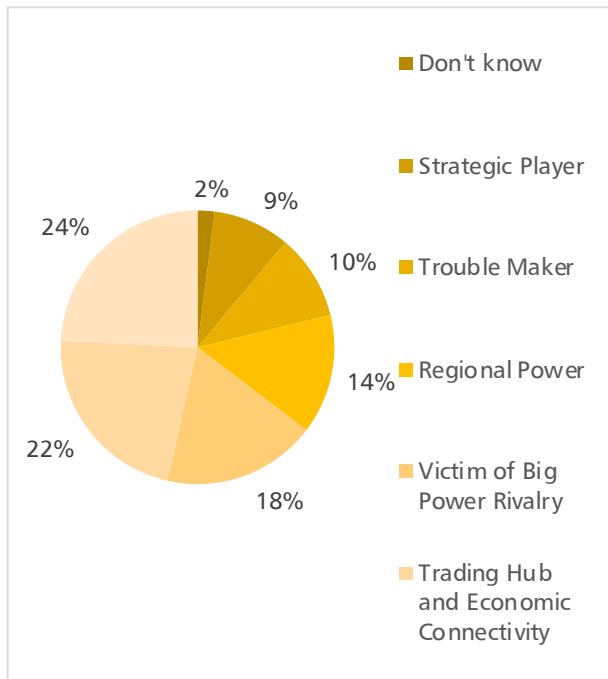
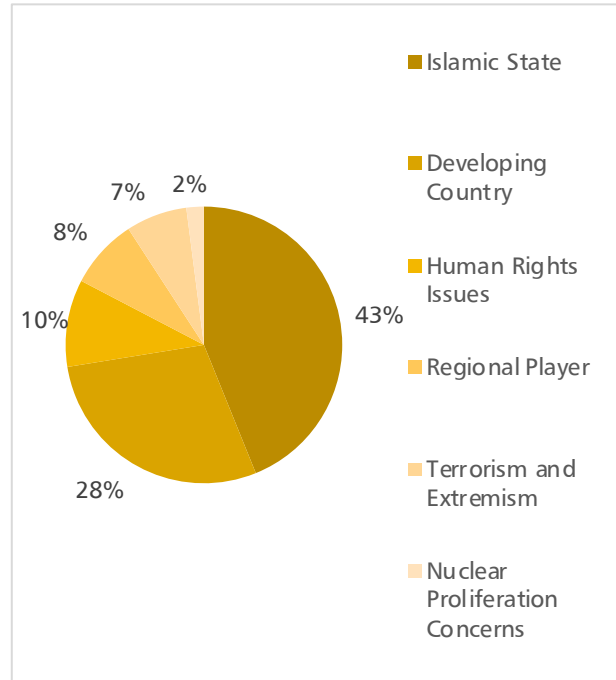
In terms of rivalries, 43% of respondents tagged India. Again, 29% of respondents chose "none of the above," indicating a significant portion of the population does not perceive any specific country as Pakistan's biggest rival in government relationships.



SECTION 3: YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF PAKISTAN

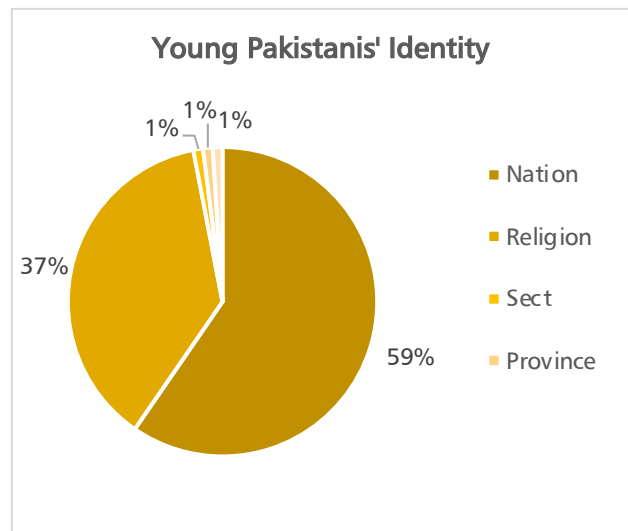
This section explores the perceptions of young Pakistanis about their nation. Pakistan's youth-majority population is often discussed on strategic and policy levels, however, it is essential that the youth's opinions and ideas be taken into account in all decision-making.

Pakistan's role in global world order: In gauging the perspectives of Pakistani youth on their country's role in the global order, diverse opinions surface across different dimensions. A significant portion (43%) sees Pakistan primarily as an Islamic state, emphasizing its large Muslim population and the foundational principles upon which it was established. This viewpoint is more pronounced among females (48%) than males (38%) and is prevalent across urban and rural areas. A substantial segment of 28% views Pakistan as a developing country, acknowledging its economic growth trajectory along with the array of social and economic challenges it faces. Human rights concerns are voiced by 10% of respondents, highlighting issues related to freedom of speech, treatment of religious minorities, and press freedom. The nuclear proliferation aspect is a minor concern for 2% of respondents, reflecting an awareness of Pakistan's status as a nuclear power.



