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PAKISTAN AS THE PIVOT: REASSESSING SOUTH ASIAN BALANCE OF POWER IN THE US–CHINA RIVALRY

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Abstract

In this article, Pakistan's role as a strategic pivot in the balance of power between the United States and China in South Asia is re-examined. Although the current literature tends to discuss South Asia in the context of either the India-China dyad or the Indo-Pacific strategy, this study is central to Pakistan's persistent geostrategic centrality. Using a combination of theoretical frameworks of realism and regional security complex theory, the article places Pakistan at the center of all of its state alignment decisions, impacting regional stability, global connectivity, and power projection. This study is considered to be sustainable because of the U.S hegemony shift to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as well as the Pakistan-China Economic Corridor (CPEC); and hedging policy in Pakistan, reveals the dynamism of the great game and rules the by-product as well as peripheral players as Islamabad. Instead, it is Pakistan that is redefining South Asian geopolitics by reshaping its role to balance its economic and security needs. This article aims to provide policy suggestions for the Pakistani government to play a mediating role in establishing stability, capitalize on connectivity, and redefine its identity in the evolving multipolar world order.

Keywords: Pakistan; South Asia; Balance of Power; US–China Rivalry; Hedging Strategy; Strategic Autonomy; CPEC; Regional Stability

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1. Introduction

With growing strategic competition between the United States and China, South Asia has emerged as a major arena of the modern great power competition. In such a changing geopolitical scenario, Pakistan carries immense strategic importance on account of its geographical location, its nuclear program, and its proximity to the South Asian countries, Central Asian States, and the Middle East countries. The literature around the Indo-Pacific and Indo-Pacific centric U.S–China competition tends to be in one-sided terms discussing U.S strategic partnership with India or competition between China and India. Comparatively, it has paid scant regard to the role of Pakistan in power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific. This article is for Pakistan, reconceptualizing it as a pivot state whose developments play a crucial role in shaping the regional balance of power.[1] The research not only fills an important gap in the existing literature, particularly the narratives portraying Pakistan as a security-dependent nation or a mere pawn in the Chinese game, but also offers a fresh perspective on Pakistan's evolving character over these decades. Beyond this, the study not only fills an important void in the existing literature but also gives a fresh perspective on the changing nature of Pakistan in these decades, as neither a security-dependent state nor a subordinate strategic ally of China. [2]

The study finds Pakistan to be 'hedging' in the wake of increasing great-power contestation and it is a policy which gave the impression that Pakistan has some strategic agency. At the same time, Pakistan has to keep its security and diplomatic relationship with the United States and strengthen economic and strategic partnerships with China through the flagship project – Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Islamabad's simultaneous move is an attempt to retain "strategic autonomy" amid the growing polarization in the region.[3] As for methodology, the research is qualitative, with a discourse analysis of policy documents, official statements, and secondary academic literature. It contends that Pakistan's foreign policy is not just a response to the international system but also an active force, shaping regional security policies and the international dynamics of the struggle between the U.S. and China. The article sheds light on the theoretical debate surrounding pivot states and the changing multipolarity in South Asian geopolitics by situating Pakistan within regional security dynamics and global geopolitics. [4]

[1] Zafar Khan, "The Effects of US–China Competing Strategies in Asia-Pacific on India and Pakistan Rivalry in the South Asian Region," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, July 1, 2021, 205789112110211, https://doi.org/10.1177/20578911211021155.

[2] Ali Ch et al., "Pakistan's Strategic Balancing Act: Navigating Relations between China, the US and the Emerging Multipolar World Order," *˜the œCritical Review of Social Sciences Studies* 3, no. 2 (April 19, 2025): 553–66, https://doi.org/10.59075/t3kkh396.

[3] Asad Ullah and Li Xinlei, "Navigating the Persian Gulf Security Complex: Saudi-Iran Rapprochement in an Era of Great Power Competition," *East Asia* 41 (July 24, 2024): 273–300, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-024-09430-2.

[4] Reuben Steff, "Theoretical Framework: Geopolitical Realism and Great Power Competition," *Global Political Transitions*, January 1, 2024, 15–59, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-0282-7_2.

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2. Theoretical Framework and Conceptualization

In this study, three ideas of International Relations which share a lot of commonalities are adopted — realism, balance of power theory and the new one of pivot states, as well as Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). These two methodologies are combined to offer an analytical perspective through which Pakistan's strategic position in the U.S.-China rivalry can be re-evaluated.

2.1 Realism and Balance of Power

The concept of realism remains one of the leading paradigms in South Asian geopolitics and in the study of the security dilemma. This paper uses Defensive Realism to describe Pakistan's strategic action. Defensive Realism is based on the structural logic of Waltz, which holds that states are driven by the need to survive and secure themselves and do not seek to accumulate limitless power. This reasoning explains why Pakistan does not fully align with China (bandwagoning) but instead adopts a hedging strategy to preserve the status quo and reduce risk. Moreover, there is the insight of Neoclassical Realism, which suggests that the internal pressures within Pakistan, such as the weak domestic political and economic elements and their relationship with the external pressure, which in this instance would be the Pakistani state, will drive the external decisions, in so far as they influence it.

This research takes the mixed view of Defensive and Neoclassical Realism. The defensive Realism that Kenneth Waltz and Stephen Walt have developed focuses on the survival of states and on seeking security rather than maximizing power, which aligns with Pakistan's hedging behavior. In the meantime, Neoclassical Realism incorporates domestic-level conditions, including political turmoil, economic insecurity, and civil-military imbalance, which precondition Pakistan's capacity to turn external opportunities into strategic independence.

