



East or West, Who is Best? Strategic Paradoxes and Policy Alternatives in Pakistan’s Relations with the U.S. and China

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Abstract

The foreign policy of Pakistan is in an intricate paradox. Although its military and political elite in the past were more inclined to the United States in terms of security, aid, and legitimacy, the current economic lifeline of the country has been propelled by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). With America-China relations on the rise, Pakistan is left with the frustrating option of its longest strategic ally and its newest economic donor. This paper challenges the paradoxes of Pakistan as a sovereign actor by considering some of its major paradoxes: dependence and autonomy, security and sovereignty, and development and debt. Referring to historical trends, local interaction, and international changes, we argue that binary decision is not only a bad idea but also impossible. Pakistan should adopt a policy of calibrated hedging, enhance its economic sovereignty, diversify its alliances, and institutionalize its foreign policy through parliamentary and regional concurrence. This paper suggests a roadmap based on strategic pluralism and regional integration, as well as internal reforms, through which Pakistan will be able to manage and live in an increasingly multipolar world without being drowned in the world of great power politics.

Keywords: US-China rivalry, Pakistan, Strategic hedging, geo-economics, Balancing Strategy

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INTRODUCTION

Pakistan finds itself at a crossroads in the course of foreign affairs. For more than 76 years, it has strongly depended on external partnerships to fulfill its economic, military, and diplomatic needs. Since its independence, the country has defied its path, whether in direct opposition to the Soviet bloc during the Cold War or its recent strategic alliance with the United States (post 9/11) and now by strengthening its economic relationship with China. The trend has brought some utility in the form of political and economic benefits in addition to long-term dependency, which has left Pakistan exposed to changes in world power politics.

The growing competition between the United States and China, two world giants with different ideas on how to shape World Order, has compounded the problems faced by Pakistan. Washington provides military cooperation, financial aid, and access to international institutions, in most cases, with additional political strings and strategic coercion. In contrast, Beijing offers infrastructure investment, soft loans, and diplomatic coercions but does this at the risk of long-term debt, control of the market, and strategic dependency.

In this great-power rivalry, Pakistan is stuck with difficult decisions. The risk of making a choice of partnering with one power will alienate another important partner. However, in an attempt to satisfy both, it may lose credibility. The central point of this paper is: Will Pakistan have the optimal results of its relations with the United States and China without being dragged into the strategic rivalry of the two nations?

This paper starts by giving a historical background of Pakistan's relationships with the two countries and proceeds to find out the strategic paradoxes that characterize these relations. It then examines prevailing international change, specifically a shift towards a multipolar world and how that affects the foreign policy arena of Pakistan. The paper concludes by presenting a practical road map that does not go along with binary options. The proposed alternatives underscore economic pluralization, integration and regionalization, strategic hedging, and change of the institutional framework of the foreign policy. This paper does not aim at idealizing non-alignment or uttering repeated sovereignty slogans in the abstract. Rather, it recommends that a realistic, long-term strategy needs to be adopted by which Pakistan is kept ahead of ideological positions or immediate profits.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: FROM COLD WAR ALLIANCES TO STRATEGIC REALIGNMENTS

The foreign policy of Pakistan was observed through the pattern of external dependence that is influenced by geographical insecurity and military considerations, as well as an elite-based strategic culture (Shah, 2014). Pakistan was leaning towards the United States since the early years of the Cold War as it was interested in joining some Western security organizations such as SEATO and CENTO because of its anti-Indian rivalry and the need to seek military and economic assistance and support (Lieven, 2011). This coalition provided Pakistan with billions in aid and weaponry, particularly in the 1950s and 1980s, however, it also embroiled the nation in superpower politics, most notably as observed in the U.S.-supported jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

Even after being declared a so-called major non-NATO ally after the war on terror in Pakistan, the affiliation between the two powers has been volatile and based on transactions. As the U.S. offered major contributions in military and counterterrorism support to the War on Terror, it also tended to doubt Pakistan's strategic motives, in

particular its relationships with the Taliban and other non-state parties (Shah, 2014). Frequent collapses like the 2011 Raymond Davis episode and the events of the Salala attacks and the killing of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad revealed the tremendous mistrust that was running deep in the alliance (Rana, 2020).