Pakistan's role in the region: Analyzing the viewpoints of young Pakistanis on their country's role in South Asia reveals diverse opinions. About 24% see Pakistan as a key mediator for peace. 22% recognize Pakistan's importance as a trading hub and contributor to economic connectivity, citing strategic initiatives like the Belt and Road. 18% acknowledge Pakistan's historical involvement in big power rivalries. Another 14% consider Pakistan a major regional power, a sentiment consistent across different groups. On the flip side, 10% perceive Pakistan as a bit of a troublemaker, a sentiment more prevalent in rural areas.

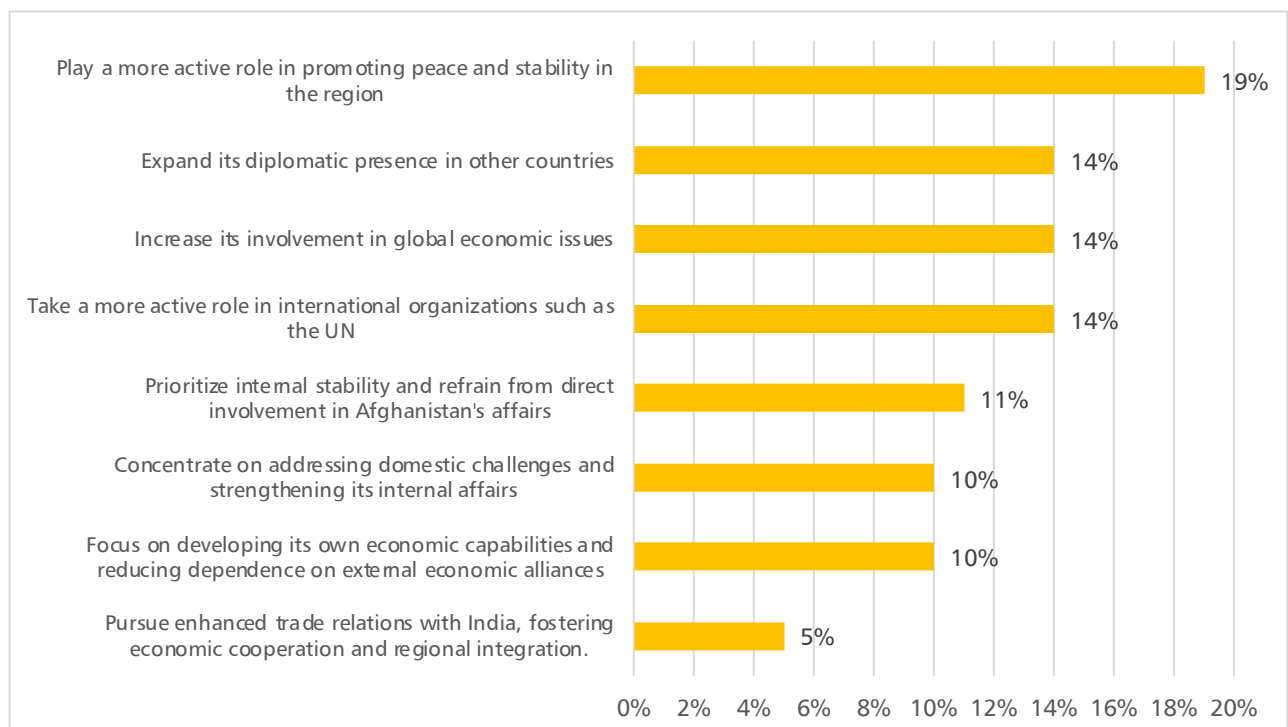
Young Pakistanis' identity: For some people their nationality is their main identity, while for some it is religion, and for some, it is their ethnic background. The respondents of this survey were asked what they preferred as their main identity. The majority of respondents (59%) identify themselves by their nationality, i.e. as Pakistanis, followed by 37% of respondents who identify themselves by their religion first. Very few (1% or less) participants identify themselves primarily by their sect, province or family name.



