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**Pakistan's Global Strategy: Navigating the US-China Tug-of-War****Dr. Anwar ul Mustafa Shah**

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Abstract

The intensifying rivalry between the United States and China has placed Pakistan in a complex geopolitical dilemma, requiring a delicate balancing act to safeguard its national interests. This article examines Pakistan's strategic positioning amid the US-China tug-of-war, analyzing its historical alliances, economic dependencies, and regional security challenges. While China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), offers critical infrastructure investments, it also raises concerns about debt sustainability and sovereignty. Conversely, the US remains a vital partner for trade, military cooperation, and access to global financial institutions, despite growing tensions over Pakistan's alignment with China. The study highlights Pakistan's multi-alignment strategy, which seeks to diversify diplomatic and economic engagements through multilateral forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and partnerships with Middle Eastern and Central Asian states. Additionally, the article explores the implications of Pakistan's regional rivalries, particularly with India, and the challenges of stabilizing Afghanistan amid great-power competition. To navigate these complexities, Pakistan must pursue pragmatic diplomacy, domestic economic reforms, and strategic autonomy to avoid over-reliance on either superpower. The findings underscore the importance of a non-aligned, agile foreign policy to ensure Pakistan's long-term stability and prosperity in an increasingly polarized world.

Keywords: Pakistan, US-China Rivalry, CPEC, Strategic Balancing, Multilateral Diplomacy, Economic Dependencies, Regional Security, Geopolitical Autonomy.

Introduction

The development of growing competition between the United States and China has become one of the most distinctive geopolitical processes in the 21st century, which has transformed the landscape of global relationships, trade circuits, and security systems (Allison, 2017). It started as an economic rivalry and now evolved into a

multidimensional conflict that includes technological dominance, military position, and ideological power (Campbell & Doshi, 2021). To the middle and smaller powers, this great-power competition is also fraught with danger and opportunities and forces countries to reevaluate their foreign policy plans lest they become collateral damage in a new Cold War-like situation (Walt, 2019). As the land juncture of South Asia, Central Asia and Middle East, Pakistan stands in a pivotal yet a very precarious place in this geopolitical tussle. It matches the history of its strategic and economic ties with the U.S. both throughout the Cold War and in combating the War on Terror since 9/11 with a growing relationship with China, especially via the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Small, 2020). With the deteriorating situation in the relationship between Washington and Beijing, Pakistan should approach this tricky competition with care, seeking to take advantage of its geographic and strategic importance and reducing to a minimum the threat of excessive dependence on one of the powers (Hussain, 2021).

U.S.-China rivalry has shifted beyond trade conflicts to the wider challenge of who rules the world, master's technologies, and dominates militarily (Shambaugh, 2021). The U.S. views China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), CPEC included, as a direct threat to its economic and strategic interests in Asia (Rolland, 2020). On the other hand, China considers the U.S. alliances in the Indo-Pacific, including the Quad (U.S., Japan, Australia, India), as the measure to encircle and contain its rise (Tellis, 2020). In the case of Pakistan, this competitiveness poses a two-pronged dilemma: to continue its decades-old relationship of security alliance with the U.S. and rely on Chinese investments that are vital towards economic growth (Rizvi, 2022). The Pakistani-U.S. relationship has been transactional in nature whereby there are times of collaboration, like during the Soviet-Afghan War and the post-9/11 counterterrorism campaign, and times of disconnection based on a conflict of priorities (Fair, 2018). In the meantime, the expanding Chinese presence in Pakistan, especially via CPEC, has increased economic interdependence and created the problem of debt sustainability and sovereignty (Wolf, 2020). In its quest to strike equilibrium between these relationships, Pakistan has had to grapple with the pressure by the region in general and India in particular which is reinforcing its strategic ties with the U.S (Pant, 2021).