Pakistan, in its turn, developed its relationship with China more quietly but consistently. It was established during the 1960s since an agreement on borders was reached and diplomatic relations extended to invite China back into the friend circle at a time when the country was alienated by most of the world nations. This bond intensified when China offered rhetorical support to Pakistan in the 1971 Indo-Pak War when the U.S. was left undecided. With time, China and Pakistan's nexus grew to include military equipment, nuclear ties, and infrastructure building (Small, 2015).

With the implementation of a new Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2015 (opened through the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)) this relationship has entered a new stage. China has promised to invest more than 60 billion including the energy and infrastructure projects. On one hand, this was hailed as a game changer in Pakistan, on the other hand, critics complained of a lack of transparency, a debt trap, and one-sided gains (Sial, 2016). However, it turned out that China was the biggest provider of bilateral loans to Pakistan, its arms exporter, and its strategic sponsor in multilateral bodies like the UN Security Council and FATF (Baloch, 2022).

The relationship between Pakistan, the U.S., and China is fraught yet by necessity today. As in the case of the U.S., the cooperation involves IMF programs, trade preferences, diaspora linkages, and military training. Strategic collaboration in China This strategic collaboration is evident in security cooperation within the Pakistani region, digital infrastructure, and diplomatic endorsement between the two nations. However, contradictions in such partnerships are present that challenge the capability of Pakistan to maintain a balanced relationship with the two.

These contradictions are discussed in the following sections, where the significant paradoxes that influence Pakistan's foreign policy decisions are analyzed.

The historical constraints in the Pakistani foreign policy that are defined by the security, economic, and elite interests make the country susceptible to changing power relations in world politics. There is extensive literature on strategic relationships between Pakistan and the United States on the one hand and Pakistan and China on the other, which tends to present the country as a client state that is finding its way in asymmetric relationships.

Shah (2014) gives a proper description of how the control of the military institutions over democratic institutions has led to a foreign policy oriented toward foreign agents in Pakistan. Likewise, in pointing out the inability of strategic autonomy, Lieven (2011) singles out institutional dysfunction and elite capture. Small (2015) follows the development of the China-Pakistan relationship and states that though it can serve as a faithful substitute for the U.S., it will also bring about another kind of dependence: a quiet, economic, and long-term one.

Haider (2005) reveals the ideological underpinnings of the China-Pakistan alliance, particularly its persistence on the internal discourse of Islam, Xinjiang, and sovereignty in Pakistan. The flexibility of Pakistani space between the U.S. and China is getting closer as Kugelman (2021) and Rana (2020) discuss the emergence of increased Indo-Pacific and BRI grand strategies. Baloch (2022) and Siddiqi (2022) address the issue of strategic hedging as a theoretical intervention that would suggest to middle powers such as Pakistan to evade

binary affiliations in order to achieve optimal economic and security returns toward both blocs.

Recent research paints more detail around this. Wang and Yu (2024) discuss how the CPEC has changed Pakistan in its geo-economic orientation but warn that such a turn is not unfettered without alignments of its own asymmetries and strategic risks. Ikram, Majeed, and Rashid (2024) assess the manner in which Pakistan has been trying to juggle between CPEC obligations and the remaining U.S. ties in terms of defense cooperation. Chaudhry et al. (2017) provide a quantitative analysis of the Pakistan-China Free Trade Agreement, whereas Chaudhry and Naveed (2014) focus on the socio-cultural background of this bilateral relationship.

Theoretically, Zahhri et al. (2025) offer a multipolarity-responsive approach to the interpretation of Pakistan's current foreign policy setting. They state that exclusivity and non-alignment are not an option and instead suggest one of the dynamic balancing strategies: a regional position that is reminiscent of the wider demands of a policy based on regional integration and reform of institutions.

The existing literature takes together an apparent necessity of such foreign policy that is pragmatic, sovereignty-based, and rather regionally rooted and that does not get trapped into the games of great power rivalry, although it does not dismiss its strategic value.

Strategic Paradoxes in Pakistan's Relations

There are contradictions shown in the way Pakistan has engaged in both China and the United States. Such are not just league differences of diplomatic behavior, but trouble of competing strategic policies, internal institutional pressures, and institutional imbalances of power. The following are four major paradoxes that best describe the predicament related to Pakistan foreign policy posture.