Fundamentally, realism focuses on the anarchic nature of the international system, in which states prioritize survival and seek to balance, bandwagon, or hedge to maximize security. Classical realism places much emphasis on power politics and the national interest, whereas neorealism, especially Kenneth Waltz's structural realism, emphasizes the distribution of capabilities as the driver of state behavior.[5]

In the South Asian context, realism focuses on Pakistan's strategic environment: a nuclearized rivalry with India, its asymmetric military and economic capabilities, and its vulnerability to the broader U.S.-China tussle. As far as the balance of power is concerned, Pakistan's foreign policy approach has certainly not been reactive in nature, but rather a proactive move towards redressing the situation in favour of India and leveraging China's influence while achieving balance with the United States.[6] The balance-of-power system thus places Pakistan as the key point in the regional equation, where a change of sides has consequences for the broader Indo-Pacific approach and the global distribution of power.[7]

[5] Asle Toje and Barbara Kunz, *Neoclassical Realism in European Politics* (Manchester University Press, 2024).
[6] Ali Bukhari, "South Asia's Power Play: Pakistan, India, China, and the USA in Strategic Relations," ` 4, no. 01 (2025): 111–22, https://www.assajournal.com/index.php/36/article/view/512.
[7] Oktay Kucukdegirmenci, "Theoretical Framework: Balance of Power and Types of Balancing Acts,"

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2.2 Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

Although realism provides the structural basis, it needs to be complemented to reflect the complexity of South Asian security relations. South Asia is an interdependent security complex in which threats are most concentrated between states that are geographically proximate, says Barry Buzan and Ole Waever's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). In this complex, the India-Pakistan dyad is the fundamental internal polarity within which regional tendencies toward amity and enmity are determined. The U.S.-China competition, by contrast, constitutes a form of foreign subversion, redefining the internal equilibrium through other orientations and financial tools. The hedging of Pakistan through its twofold participation in CPEC and its continued co-operation with Washington serves as a means of coping with this twofold pressure and balancing domestic multiplicity at the cost of playing external competition to its advantage.

Barry Buzan and Ole Waever developed the concept of Regional Security Complex Theory, a meso-level of analysis that connects system pressures to local patterns of friendship and hostility. RSCT assumes that the level of security interdependence is greatest in cases where states are geographically close, form regional security complexes, have interconnected conflicts, and are subject to outside power intervention. South Asia is a prime example of how security challenges are interlinked: Indo-Pakistani relations, the question of Afghanistan, the Chinese and the American presence in the region and the closeness of the Gulf all point this out. Pakistan is not only a member of this regional security complex but also of other Middle Eastern and Central Asian complexes.

2.3 Hedging and the Pivot-State Logic

Based on these structural and regional observations, there is an agency-oriented aspect of the structure, as depicted by the concept of pivot states. Pivot states are those that, owing to their geostrategic locations, political orientations, and endowments, have the capacity to influence the balance of power in their regions and beyond. They can skew alignments, build or block connection channels, and redefine the strategies of great powers.

In contrast to middle powers, whose prominence rests on diplomatic activism or institutional involvement, pivot states are relevant primarily because of their geographic and strategic indispensability. The country is Pakistan: it borders South Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia, and controls the entry points to the Arabian Sea; it is also the location of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a landmark of China's Belt and Road Initiative. At the same time, Pakistan has strengthened its nuclear force and modernized its armed forces, and has come to be more versatile in terms of its regional alignments. By imagining Pakistan as a pivot state, the study will move beyond deterministic explanations of dependency and instead emphasize the agency involved in the strategic decisions Islamabad makes.[8]

Springer.com, January 1, 2024, 27–50, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-7578-1_2.

[8] Ole Wæver, "Towards a Political Sociology of Security Studies," *Security Dialogue* 41, no. 6 (December 2010): 649–58, https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010610388213.

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These three perspectives are integrated to form a multidimensional conceptual framework. The theory of realism provides the logic of structural rivalry between great powers, which is why the U.S.-China rivalry is evident in South Asia and why Pakistan is structurally constrained. These pressures are contextualized through the RSCT, as Pakistan competes against India, and its relationships with Afghanistan, proximity to the Gulf, and Iran can create overlapping security dilemmas. The pivot state concept sheds light on Pakistan's agency in navigating structural and regional constraints, demonstrating how Islamabad makes strategic decisions that shape the regional balance of power. [9]

This theoretical model is closely connected to the research question. To pose the question of how Pakistan can act as a pivot state in determining the balance of power in the South Asian region amid the U.S.-China rivalry, it is important to identify the systemic and regional forces at play. Balance of power theory and realism operate at the systemic level, explaining why U.S. strategic alignment with India and the increasingly strained relationship between China and Pakistan create pressure points. RSCT focuses on the regional level, where ties among Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, and Iran shape local security patterns that mediate great-power rivalry.

The concept of pivot state is used to relate the rationale of a system and the rationales of a region with regard to the logic of Islamabad in the hedging, balancing, or alignment process in this regard. The structure thus fails to interpret Pakistan in a reductionist sense as a dependent or destabilizing force, but rather as a variable point whose orientations influence South Asian security and the global power equilibrium.[10]

In addition, this framework highlights the study's theoretical novelty. A major chunk of existing writing on South Asian geopolitics has originated from the prism of realism while some from the prism of RSCT have been developed to explain trends in the region, and not many have integrated both with the pivot state to explain the case of Pakistan's pivot. In that way, the article is not only filling a conceptual gap but also advancing the development of pivot state theory, showing how states with weak domestic organizations can still have a disproportionate say in regional and world politics.[11]

The framework also allows for critical consideration of the constraints on the agency of pivot Pakistan, which is seen as constrained by economic dependency, political instability, and foreign forces. In this regard, the framework remains explanatory and critical insofar as it highlights the paradox of strategic indispensability in Pakistan and its structural vulnerabilities.