In such a geopolitical scenario of high stakes, the foreign policy strategy of Pakistan has to be pragmatic, in addition to being flexible. It is not possible to lose either U.S. or China since they both play a major position in the economy and security of the country (Yasmeen, 2022). Rather, Islamabad has to seek a multi-vector strategy, which involves building closer relationships with other regional powers, i.e., Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, and participating in multilateral institutions, i.e., the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), etc (Khan, 2021). Economically, Pakistan should make sure that the CPEC is a sustainable growth in the country that does not cause it to be overburdened with debt, and explore other trade and investment opportunities in order to decrease

dependence (Haider, 2023). In military terms, Pakistan has to strike the right balance between its dependence on U.S. defense equipment and further strengthening its ties with China, and do all that in the context of regional tensions, especially with India and Afghanistan (Paul, 2022). In the end, the capacity of Pakistan to balance between the U.S. and China is a question of diplomatic dexterity, economic strength, and the possibility to use its geopolitical location without being a chess piece in the great-power game (Malik, 2023).

Research Objectives:

This article aims to focus on the given objectives;

1. To examine Pakistan's strategic positioning amidst the growing rivalry between the United States and China.
2. To investigate the impact of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) on Pakistan's geopolitical and economic balance.
3. To explore Pakistan's multi-alignment strategy, focusing on its diplomatic engagement with the U.S., China, and regional powers, including the implications of this strategy on regional security and economic stability.

Research Methodology:

This research adopts a qualitative approach, combining historical analysis and strategic assessments of Pakistan's geopolitical positioning. Primary and secondary sources, including academic journals, government reports, and expert opinions, are utilized to gain insights into Pakistan's strategic dilemmas. The study employs a case-study method to analyze specific events such as the U.S.-Pakistan military cooperation, the development and economic ramifications of CPEC, and Pakistan's diplomatic engagements in multilateral forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). By exploring these areas, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Pakistan navigates its complex relationships with major global and regional powers.

Background of the US-China Rivalry

The US and China rivalry that had been described with economic interdependence after normalization in the 1970s (Kissinger, 2011) has now become a complex game of geopolitical power, technological superiority, and military supremacy (Allison, 2017). Originally precipitated by trade imbalance and market access conflicts, tensions are now rising to a wider conflict that includes technological decoupling in the form of the Hong Kong ban and the chip export licenses as well as military brinkmanship in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait (Campbell & Doshi, 2021). The US views the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in general and its flagship China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in particular as a strategic intrusion into the traditional American spheres of influence (Rolland, 2020). On the other hand, China sees US-led coalitions like the Quad (US, Japan, Australia and India), and AUKUS as a conscious effort to contain its emergence (Shambaugh, 2021). This growing competition has broken global supply chains, divided international institutions, and forced secondary states especially those

in the Indo-Pacific and South Asia to rebalance their foreign policies to ensure that they are not drawn into the crossfires (Tellis, 2020).

This competition has more strategic impacts than only economic and security concerns, as it transforms the diplomatic alliances across the globe (Walt, 2019). The rivalry is also an opportunity as well as a threat to Pakistan, which is a historical US ally and a close partner of China. Chinese CPEC investment promises infrastructure development and energy security to Pakistan but also exposes it to more debt and causes suspicions among the US (Wolf, 2020). In the meantime, the development of the strategic partnership between Washington and India as a regional competitor adds an additional twist to the balancing act of Pakistan (Pant, 2021). The US-China competition has therefore made Islamabad engage in a multi-vector approach to foreign policy where it maintains relations with both superpowers and pursues relationships with Russia, Saudi Arabia and multilateral organizations such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to prevent excessive dependence on one of the two blocs (Small, 2020). The more this competition heats up, the more capacity Pakistan will have to engage economic opportunities without having to lose key security partners in all that, balancing regional turmoil in Afghanistan and India tensions (Rizvi, 2022).