Pakistan has over the years depended on U.S. military support, its intelligence sharing and its military training packages to strengthen its armed forces. However this dependency has frequently degenerated to compromise its strategic freedom. The employment of drone attacks on the territory of Pakistan without the authorization of parliament and the presence of the CIA in the country since 9/11, followed by the unilateral raid led by Abbottabad in 2011 were viewed by most people in Pakistan as a violation of their national sovereignty (Shah, 2014; Rana, 2020). Meanwhile, partnership with the U.S. in the area of security is unavoidable, particularly in the conflict on countering terror in the tribal belt, and following the war stabilization phase in the tribal belt.

China, on the other hand, does not openly participate in military activities but secretly implants an influence in the security agencies in Pakistan. The military bond has been enhanced by joint military training, transfer of arms and defense cooperation (such as the JF-17 fighter jets) (Small, 2015). But this strategic ease of doing business with China is not free of condition. China has already forced Pakistan to manipulate Uighur activism, observe Chinese people involved in working on CPEC and squeeze the internal dissent to promote the investment security (Haider, 2005).

Therefore, Pakistan remains at the crossroads of the widespread civil anger against the excessive military presence of the West and the slow acceptance of the Chinese control over domestic affairs.

The Pakistani economy has a structural reliance on the outside forces. The U.S. has traditionally been a large donor is especially well-known to donate its aid and to provide loans, mostly via USAID, the remittance system, and the influence on IMF patterns,

whereas Pakistan has an old history of annoyance when it comes to the conditionalities that are tied to the Western loans and aid (Lieven, 2011). The economic profile of China has multiplied since the introduction of CPEC. In 2022, more than 30 percent of Pakistan bilateral debt was composed of Chinese lending (Sial, 2016). But it is found that the majority of CPEC projects are on loan, there is zero transparency on the interest rates or repayment duration or the process of bidding. This has raised concerns of a debt trap such as the one in Sri Lanka in Hambantota, with concerns over an economic sovereignty and economical sustainable development (Baloch, 2022).

Whereas Pakistan requires foreign capital, it also requires flexibility. Excessive dependence on either actor constrains the choices of trade diversification, regional cooperation and local capacity building. Democracy, freedom of the press and human rights are encouraged by the U.S. throughout its international activities. In the case of Pakistan, it translates to the periodic inspections of the country by the international community its battle over the freedom of worship, civil-military relations, and gender rights balance all of which have compromised its image in world politics as well as its ability to attract foreign aid (Shah, 2014).

Meanwhile, China has a hands-off policy when it comes to the domestic matters of Pakistan and thus offers it diplomatic protection on multilateral bodies like the UN, FATF, and the UNSC. Yet, the need to be aligned with China too much can cause alienation of western democracies and has a potential to isolate Pakistan at the diplomatic stage in forums where normative politics are gaining popularity (Haider, 2005; Rana, 2020). Pakistan has to deal with these normative tensions, in a situation of protecting its strategic interests.

The relations between Pakistan and the U.S. stay critical in the scientific, technological, and educational fields. Schemes such as Fulbright scholarships, grants on research and university collaboration has enabled generations of Pakistani academics and professionals. The Pakistani community in America contributes notably to the remittance, political impact and thought (Rana, 2020).

China has also enlarged its technological footprints, especially on 5G, Artificial intelligence, surveillance setup and vocational education within CPEC (Small, 2015). But there is nothing like open knowledge transfer by the Chinese and the educational setting is not keen on openness and exchange. Pakistan will not have any capacity of building or remaining to be a thinker when it comes to Chinese technology as it will become a consumer of the Chinese technology. These contradictory needs in wishing to be as rapid and capitulatory as the Chinese development and at the same time wishing to be as intellectually open and institutionally rich as the U.S. alliances provide show the paradoxical nature of the modern Iranian state.

The capacity with which Pakistan can negotiate such paradoxes is pegged on how it perceives its very long-term interests not as a subservient but as a sovereign being in a competitive, multipolar universe. The second part discusses how the transformation in global power is remodelling Pakistan foreign policy choices.

Emerging Global Order and Implications for Pakistan

The international system is experiencing a radical change. The unipolarity of the post-Cold War with the hegemony of USA is gradually being replaced by a multipolar competitive and in the process, China, Russia, India and blocs of regions are coming out strongly with their independent impacts. Squarely sandwiched between this New World Order, Pakistan is in an uncomfortable situation: On the one hand not a strong enough country to

influence the world politics and on the other not placed in a way in which it can be disregarded. They also have broader implications since its ruling no longer has relevance just in respect of regional peace, but also to the way in which smaller states make their way through major power disputes.