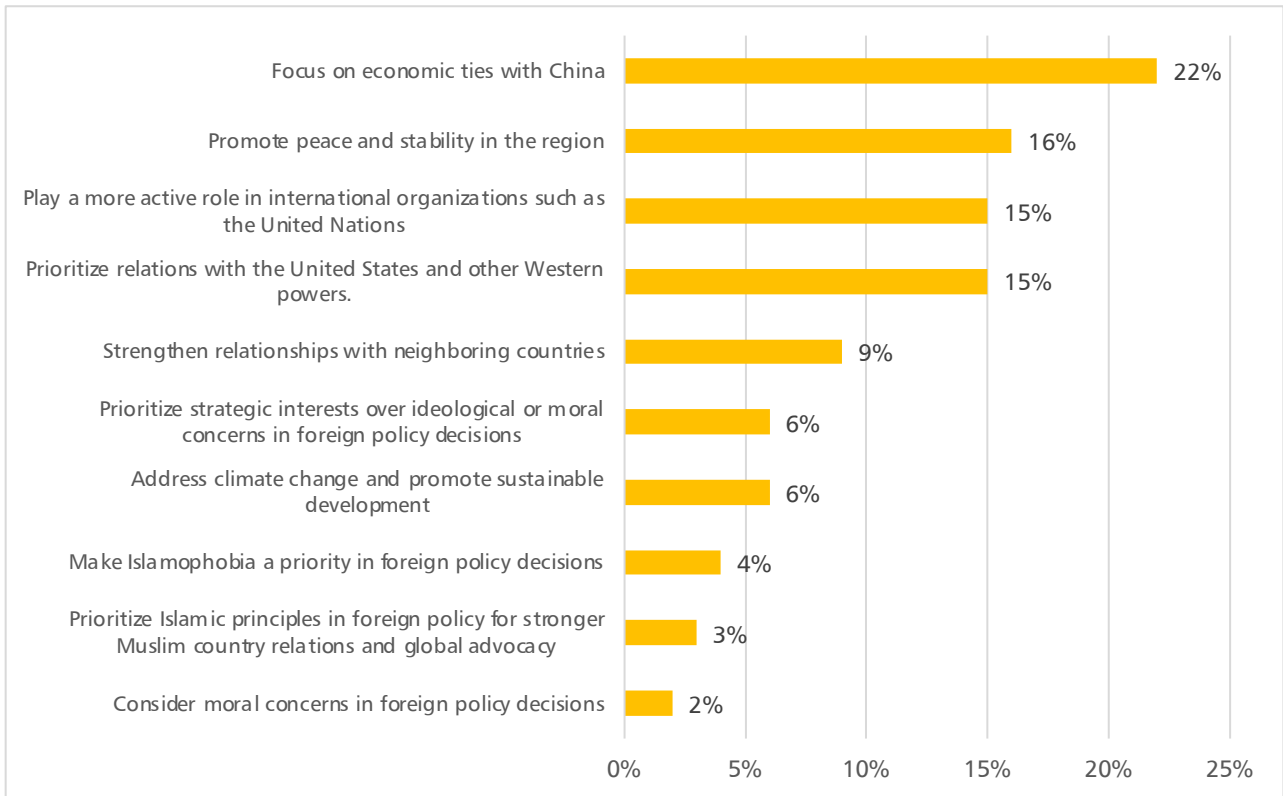
They were further asked whether their personal identity aligned with their national identity, to which 76% responded that it was aligned and 26% said that it was not.



What should Pakistan do? Respondents were asked what Pakistan should do in their opinions. Some respondents (19%) said that Pakistan should play a more active role in promoting peace and stability in the region. An equal number of participants (14% each) said it should increase diplomatic presence in other countries, increase involvement in global economic issues, and play a more active role in international organizations. Participants also felt that Pakistan should prioritize its internal stability and concentrate on domestic challenges, while some believed that economic alliances and better trade relations with neighboring countries would be beneficial.



Priorities for Pakistan's foreign policy: A large section of the respondents (22%) believed that Pakistan's foreign policy priority should be to focus on economic ties with China. Following that, several young people believe that Pakistan should prioritize promoting peace and stability in the region, play a more active role in international organizations and prioritize relations with Western powers such as the United States. Strengthening relations with neighboring countries such as Iran, Afghanistan and India was also cited as a priority by 9% of the respondents. Some believed that addressing climate change should be Pakistan's top priority while others said that Islamophobia should be the focus.



CONCLUSION

The findings from this report highlight several key insights into how Pakistan's younger generation views its nation's vis-a-vis the global arena. These perspectives, which are shaped by social, cultural, geopolitical, and socioeconomic factors, represent an engaged youth that is eager to participate in discussions that will influence Pakistan's future foreign policy direction.