Pakistan's Strategic Position

Pakistan also holds a strategically positioned geostrategic position at the crossroad of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, thus being a key actor in regional and global geopolitics (Cohen, 2022). Being neighbors with Afghanistan, Iran, India and China and having access to the Arabian Sea via the Gwadar Port, Pakistan is a key transit point in supplying energy sources and trade between Central Asia to the world (Grare, 2021). Traditionally, the strategic value of Pakistan was established during the cold war as a frontier state against the Soviet expansion and received significant military and economic support by the United States (Haqqani, 2022). After 9/11, Pakistan once more proved to be a crucial partner of the U.S. in the War on Terror, receiving billions of dollars in aid in exchange of cooperation in combating terrorism (Fair, 2023). Nevertheless, this partnership has been marred with suspicion as the U.S. policymakers have often accused Pakistan of engaging in a dual game in Afghanistan by funding militant groups and simultaneously presenting itself as a partner in Western counters to terrorism (Schaffer & Schaffer, 2021). The worsening ties between Pakistan and China, especially the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which has changed the strategic direction of the country to move eastward, have further aggravated these tensions (Small, 2023).

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a mega project under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that has injected an amount of 62 billion dollars into the infrastructure, energy and transport sector of Pakistan (Ahmed, 2022). Besides improving the economic future of Pakistan, CPEC also secures a strategic base in South Asia for China (Cheema, 2023). CPEC helps China gain access to the Arabian Sea through the

Gwadar Port and consequently give direct access to the country to the sea. This cooperation has also led to the military sphere as China has become the biggest arms supplier to Pakistan and a significant partner in the production of arms, such as the joint development of the JF-17 Thunder fighter jet (Khan, 2022). Nevertheless, the increasing dependence of Pakistan on China has caused alarm in Washington, where officials consider CPEC as one of the components of a broader Chinese plan to undermine U.S. authority in the region (Pande, 2023). U.S. has retaliated by cutting military assistance to Pakistan and strengthening its strategic alliance with India which further makes the task of Islamabad to balance its relations with both the superpowers more difficult (Pant, 2023). In the case of Pakistan, it is pertinent to note that the country has to uphold its security collaboration with the U.S. especially in counterterrorism and defense as well as its economic and strategic interests with China (Rizvi, 2023).

Regional politics also contribute to Pakistan facing a strategic dilemma, which is the rivalry with India, as well as the changing state of affairs in Afghanistan (Yusuf, 2022). New Delhi has gained an upper hand in the region due to the U.S.-India strategic alliance, characterized by defense deals and apprehensions about the Chinese ascendancy, and this has left Pakistan alone (Basrur, 2023). In the meantime, the re-emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan has led to new uncertainties, as Pakistan is trying to stabilize its western border in the context of the tensions between the Taliban regime and the international community (Shah, 2023). In this regard, Pakistan has been adopting the policy of strategic hedging, where it is spreading its relations by involving Russia, Turkey, and Middle Eastern powers, such as Saudi Arabia and UAE (Ahmad, 2023). Such relations give Pakistan other sources of economic and military support and it does not rely on a single great power (Hussain, 2023). Also, Pakistan has tried to use such multilateral platforms as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to increase its diplomatic presence and balance between conflicting interests (Malik, 2023).

In the future, how Pakistan manages to steer between the U.S.-China rivalries will be affected by how well it is able to adopt a pragmatic and flexible foreign policy (Paul, 2023). Although CPEC promises many economic dividends, Pakistan needs to be careful about the issue related to the sustainability of debt and the fact that its Chinese relationship should not be at the cost of its relation with the west (Wolf, 2023). In the same vein, the U.S. is an essential security ally, but Pakistan can no longer afford to lose China as its most dependable partner in the currently polarized world (Haider, 2023). To alleviate these threats, Pakistan needs to enhance its local economy, governance and diplomatic efforts to reach out to emerging powers and regional blocs (Zaidi, 2023). Through a balanced and non-aligned policy, Pakistan can benefit its strategic independence to the fullest extent as it enjoys the economic and security advantages of both the U.S. and China (Abbas, 2023). In conclusion, the geopolitical importance of Pakistan guarantees its continued role as an important

element in the great-power competition, yet its stability and prosperity in the long term will depend on how successfully it will traverse this complicated terrain (Siddiqua, 2023).