The escalation of strategic competition between the U.S. and China is the characterizing aspect of global politics today. This competition covers a variety of areas: trade, technology, militaristic presence in the Indo-Pacific, and this ideological rivalry between liberal democracy and state-controlled authoritarianism (Kugelman, 2021). The two powers are insisting on the need of regional actors to align clearly. This poses the concept of strategic ambiguity even more complicated to Pakistan.

With the development of U.S. Indo Pacific strategy America is no longer focused upon strengthening relations between them and Pakistan but instead they appear to have consolidated their relations with India, Australia, and Japan, putting less priority on Pakistan into American strategic planning (Small, 2015). In the meantime, China wants a strong alliance on Taiwan, Xinjiang, and BRI projects, and at times, it tries to darken Pakistan adopt silence or complicity on international matters in need of moral diplomacy (Haider, 2005). In this zero-sum game, by being accommodative of one, Pakistan will end up alienating the other power. The hedging space is being reduced although it does not mean that it has disappeared completely.

Multipolarity has given new possibilities to such nations as Pakistan. A more decentralized system of the global world is possible, signaled by an increasing influence of middle powers, such as Tuerkiye, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and even Central Asian republics (Baloch, 2022). The membership of Pakistan in the forums such as Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), BRICS outreach and regional forums such as the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) has the potential to enable Pakistan to dilute its bilateral interactions with the U.S.-China binary. Loyalty however does not give a mandate. To capitalize on these multipolar breakthroughs, Pakistan needs to develop an institutional strength, economic credibility, as well as a consistent diplomatic outlook (Rana, 2020).

The U.S. strategic pivot-to-India, which is the counterbalance to China, has shifted the power balance in South Asia. Pakistan is caught in its traditional formula of seeking alliances in an attempt to bring a balance to power, due to the increasing position of India in the international forums (e.g., G20 presidency, BRICS+), and its association with its Quad partners (Lieven, 2011).

The current challenge advanced by Pakistan is that of pursuing regional peace and trade but protecting its strategic interests. This requires a refusal of reactive diplomacy and the development of new or dependable regionalism based on economic interdependence and cultural connection.

The attempts of China and Russia to encourage de-dollarisation, the creation of new financial platforms (such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and BRICS Bank), and the bilateral exchange of local currencies provide states, such as Pakistan, with an opportunity by cutting off access to western-dominated financial systems (Kugelman, 2021). Such tendencies when made institutional will decrease the reliance of Pakistan on the IMF and the Western aid provided Pakistan, but only when done in a thoughtful manner.

The insufficient exporting base of Pakistan and the unstable rupee, as well as the debt service problem, imply that although anti-dollarization appears to be ideologically decisive, it can prove to be economically dangerous in the short-run in the absence of real sector reforms (Baloch, 2022).

Pakistan and its location in the new world order is not defined or marginal. It can become a regional pivot, connecting Central Asia, the Gulf, and South Asia, provided that it manages to get out of internal instability and communicate a clear and active foreign policy. The following chapter suggests strategic policy options that are grounded on this changing geopolitical environment.

Policy Alternatives and Strategic Roadmap for Pakistan

The foreign policy of Pakistan cannot afford to swing between Washington and Beijing, or a dream of an existential self-sufficiency. The only way to come out alive, and prosperous in the next few decades, Pakistan needs to adopt the calibrated strategy, which rests on strategic autonomy, institutional reform, and economic diversity. Four fundamental policy directions are set below which provide a feasible roadmap.

Pakistan needs to get out of the tendency of dyadic alliances and a strategic hedging-position should be taken wherein they engage both China and the United States without being drawn into their power tussle. The difference between fence-sitting and hedging is that the latter is a calculated method of minimizing risks associated with overdependence and deriving benefits of having several relationships (Baloch, 2022).

This necessitates favorable collaboration with both the powers:

1. Stay engaged with the U.S. on defense and intelligence (in counterterrorism in particular), but make red lines on sovereignty much more specific (Shah, 2014).
2. Further economic and infrastructure cooperation with China however add transparency, third-party audit, and diversified bidding to CPEC projects (Sial, 2016).
3. Take lessons provided by examples such as Vietnam or Türkiye that strike a balance between their involvement in the affairs of the U.S., China, and Russia and a certain level of strategic independence.