Table 1: Theoretical Framework and Pakistan's Strategic Choices

Theory	Core Assumptions	Application to Pakistan's Foreign Policy

[9] David Ramos, "Strategic Competition and Regional Recalibration: South Asia in the Shadow of United States–China Rivalry," *Journal of Policy Options* 8, no. 2 (2025): 1–8, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15769973.
[10] Ximena Alejandra Flechas Chaparro and Leonardo Augusto de Vasconcelos Gomes, "Pivot Decisions in Startups: A Systematic Literature Review," *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research* ahead-of-print, no. ahead-of-print (February 26, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1108/ijebr-12-2019-0699.
[11] Bill Mcsweeney, "Identity and Security: Buzan and the Copenhagen School," *Review of International Studies* 22, no. 1 (January 1, 1996): 81–93, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0260210500118467.

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Realism	States pursue survival, power, and security in an anarchic international system.	Pakistan balances military and nuclear capabilities against India and leverages strategic geography to deter threats.
Constructivism	Norms, identities, and historical narratives shape state behavior.	Pakistan's Islamic identity, rivalry with India, and narrative of strategic insecurity influence alignment choices.
Hedging Theory	Small and middle powers diversify their alignments to avoid overdependence on a single great power.	Pakistan engages both the US (security aid, counterterrorism cooperation) and China (CPEC, defense, investment).

Together, Defensive and Neoclassical Realism and RSCT have positioned Pakistan as a state whose structure is limiting, but whose regional agency is given. As Realism articulates the survival-motivated efforts by Islamabad to secure the state in an anarchic order, RSCT situates Islamabad's survival efforts within the interrelated threat environment in South Asia.

3. Methodology

A qualitative research approach is appropriate for this study because it is best suited to analyzing complex interactions among structural forces, regional forces, and state agencies in Pakistan's role as a pivot in the U.S.-China rivalry. A qualitative approach enables in-depth exploration of meanings, interpretations, and discursive constructions, to the extent that quantitative indicators are inadequate to capture them. The research uses a case study approach, focusing on Pakistan as a single critical case in South Asia. The use of a case study is suitable as Pakistan is a characteristic and a typical case: It is a characteristic case since Pakistan, being a nuclear state, is geostrategically located and additionally with dual affiliation to both China and the United States; It is a typical case since Pakistan demonstrates wider trends of pivot state behavior in the areas that a clash of great powers has impacted. This approach allows theory-based, contextualized knowledge that can both inform empirical knowledge and theory development.[12]

The research design employs qualitative content analysis and process tracing to establish causal relationships between structural changes and Pakistan's strategic responses. The logic of process tracing is as follows: U.S. strategic repositioning, enhanced regional uncertainty, Pakistan's adoption of the hedging strategy, and the South Asian balance of power.

There are three categories of sources of data:

(1) Primary sources: official statements of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, the U.S. State Department, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China;

(2) Academic policy texts and legislative discussions concerning the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC); and

[12] Nihan Sölpük Turhan, "QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGNS: WHICH ONE IS the BEST for YOUR RESEARCH?," *European Journal of Special Education Research* 4, no. 2 (May 30, 2019), https://doi.org/10.46827/ejse.v0i0.2448.

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(3) Secondary academic literature and peer-reviewed studies of South Asian insecurity and great-power rivalry.

This combination of sources can be triangulated to improve the validity of the research and to allow the interpretative contextualization of Pakistan's changing pivot role.

Regarding research methods, the research uses discourse and document analysis. The discussion of the state as a narrator and justifier of its policies describes the relationship between identity, security, and strategic placement as the focus of discourse analysis. This is supplemented by document analysis, a methodical review of official statements, policy papers, strategic doctrine, and secondary literature to track trends of assent and strategic redrawing. It is this mixture of practices that results in the manifestation of visible policies, as well as the behind-the-scenes discursive arrangements through which Pakistan's pivot role is constructed. The nature of the rivalry between the U.S and China in relation to Pakistan cannot be explained only by material capabilities or indices of power. It necessitates focus on policy talk, chronological patterns, and the discourses that justify strategic decisions. A qualitative case study based on discourse and document analysis has the depth and contextualization required and offers an analytical rigor. The data sources contain a variety of both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include official texts such as national security policy, white papers on Pakistan's defense policy, statements from the foreign ministry, and official speeches by U.S. and Chinese leaders. The secondary sources will include peer-reviewed journal articles, books on South Asian geopolitics, non-government documents from think tanks and reliable media analysis. All these materials constitute a strong evidentiary foundation of triangulating results and validity.[13]

4. Analysis

4.1 Pakistan’s Geographic and Strategic Centrality

Pakistan’s geographic location remains the cornerstone of its strategic relevance. Pakistan is at the crossroads of nations of South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East and the Indian Ocean. Its western frontier links it to Afghanistan and Iran, while the enduring rivalry with India dominates its eastern border. To the north, Pakistan borders China through the Karakoram corridor, while to the south, its coastline along the Arabian Sea provides critical access to global maritime routes. This multidirectional connectivity situates Pakistan as a hinge between continental and maritime Asia, amplifying its importance for external powers seeking regional influence.[14]

[13] Alan Bryman, “Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Research: How Is It Done?,” *Qualitative Research* 6, no. 1 (February 2006): 97–113, https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794106058877.