The Economic Dimension of Pakistan's Strategy

The country Pakistan has been experiencing a more intertwined economic path with the conflicting interests of the United States and China, which presented opportunities and weaknesses (Jaffrelot, 2023). The US continues to be the largest export destination of Pakistan and is consuming almost 18 percent of the total Pakistan exports, mainly textile, and other agricultural products, and is a major source of financial assistance and International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout funds as well (Zaidi, 2023). Nevertheless, such U.S. aid has also been conditioned by the strict demands related to political and security-related matters, especially related to the cooperation in counterterrorism and the nuclear non-proliferation, which results in the periodic bilateral strains (Husain, 2023). Conversely, China has become the economic prime partner of Pakistan with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a 62-billion-dollar program that involves energy and transportation infrastructure, along with a strategic port, Gwadar (Chaudhry, 2023). Although CPEC has brought a much-needed investment in infrastructure to the Pakistani economy, it has also caused the country to have a significant debt burden, as Chinese loans have constituted in the range of 30% of the total external debt of Pakistan (Mirza, 2023). Such financial dependency on Beijing has raised questions of debt sustainability and the loss of economic sovereignty as a number of CPEC projects have been delayed, experienced cost escalations, and claims of lack of transparency of the terms of financing (Wolf, 2023).

Pakistan has structural imbalances in its economic relations with both powers, which requires a reconsideration of its growth strategy with care (Kugelman, 2023). On the one hand, the U.S. financial aid, which is receding over the past few years, is still vital to macroeconomic stability, particularly IMF programmes that implement austerity measures that are excruciating but guarantee supply of liquidity (Hasan, 2023). Conversely, Chinese investment model under CPEC provides sustainable infrastructure growth, yet there is a danger of entrenching a debt trap, as experienced in the case of Pakistan when it could not repay money taken to finance power plants and transport networks that remained underutilized (Siddiqui, 2023). Adding to these predicaments is the geopolitical tension between the US and China, which restricts Pakistan to extract maximum gains out of both powers at the same time (Rafiq, 2023). As an example, the sanctions imposed on Chinese tech companies by the U.S. have made it difficult to modernize the country in the digital space, and the American interest in the transparency of CPEC has scared away Western investors who may be interested in such ventures (Abbas, 2023). To overcome such limitations, Pakistan would need to focus on diversifying its economy by increasing trade relations with European Union, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, and Central Asian

economies besides rejuvenating local industries to diminish the reliance on imports (Farooq, 2023). Also, the restructuring of the governance system of CPEC to make it competitive and profitable and to produce a positive impact on employment and the environment may help to increase its viability and reduce the neo-colonial claim (Akhtar, 2023).

In the future, the health of Pakistan economically will lie in its capability to utilize its strategic partnerships without yielding to external pressures (Malik, 2023). As much as CPEC is an opportunity of change, it will need to renegotiate its debts, enhance efficiency of projects, and need its infrastructure investment to bring about widespread industrialization and employment (Cheema, 2023). At the same time, Pakistan cannot lose the U.S. as it has a say in the global financial institutions and requires continued access to Western markets (Khan, 2023). The most viable middle ground could be to compartmentalize the economic activity- keeping a high degree of trade open with the U.S., and increasing production linked investment relationships with China in areas such as renewable energy and export processing zones (Haider, 2023). Further enhancement of regional economic integration with such structures as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) may be another way to decrease the excessive dependence on one of the superpowers (Rizvi, 2023). After all, the economic sovereignty and sustainable development of Pakistan will entail not only clever diplomacy but also a swift need to change the course of domestic development, such as broad tax base, modernization of energy sector, and anti-corruption efforts, to attract diversified foreign investment and overcome the vicious cycle of debt dependency (Bukhari, 2023).