- *Interest and Engagement:* One consistent theme in this report is the level of engagement and interest Pakistani youth have in international affairs. A substantial number of respondents expressed moderate to high levels of interest in global issues. These respondents mostly had mainstream and social media as their primary sources of information. This highlights the growing importance of media literacy and the need for policymakers to engage young people in places where they consume their news. However, the variation in media consumption between rural and urban youth highlights a need for more inclusive and diverse media platforms that can cater to all segments of society.
- *Foreign Relations:* The findings of this report also shed light on the complex dynamics of Pakistan's foreign relations from the youth's perspective. Countries like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and China enjoy high levels of trust, while India is overwhelmingly seen as a rival. These views undoubtedly reflect the entrenched historical, cultural, and political tensions that shape Pakistani foreign policy, particularly regarding India. At the same time, the positive perceptions of China highlight the significance of Pakistan's strategic and economic partnerships, especially through initiatives like CPEC. On the other hand, a critical aspect revealed in the report is the ambivalence of youth towards the United States, with mixed perceptions of the US as both an ally and a hegemonic power. This duality is a result of the complex nature of Pakistan-US relations, where the youth respondents acknowledge cooperation in areas such as military aid yet feel distrust stemming from past interventions in the region. This ambivalence extends to Russia as well, where there is both optimism about strategic alliances and concerns about Russia's ties with India, which further complicates perceptions.
- *Perceptions of Pakistan:* The findings also reveal how young Pakistanis view their own country's role on the global stage. Interestingly, many view Pakistan as an Islamic state. There is also a growing recognition of the country's developing status and the pressing need to address socioeconomic challenges, which is in tune with the broader global trend where young people are more attuned to issues like human rights, climate change, and economic development. These concerns are also mirrored in the future challenges that youth foresee for Pakistan, with poverty and economic development, corruption, and climate change ranking as the top priorities.
- *Migration and Education:* Data on migration preferences and study destinations demonstrates the aspirations of Pakistani youth. Saudi Arabia and China were seen as the top choices for migration and education, reflecting the deepening ties between these nations and Pakistan. However, the relatively low interest in countries like Germany and the EU for education and migration suggests a potential area for growth in diplomatic and educational exchanges.

In conclusion, the findings of this report provide stimulating insights into the perceptions of Pakistan's youth on foreign policy and international relations. Their views reflect nuanced opinions on both traditional alliances and emerging global challenges. As Pakistan continues to navigate its role in an increasingly interconnected world, it is essential for policymakers to incorporate these youth perspectives into decision-making processes, especially as social media seems to be one of the foremost sources of information on current affairs for the youth. Engaging the next generation will not only ensure that Pakistan's foreign policy is forward-thinking and inclusive but also that it aligns with the aspirations of a demographic that will soon shape the country's political, social, and economic future. In doing so, Pakistan can adopt a foreign policy that is both responsive to current global challenges and reflective of the diverse voices within its own borders.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Adil Sultan is Dean Faculty of Aerospace and Strategic Studies (FASS) at the Air University Islamabad, Pakistan. He has served in the PAF for over 31 years and retired as an Air Commodore. Before joining the Air University, Dr Sultan had served as Director Strategic and Nuclear Affairs at Centre for Aerospace and Security Studies (CASS) Islamabad. He is a former Visiting Research Fellow, Centre for Science and Security Studies (CSSS), King's College London from 2017-2019, Visiting Fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), London (2015), and Henry L. Stimson Centre, Washington D.C. (2006). He is also member of Asia-Pacific Leadership Network (APLN).

His research interests include arms control, nuclear deterrence, and emerging technologies. Dr Sultan has authored several research articles in international and national journals. He is also the author of book titled: "Universalizing Nuclear Nonproliferation Norms: A Regional Framework for the South Asian Nuclear Weapon States", published by Palgrave MacMillan London in 2019.

Dr Sultan is the co-founder of 'Strategic Foresight for Asia' (www.strafasia.com), which is a London-based platform publishing policy relevant analysis on security issues.

IMPRINT

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), Pakistan Office
1st Floor, 66-W, Junaid Plaza, Jinnah Avenue,
Blue Area, P.O Box 1289, Islamabad, Pakistan

Responsibility for content and editing:

Felix Kolbitz | Country Director
Hamayoun Khan | Program Advisor

Contact/Order:

✉ info.pakistan@fes.de

☎ +92 51 2803391-4

🌐 pakistan.fes.de

📘 @FESPakistanOffice

📺 @FES_Pak

Published by: FES-Pakistan

Layout & Printed by: AGLOW Graphics

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung or of the organization for which the authors work. Commercial use of media published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is not permitted without the written consent of the FES.

ISBN 978-969-9675-72-0

© 2024

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is the oldest political foundation in Germany. The foundation is named after Friedrich Ebert, the first democratically elected president of Germany.

FES Pakistan Office was established in 1990, though the cooperation with national institutions of Pakistan had already commenced during the middle of the 1980s. Based on its commitment to the basic values of social democracy including peace and social justice, FES-Pakistan formed partnerships to carry out activities for promoting dialogue involving state institutions, political parties, social partners, civil society actors, opinion leaders and citizens.