[14] Irfan Farooq and Dr Muhammad, “Pakistan’s Strategic Imperatives and Maritime Security Challenges in the Indian Ocean,” *Journal of Nautical Eye and Strategic Studies* 3, no. 2 (2023): 44–58, https://doi.org/10.58932/MULG0022.

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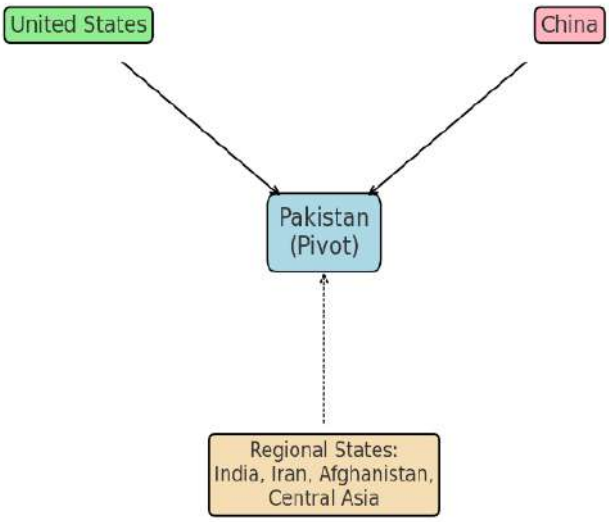
Figure 1: Pakistan as a Pivot State in the U.S.-China Rivalry



Pakistan's strategic centrality in the past has been reflected in regular alliances with world powers. Pakistan was used by the United States to front the war against the Soviet expansion during the Afghan jihad, which was the Cold War. In the post-9/11 world, it played a crucial role in U.S. counterterrorism operations, and was again essential. Today, the geopolitics of Pakistan play a crucial role in the U.S.-China competition and could impact the U.S. choice of balancing China via regional blocs in Pakistan while promoting China's Belt and Road Initiative.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) between western China and Gwadar Port is the epitome of how geography is becoming a strategic advantage, and how China is gaining direct access to the Arabian Sea while avoiding the chokepoint of the Strait of Malacca. Regional security management in the United States must take Pak' s geography into account, despite Washington's increase in its ties with India.[15]

Pakistan's centrality is not purely a matter of location; it is a matter of functionality. This is due to its geographic location, which allows it to develop power between power centers, influence connection routes, and shape security architectures. As a consequence, Pakistan is the ideal case study of a pivot state: the decision on its orientation and strategic course has implications that extend far beyond its material capabilities.[16]

[15] Rizwana Abbasi, "Global Power Shift and Foreign Policy Choices for Pakistan," 2023, https://www.issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Rizwana_Abbasi_SS_No_1_2023.pdf.

[16] Memoona Rasool and Ayesha Bhatti, "The Pakistan-Russia Strategic Alliance: A New Geopolitical Paradigm in South Asia Introduction Theoretical...," ResearchGate (unknown, November 2023), https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Gul-Bhatti/publication/380890722_The_Pakistan-

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4.2 U.S. Policy Shifts: Afghanistan Withdrawal, Indo-Pacific Tilt, and India Partnership

The environment for the strategy has changed due to the course of United States policy in South Asia over the past two decades. The withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan in 2021 marked a shift in Washington's priorities. During the last 2 decades, Pakistan has been a critical center of the U.S counterterrorism and counterinsurgency strategies as it was a logistical center and route to the Taliban. The U.S. exodus rendered Pakistan less immediately useful and less of a leverage point in bilateral relations.

(i) Post-Afghanistan Recalibration

Since the withdrawal of the United States troops in Afghanistan in 2021, South Asia has seen a significant change in its strategic environment. Pakistan has been an important logistical and intelligence hub over the 20 years during which Washington has been conducting counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations. The withdrawal from the Afghan operation, however, diminished Pakistan's short-term usefulness in American planning and reduced its margin in two-sided affairs. Meanwhile, this detachment allowed Islamabad to secure a narrow form of strategic independence, enabling it to reject U.S. wartime demands and recalibrate its regional stance. Pakistan started focusing on its contribution to stabilization and border control in Afghanistan- in an attempt to turn its long-time dependency into regional brokerage capabilities. However, the withdrawal has also exposed Pakistan's economic vulnerabilities, as funding for coalition and military support has declined sharply. The readjustment in the post-Afghanistan period, therefore, reduced transactional dependence but also brought new fiscal and security challenges.[17]

ii) Indo-Pacific Realignment and the Rise of India

The Asian Region is slowly gaining strength in the international system and has an impact on the system in the near future. Similar to the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Indo-Pacific realignment under Washington redefined its strategies towards Asia. China was declared the main rival to U.S primacy, and India was created to be the most significant balance element in this architecture. The United States also initiated the program Quad (United States, India, Japan, and Australia) and accelerated defense and intelligence collaboration efforts to bolster India's role as the bulwark in the region against the Chinese threat.

For Pakistan, the result of this asymmetry was a twofold dilemma: a strengthened, U.S.-backed India and decreasing American reliance on Pakistan as a security ally. Nonetheless, the fact that Islamabad was not included in the Indo-Pacific system did not eliminate its applicability. Its location, possession of nuclear arms, and its counterterrorism actions still cause it to be a necessary but inconveniencing partner to Washington. As a result, Pakistan's diplomacy with the United States gradually began to be based on the principle of selective engagement in the coordination of nuclear security, combating terrorism and ensuring regional peace and stability,

Russia strategic alliance a new geopolitical paradigm in south Asia Introduction Theoretical Descriptions Geopolitical Prospect of South Asia Pak-Russia Defence Relations Pak-Russia.