Diplomatic and Military Implications

The foreign policy of Pakistan can be described as a very subtle multi-alignment approach to international relations that seeks to balance strategic relationships with the United States and China without making either of the powers look like a favorite (Cohen, 2022). Pakistan has maintained a military relationship with U.S. as it still procures F-16 fighter jet aircraft, and cooperates in counterterrorism despite the growing strategic drift towards India by Washington (Grare, 2021). At the same time, Pakistan has intensified its military partnership with China, and it co-produces JF-17 thunder aircraft, strengthens naval contact, and engages in joint military training (Khan, 2022). This juggling act is typical of the Islamabad pragmatic stance in trying to obtain the best of the military technology and trying to maneuver around the geopolitics between its two most important partners. But the increasing military aid to India by the U.S., such as advanced weapons systems and intelligence sharing treaties, has increased the level of asymmetries in the region causing Pakistan to turn increasingly to Chinese export of arms and support at the international platforms like the United Nations (Pant, 2023).

The situation in the region adds even more to this diplomatic balancing act of Pakistan, especially its longstanding rivalry with India and the developing events in Afghanistan (Yusuf, 2022). The U.S.-India strategic partnership, which is supported by such initiatives as the Quad and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), has changed the security balance in South Asia dramatically, leaving Pakistan with even fewer options, with China being the only counterbalance left (Basrur, 2023). In the meantime, the stability of Afghanistan is a crucial issue, and Pakistan wants to avoid the spillover militancy, but also has to cooperate with both Washington and Beijing in terms of counterterrorism and humanitarian work (Shah, 2023). The economic investments in Afghanistan and diplomatic interaction with the Taliban by China gives Pakistan a chance to stabilize its western border, yet this should be done with deliberate coordination with the priorities of American counterterrorism to prevent the emergence of new tensions (Fair, 2023). A combination of these aspects makes it clear that Pakistan requires a sophisticated approach to diplomacy that will use multilateral institutions, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), to balance the interests of competing great powers whilst protecting regional security priorities of its own (Malik, 2023).

In the future, the sustainability of the multi-alignment strategy of Pakistan will rely on the capability of the country to compartmentalize relationships and minimize geopolitical spillover (Rizvi, 2023). Although the U.S. military assistance has been declining over the last few years, Pakistan cannot risk a total break since Washington controls most global finance organizations and influences the political evolution of Afghanistan (Hussain, 2023). On the other hand, the unconditional help on such matters as Kashmir and the readiness to provide modern military equipment predetermine China as a necessary ally, though such an ally to be managed to avoid the bestowing and dependence risks (Wolf, 2023). In order to negotiate this complicated terrain, Pakistan would need to keep diversifying its diplomatic interactions and enhance relationships with middle powers, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and call on non-aligned mediation in regional conflicts (Ahmad, 2023). Finally, the diplomatic and military policy of Islamabad should not be rigid and should focus on economic stability and collaboration in counterterrorism without offending either Washington or Beijing, as the rivalry between great powers develops in South Asia (Siddiq, 2023).

Pakistan's Global Strategy Moving Forward

The geopolitical approach to the future of Pakistan should focus on multilateralism to avoid falling into the trap of excessive dependence on one of the two powers, the United States or China (Cohen, 2022). Becoming an active member of such forums as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and engaging with ASEAN can offer Pakistan a platform to express its interests without being explicitly pro-one or pro-the other superpower (Grare, 2021). More specifically, the SCO provides Pakistan with an excellent opportunity to work together

with the states of Central Asia and Russia on issues of regional security and economic integration, eliminating its isolation in a U.S.-dominated world order (Hussain, 2023). The OIC, in turn, allows Pakistan to exploit its Islamic identity to forge unity with Muslim-majority states, especially over such disputes as Kashmir, and take a neutral position in the U.S.-China standoff (Yusuf, 2022). Through such multilateral relationships, Pakistan will be able to have a broader range of options in its diplomatic relations and will not be susceptible to the pressure of being aligned to the two-dimensional geopolitical realities (Rizvi, 2023).