[17] Ferris Jabr, "John A. Long - Publications List," *Publicationslist.org* 14, no. 6 (2023).

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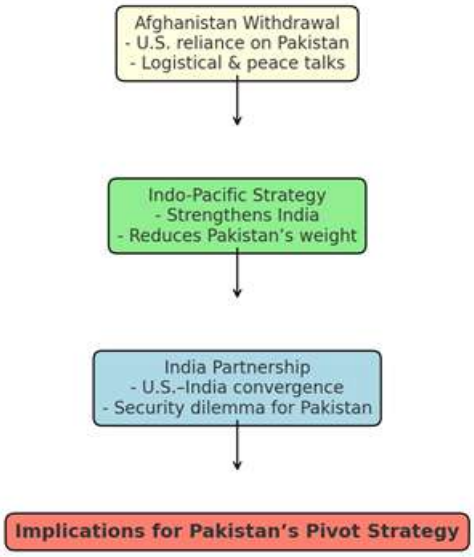
and strengthening the economic and defence relationship with Beijing. Such two-sided involvement reflects the rationale of hedging, central to Pakistan's pivot role in South Asia.[18]

Figure 2: U.S. Policy Shifts and Impact on Pakistan



However, the fact that Pakistan was not considered in the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy does not make it irrelevant. The city of Islamabad is still valued for its regional stability, counterterrorism cooperation, and nuclear risks. In this way, the changes in U.S. policy demonstrate the paradox of the Pakistani situation: it is no longer in the privileged position of American grand strategy, yet its geostrategic indispensability does not allow marginalization.[19]

4.3 China's Belt and Road Initiative and CPEC as Strategic Leverage

The biggest engine of Pakistan's modern pivot is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) from China. The backbone of this project is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a network of roads, railways, pipelines and energy infrastructure links connecting Gwadar Port to Xinjiang, China. CPEC will provide China with strategic benefits, as it will no longer have to rely on maritime chokepoints and will instead gain direct access to the Arabian Sea. For Pakistan, CPEC is not only a lifeline for its economy but also a strategic insurance policy, cementing its relationship with Beijing and signaling to other states that it remains relevant in the geostrategic context.[20]

South Asian security is also another factor considered by CPEC. The incorporation of Pakistan into China's geo-economic framework will elevate Pakistan from a bilateral partner to a geo-

[18] Muhammad Tahir and Mehwish Rasheed, "Geo Economic Significance of Pakistan: A Strategic Nexus for Regional and Global Dynamic," *Khaldunia-Journal of Social Sciences* 4, no. 1 (2024): 27–39, https://doi.org/10.36755/.

[19] Dr. Sundas Khizar, "Navigating US-South Asia Relations: Strategic Interests and Future Trajectories," *Pakistan Social Sciences Review* 8, no. II (June 30, 2024), https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2024(8-ii)62.

[20] Saeeda Khan, Muhammad Waqas, and Khali Ur Rehman, "The BRI & the CPEC: An Economic & Strategic Reconfiguration," *The Lighthouse Journal of Social Sciences* 4, no. 01 (2025): 13–26, https://kpheart.edu.pk/ojs/index.php/ljss/article/view/187.

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regional hub in Beijing's global strategy. This further integration will also endow Pakistan with diplomatic clout as it will be viewed as part of China's Indo-Pacific and other far-reaching influences. Nevertheless, it makes Pakistan more vulnerable, as excessive dependence on Chinese investment will make Islamabad susceptible to debt, strategically reliant, and vulnerable to the weaponization of infrastructure during crises.[21]

Theoretically, CPEC illustrates how economic projects are transformed into a balance-of-power exchange. Realism emphasizes the material and strategic assessment of the project, whereas regional security complex theory situates the project within broader patterns of rivalry, especially with India. New Delhi considers CPEC a breach of its sovereignty because it will pass through Gilgit-Baltistan, thereby further deepening the Indo-Pakistani conflict. CPEC is, therefore, not just a development project but a geostrategic tool that restructures regional alignments, making Pakistan more entrenched in China's camp and strengthening it as a pivot state.[22]

Although CPEC has the potential to transform Pakistan, it also limits its structural autonomy. Overdependence on Chinese loans and power development imposes debt-service burdens that might limit fiscal flexibility. Furthermore, an unequal partnership, i.e., one in which the strategic resources, including Gwadar, are significantly funded by China, can turn economic vulnerability into political dependency. From the Realist point of view, the potential to keep a 'balanced hedging policy' on a long term basis is constrained given Pakistan's security challenges and its needs for autonomy in the long run; economic choices between short term security gains and long term choices of strategic autonomy are therefore considered to be one.

4.4 Pakistan's Hedging Strategy Between Washington and Beijing

Eventually, after building relationships with China, the Pakistani government has not opted for exclusivity rather embraced the concept of hedging. Looking to the possibility of hedging as developing relations with competing powers at the same time to reduce risk and increase strategy. To take an example of Pakistan, another hedging strategy can be seen in its traditional ties with the United States, notwithstanding its current tilt towards China. This strategy serves a purpose and is designed. On one side, Pakistan's economic constraints dictate the need to retain the status operational with Washington and its allies. On the other side, maintaining the status operational with Washington and its allies depends on Pakistan's need to rely on foreign financial institutions more. However, the influence of the U.S. in such organizations like the IMF and the World Bank, will make it impossible for Pakistan to break off entirely. On the other hand, Pakistan has the big advantage of leveraging the relationship with China to renegotiate with the US and its relations with Pakistan have improved considerably over the

[21] Muhammad Ghaffar and Prof. Dr. Muhammad Khan, "CPEC: A SOURCE of STRENGTHENING BILATERAL TIES and DRIVING STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP," *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs* 7, no. 3 (September 20, 2024), https://doi.org/10.52337/pjia.v7i3.1119.

[22] Waqas Ahmed et al., "Assessment and Analysis of the Complexities in Sustainability of the Transport Projects under CPEC: A Grounded Theory Approach," *SAGE Open* 13, no. 4 (October 1, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231203477.

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last couple of years. This three-sided diplomacy reflects the spirit of pivot behavior, in which the state has sought to remain as relevant as possible by refusing to be trapped in inflexible alignments.[23]

Nevertheless, hedging is not risk-free. Pakistan runs the risk of having strategic overextension, meaning making efforts to court both sides, but ending up in a situation that creates suspicion and prevents any profound cooperation with either. Besides, governance incompetence and internal instability undermine Islamabad's credibility as a stable ally. Hedging, however, is a logical reaction to the structural limitations in Pakistan and shows its agency in walking the U.S.-China rivalry.[24]

Table 2: Pakistan's Hedging Strategy, Tools, Alignments, and Outcomes

Strategic Tool	Alignment with the US	Alignment with China	Observed/Expected Outcome
Military	Training, counterterrorism cooperation, and defense sales (historically).	Joint exercises, defense technology transfers, and conventional weapons.	Maintains deterrence against India while diversifying security dependence.
Nuclear	Pressure from the US to limit arsenal and participation in non-proliferation talks.	Diplomatic shielding at UNSC, nuclear cooperation (limited).	Strategic balance sustained; avoids international isolation.
Diplomatic	Partnership in the war on terror, but growing mistrust post-Afghanistan.	Strategic partnership via BRI, CPEC, and SCO participation.	Dual channels enhance bargaining power but complicate autonomy.
Economic	Limited aid, IMF-linked support.	Infrastructure investments through CPEC are long-term economic projects.	Economic relief, but risk of debt dependency on China.

4.5 Military, Nuclear, and Diplomatic Balancing

The military and nuclear strength also support Pakistan's pivot role. Being the sole nuclear power that has a majority of Muslims, Pakistan is in a special position in terms of security in the world. Its nuclear deterrence is the primary factor in the balance of power in South Asia. It restricts India's military options and levels the regional balance of power through mutually assured destruction. Realistically speaking, nuclear arms offer Pakistan strategic parity in the

[23] Iftikhar Ali, Noraiz Arshad, and Roy Anthony Rogers, "Trilateral Dynamics in Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Balancing China and Hedging the US," *Strategic Analysis*, December 31, 2024, 1–17, https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2024.2434382.

[24] Dr Anwar, Dr Ghulam, and Ahmed Hussain, "Pakistan's Global Strategy: Navigating the US-China Tug-of-War," ` 3, no. 02 (2025): 2038–50, https://www.assajournal.com/index.php/36/article/view/484.

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face of conventional asymmetries, thereby enabling it to wield influence disproportionate to its economic capacity.[25]

In addition to nuclear deterrence, Pakistan has strong conventional military forces and is modernizing, especially through defense ties with China. The creation of fighter planes in collaboration with China, the procurement of naval capabilities, and missile development are examples of how Pakistan uses Chinese support to counter the benefits that India has acquired through American cooperation. Meanwhile, the military is one of the most one of the most important interlocutors of the United States in Pakistan. It participates in professional exchanges, counterterrorism cooperation, and dialogues on nuclear risk reduction.[26]

Pakistan is seeking to expand its diplomatic options by engaging with middle powers and regional organizations. Supported by its partnerships with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as its games in other groups like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, its cooperation and standing in the region can be enriched.[27]

4.6 Implications for Regional Stability and Global Order

Pakistan's pivot state status carries significant consequences for regional stability and the global system. It leaves long-term effects on Indo-Pak conflict; in Afghanistan so far as future is concerned and networking programs between Asia and the Middle East relates. The strengthening of U.S.-India relations and Sino-Pakistani co-operation risks institutionalizing bloc politics, with Pakistan and India as proxies in a broader rivalry between great powers. This relationship exacerbates security dilemmas, increases the likelihood of miscalculation, and reduces the prospects for regional integration.[28]

On a global scale, Pakistan is a good example of how difficult it is to deal with pivot states in a multipolar system. Its alignment options shape the effectiveness of American policies to contain China and the sustainability of the BRI in Beijing. Pakistan's hedging is an example of how small and medium powers can take advantage of great-power competition to achieve as much latitude as possible. Still, it also shows the limits of such policies when faced with internal weaknesses. To the policymaker, Pakistan can serve as a reminder that pivot states are not tools for conducting great-power rivalry; rather, they have agency that can stabilize or destabilize the international order, depending on their strategic orientation.[29]

[25] Dr Yunas Khan, Saeedullah, and Fazli Rahman, "PAKISTAN'S NUCLEAR DIPLOMACY: BALANCING DETERRENCE and GLOBAL NON-PROLIFERATION NORMS," ` 3, no. 01 (2025): 1225–43, https://assajournal.com/index.php/36/article/view/244.

[26] Arthur Lusenti, "The Indo-Pakistani Conflict in Light of the 'Islamic Bomb,'" 2025, https://www.gcsp.ch/sites/default/files/2025-06/GP-2025_36_Lusenti%3Bdigital.pdf.

[27] Muhammad Faisal, "RISE of MIDDLE POWERS in a MULTIPOLAR WORLD and ITS IMPACT on PAKISTAN," *Policy Research Journal* 3, no. 9 (2025): 240–54, https://policyrj.com/index.php/1/article/view/1003.