Aside from the multilateralism, Pakistan needs to develop strategic alliances with main regional actors, such as the states of the Middle East and Central Asia, to improve its geopolitical maneuverabilities (Ahmad, 2023). Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are still important economic partners, giving financial aid, offering Pakistani expatriates work opportunities, and investing in infrastructure development (Shah, 2023). In the meantime, the strengthening of the relationship with Central Asian republics especially via energy and trade corridors such as the Central Asia-South Asia (CASA-1000) electricity project can help ensure that Pakistan does not become economically dependent on its traditional allies (Malik, 2023). One more thing is that Pakistan would be better off looking into a more active cooperation with Turkey and Iran, which are both interested in a balance between Western and Eastern powers and have independent foreign policies of their own (Wolf, 2023). Such alliances do not only provide alternative channels of economic and security relationships, but they also make Pakistan a bridge between various geopolitical blocs that make it more strategically relevant in an ever-multipolar world (Siddiqi, 2023).

In the end, the long-term stability and sovereignty of Pakistan revolve around its capability to make structural economic reforms to attract the investment of non-aligned sources (Khan, 2022). Even though CPEC has been an essential part of Pakistan developing infrastructure, excessive reliance on Chinese funding has increased issues related to debt sustainability and being dependent on foreign power (Cheema, 2023). In order to curb these risks, Pakistan needs to enhance business environment and reform taxation policy and fight corruption to attract differentiated foreign direct investment (FDI) in Europe, Southeast Asia, and the Gulf (Bukhari, 2023). Moreover, the growth of export-oriented sectors especially in textiles, IT and agriculture will help to decrease the dependence on foreign aid and increase economic stability (Zaidi, 2023). With this approach of multilateral diplomacy, regional, and domestic economies, Pakistan can find a way of avoiding the U.S.-China rivalry without losing its sovereignty or finding itself in a crossfire of great powers (Pant, 2023). The future requires practical leadership, a long-term perspective, and dedication to putting Pakistan on a self-sustainable path that will enable it to use its strategic location to enhance growth sustainability and stability (Abbas, 2023).

Conclusion

Pakistan is at an important stage in its geopolitical path, and it has to balance the rising U.S.-China competition with strategic vision and practical diplomacy. The historical alliances, economic dependencies and regional security necessities of the country require a balanced policy that does not exclude Washington, and is not over committing to Beijing. Though these investments by China in the form of CPEC have brought much needed infrastructure and energy projects in China, the associated debt and the need to be wary of sovereignty issues warrants careful handling. On the other hand, the U.S. is an irreplaceable ally in the context of trade, military affairs, and the right to international financial institutions, regardless of increasing strategic differences. The strength of Pakistan in maintaining this balancing act will depend on its capability to diversify its diplomatic and economic interactions by using multilateral forums such as SCO and OIC to increase its voice and reduce vulnerability to the overdependence on a single power. The way out needs Islamabad to reconsider its foreign policy as an aggressive but non-aligned state in a multi-polar world, a state that gives emphasis to national rather than bloc interests.

In the future, the long term stability and prosperity of Pakistan will be pegged on whether or not it manages to translate its geopolitical issues into opportunities. Enhanced regional cooperation with states in the Middle East and Central Asia can offer alternative sources of trade, investment, and security cooperation and diminish the exposure to the U.S.-China tensions. At the same time, it is important to conduct domestic economic restructuring such as tax modernizations, industrial diversifications, and anti-corruption to attract non-aligned investments and to achieve sustainable growth. The viability of CPEC should not only be gauged in terms of infrastructure creation but also creating local jobs, transfer of technology and competitiveness in exports. Besides, Pakistan needs to skillfully handle its regional disputes especially with India, without adopting an escalatory stance in favor of finding a diplomatic resolution through back channel contacts and multilateral mediations. The Afghanistan government has to be stable and inclusive which is key to the security of Pakistan, and thus coordination with both the international as well as the regional stakeholders is critical. In the end, Pakistan can only be in the geopolitical future of its own making because of a trifecta of strategic autonomy, economic resilience, and diplomatic agility attributes that will make it a success in the uncertainties of great-power competition and be a consequential actor in the new global order.

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