[28] Dr Muhammad, Dr Humera Akhtar, and Dr Ibrar Hussain, "The China Factor in Pakistan's Middle East Diplomacy: A Shift from Religious Solidarity to Strategic Realism," ` 3, no. 02 (2025): 1220–29, https://www.assajournal.com/index.php/36/article/view/415.

[29] Muhammad Faisal, "RISE of MIDDLE POWERS in a MULTIPOLAR WORLD and ITS IMPACT on PAKISTAN," *Policy Research Journal* 3, no. 9 (2025): 240–54,

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5. Findings & Discussion

The US-China rivalry analysis of Pakistan's strategic behavior has demonstrated that the nation is not merely a spectator but a crossroads, and that its decisions have a massive impact on the power balance in South Asia. These results confirm the synthesis of the theory proposed in the previous section. The logic of survival under power asymmetry within a Defensive Realist approach implies that Pakistan behaves as it does. The RSCT lens shows that its hedging choices are not one-time actions but reactions to both domestic competition (with India) and global great-power infiltration (U.S., China). In the meantime, Neoclassical Realism points out that Pakistan is too weak a state to pursue a regular grand policy.

5.1 Pakistan as an Active Pivot

Pakistan's actions indicate that it has adopted a pivot-state logic. The country's leadership does not just deliberate on its geostrategic centrality as a structural burden, but also as a bargaining tool. In the US policies, it is argued that the collaboration in counter-terrorism, in the promotion of peace in Afghanistan and in making the defense sector modern are linked to strengthening ties with China within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).[30]

Pakistan is increasing its bargaining power by making itself indispensable to several great powers. For example, U.S. dependence on Pakistan as a logistical route in the Afghan war and China's dependence on Pakistan for access to the western front via the Arabian Sea illustrate how Islamabad is converting its weakness into strategic leverage. This implies that Pakistan is not an innocent bystander but proactively controls its middle-ground position. [31]

5.2 Risks of Over-Reliance on China

Regarding over-reliance on China, despite the agency's showing, the results indicate significant risks. Pakistan has become economically dependent on Chinese loans to finance infrastructure, energy, and transport projects, making it susceptible to debt and restricting fiscal space. As much as the Chinese investments under the CPEC are increasing connectivity and capacity, they are also exposing the country to external conditionalities and asymmetric influence.

China is rising as a force in the Indo-Pacific, and it is not fond of India. This places Pakistan in a situation where the choices it must make are not national balancing but rather balancing within the bloc. That would undermine its diplomatic balancing exercises and ruin its reputation as an unbiased mediator of any regional dispute in Pakistan. However, reliance on Chinese defense technologies can narrow the range of diversification opportunities and lead to addiction, despite the initial short-term benefits in military strength. These dangers explain why

https://policyrj.com/index.php/1/article/view/1003.

[30] Syed Muhammad Saad Zaidi and Nirmal, "Regional Political Paradigm Shift: Challenges and Opportunities for Pakistan," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 7, no. 4 (June 16, 2022): 772–89, https://doi.org/10.1177/20578911221103358.

[31] Ibid.

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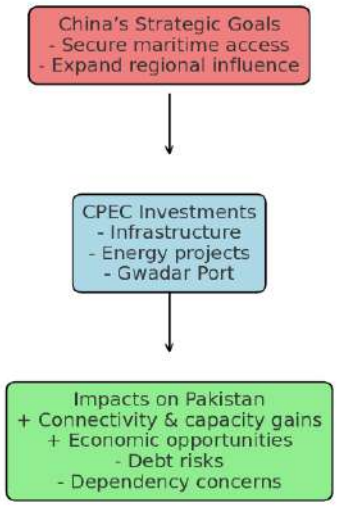
Islamabad must be cautious in its alliances so that it does not become over-reliant on a single foreign power.[32]

5.3 Strategic Autonomy Challenges

Structural and domestic factors limit Pakistan's vision of strategic autonomy. The external level is likewise restricted, with the United States and China gaining an advantage over Islamabad. The Indo Pacific partnership between Washington and India and the rivalry between the world's two leading powers – Washington and Beijing – leave limited scope for Pakistan to steer a middle course.[33]

At the domestic level, economic vulnerability, political instability, and governance issues weaken the legitimacy of Pakistan's strategic decisions. Debt dependence, IMF conditionalities, and currency crises limit the policy options available in foreign policy. The articulation of a coherent grand strategy is further complicated by political polarization and contestation between the civil and military spheres. These internal vices also heighten external demands; hence, autonomy is more of a dream than a job.[34]

Figure 3: China's BRI & CPEC as Strategic Leverage



But Pakistan's maneuverability through hedges is in the pursuit of survival as evident in its security relationship with Washington, economic engagement with China and its foreign policy engagement in the Middle East and the Eurasian states. The conclusion in this situation is that

[32] Fazal Rabbi, Mahar Munawar, and Syed Hamid Mehmood Bukhari, "DONALD TRUMP'S POLICY and POSTURE towards PAKISTAN: THE EMERGING DYNAMICS and DRIVERS of the BILATERAL TIES," *Pakistan Journal of Social Research* 04, no. 02 (June 30, 2022): 194–207, https://doi.org/10.52567/pjsr.v4i2.467.
[33] Mr. Nosherwan Adil Ms. Noor-e-Hera Dr. Muhammad Saeed Uzzaman, "PAKISTAN'S QUEST for STRATEGIC AUTONOMY: HEDGING against US-CHINA-RUSSIA RIVALRIES POST2013," *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs* 7, no. 2 (June 20, 2024), https://doi.org/10.52337/pjia.v7i2.1082.
[34] Maheen Shafeeq, "India's Strategic Autonomy and the US-India Strategic Partnership: Implications on Pakistan," *Journal of Security & Strategic Analyses* 11, no. 1 (July 1, 2025): 05-28, https://doi.org/10.57169/jssa.0011.01.0344.

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Pakistan's independence is relative, given its capacity to offset its weaknesses through diversified alliances.[35]

5.4 Policy Implications for the United States

To the United States, the results indicate that its involvement in Pakistan is still strategic regardless of the tilt that Washington is taking towards India. Any refusal to pay attention to Pakistan would put the country even further in the Chinese camp, ruin U.S. bargaining power in South Asia, and impede American ability to shape the situation in Afghanistan, counterterrorism, and nuclear security. A realist approach would recognize Pakistan's structural centrality and pursue functional cooperation in areas of shared interest, although a full revival of the alliance is unlikely.[36]

Washington will also need to understand that there is a diminishing marginal effectiveness of conditional or transactional engagement. Rather, a strategy of long-term stability, oriented toward economic reforms, regional connectivity, and governance capacity, would be more aligned with U.S. interests, with Pakistan in a pivot role. This would not sever the Islamic connections of the city of Islamabad to China but would reduce its dependence on China.[37]

5.5 Policy Implications for China and Pakistan

Policy implications for China

To China, Pakistan is a bridge and hedge. The results indicate that Beijing needs to control its economic and strategic involvement in a manner that does not recreate dependency traps. Indeed, excessive lending or a misconception of debt diplomacy can well be the basis of a domestic pushback in Pakistan and tarnish the credibility of CPEC.

Tactically, China will gain the most when Pakistan has sufficient autonomy to serve as an effective regional balancer rather than an exclusive Chinese proxy. Beijing, therefore, has to help in sustainable economic activities, promote local ownership of projects, and help Pakistan in the overall diversification of its diplomatic relations. Such a balanced partnership would help in such a way that the pivot role of Pakistan will not be ineffective due to dependency, but will be effective.[38]

Policy implications for Pakistan

Institutionalize Strategic Diversification (Defensive Realism): To maintain survival and independence in the face of systemic uncertainty, Pakistan needs to institutionalize alliances beyond the U.S. and China. The idea of expanding involvement in Europe, the Gulf, Central

[35] Mr. Nosherwan Adil Ms. Noor-e-Hera Dr. Muhammad Saeed Uzzaman, "PAKISTAN'S QUEST for STRATEGIC AUTONOMY: HEDGING against US-CHINA-RUSSIA RIVALRIES POST2013," *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs* 7, no. 2 (June 20, 2024), https://doi.org/10.52337/pjia.v7i2.1082.

[36] Hafsa Gul et al., "Assessing the Impact of U.S. Economic Aid and Military Support on the Strategic Dynamics of Pakistan's Foreign Policy: A Study of Diplomatic Relations and Public Sentiment," *Future Business Journal* 11, no. 1 (May 2, 2025), https://doi.org/10.1186/s43093-025-00528-4.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Agnieszka Kuszewska and Agnieszka Nitza-Makowska, "Multifaceted Aspects of Economic Corridors in the Context of Regional Security: The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor as a Stabilising and Destabilising Factor," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 8, no. 2 (June 2, 2021): 218–48, https://doi.org/10.1177/23477970211017719.

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Asia, and ASEAN is consistent with the Defensive Realist logic of reducing vulnerability by maintaining balance rather than aligning with a bloc.

Enhance Domestic Economic Preconditions (Neoclassical realism): Strategic autonomy is based on domestic capabilities. Through the Neoclassical Realist prism, the role of economic resilience plays the primary variable bridging the external approach and domestic limitations. Sustaining the hedging strategy in Pakistan is hence a precondition of fiscal reform, diversification of exports and discipline on debt.

Strengthen Civil-Military Policy Co-ordination (Neoclassical Realism): Institutional coherence is necessary for a consistent grand strategy. The parliamentary civilmilitary alignment of Pakistan turns the country into a predictable actor rather than a reactive state, which is a level of weakness highlighted by Neoclassical Realism.

Embrace Principeled Hedging Doctrine (RSCT + Realism): Hedging needs to be institutionalized as a principled, not an opportunistic construct, which upholds autonomy without complete alignment with either of the two big powers. This is a strategy to stabilize Pakistan in the South Asian security complex which is in line with the focus of RSCT on how to deal with interdependent threats.

6. Conclusion

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that Pakistan is not a passive recipient of external pressures but an active pivot state in the unfolding U.S.–China rivalry. Its geography, nuclear capacity, and diplomatic positioning grant Islamabad an outsized role in shaping South Asia's balance of power. Through its association with Washington and Beijing, Pakistan can use the vulnerabilities as tools of bargaining to establish itself as a state whose decisions have regional as well as global implications. The pivot position, though, has both merits and demerits for the stability of South Asians. On the one hand, the centrality of Pakistan is a form of stabilization, as any great power will not be able to dominate the region. Well The balance with China and India with the USA is counterbalanced by its relations with China. This kind of balance eliminates one-sided behavior and keeps the other players on the alert about security of Pakistan alert. The pivot position, in turn, could lead to instability. Apart from this, Pakistan's dependence on China can result in a clash or if its ties with the U.S. weaken, its much needed economic and technological assistance be curtailed. All these three tensions and threats lead to more arms race, more territorial tensions, and mistrust in the subcontinent. In addition, the poor internal economic power, combined with Pakistan's weak control, complements the effects of external alignments and may, therefore, result in instability in its domestic political system that extends to the region.

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