Pakistan has to turn towards geo-economics, investing in connectivity in the region. In terms of location it provides potential that has not yet been explored; a zone between Central Asia, the Persian Gulf, and South Asia. But this has been held at ransom by an old fashioned strategic thought and absence of infrastructure governance.

Policy Recommendations

1. Revitalize and strengthen Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) as a workable economic block.
2. Seek trade transit and railway connectivity with Iran, Afghanistan and the States of Central Asia, even though there may be temporary political difficulties.
3. Liberalize the regional visas, cultural exchanges and academic diplomacy to create people-to-people level of trust.

This kind of regionalism would have also neutralized the overreliance which Pakistan has on any of the world powers (Rana, 2020).

Pakistan needs to slowly narrow its debt reliance on the western and the Chinese creditors through:

1. Diversifying exports beyond textiles- particularly in IT, agri-tech and green energy.
2. Diversifying sources of FDI to neutral countries such as the Gulf states, Türkiye, Malaysia, as well as Scandinavian nations.
3. Restructuring of the Phase-II of CPEC to focus on job generating, small and medium enterprise (SME)-connected investment rather than debt laden mega infrastructure.

Complementing the idea of stopping overspending to protect developmental capacity is the need to discipline the budget and cut on the cost incurred by the military (Lieven, 2011).

Institutional reform is uneasy to achieve the success of any strategic roadmap. The foreign policy of Pakistan continues to be controlled by an orientation of security generally controlled by the military, and minimal parliamentary scrutiny or involvement by think-tanks (Shah, 2014).

Some of the major reforms they should initiate should comprise:

1. Forming an agency of Foreign Policy Council chaired by the Prime Minister and incorporating input of the Foreign Office and military, the Parliament, and the civil society.
2. Establishing a Foreign Policy Review Mechanism like Quadrennial Defense Reviews in the U.S on a five year basis.
3. Investment in language, area/regional training and economic diplomacy of the Foreign Service officers.
4. Promoting university-policy connections through trade, climate diplomacy and regional security research investments.

Through these reforms, consistency can be institutionalized and long-term strategy made possible as opposed to react to diplomacy.

The future of Pakistan is neither to align with the East nor the West but to become powerful enough (economically and institutionally) to follow its interests without fear or losing the need to rely on the others. The last part includes the limit, chances and hazards of this proposed roadmap.

Risks and Limitations

Although the given roadmap can be perceived as the (opportunistic) course of action providing the pragmatic solutions to the foreign policy of Pakistan, it is challenged by several limitations, both internal and external. They are structural, political and institutional, and their presence will undermine even the most positive-minded plans unless they are recognized and dealt with.

The foreign policy of Pakistan also changes frequently with the changes in power at the domestic front. The long-term view is hard, being hedged with civil-military imbalance, crippled democratic institutions and unstable coalition. Regional involvement or multilateral diplomacy can be launched by the civilian governments only to have the overall strategy shifted towards securities doctrines by the security establishment (Shah, 2014).

Such inconsistency erodes global confidence and investors trust. Unless it is based on political stability and elite consensus, no matter how a strategy of hedging against the forces of globalisation or a regional connectivity plan is run, it will not last.

Pakistan has experienced an historical advantage of the external liaisons by both the army and civilian elite. Foreign alliances have begun to serve as a means of regime preservation much more than national change bearing in mind that it is estimated that such collaborations come in the form of military assistance, loans as well as diplomatic support (Lieven, 2011). Such rentier mentality hinders structural change, deters or shuns the transparency in projects such as CPEC and steers the available foreign aid to aid consumption rather than development.

Pakistan cannot be a constituent of a geopolitical realignment without tackling this problem of internal capture unless all the nations in the region work towards being a sovereign republic, not a dependent client-state.

Pakistan is a country with a weak foreign policy option due to the chronic economic weaknesses, such as a trade deficit, insufficient exports, a thin foreign cash reserve, and a

large foreign debt (Rana, 2020). Under these precarious conditions policy independence is a fantasy. Even well-laid diversification plans can fail under IMF conditions or on schedule of Chinese pay-backs.

Further, monopolizing on the remittance and debt-financed infrastructure, without enhancing national productivity, reduces the capacity of the country to take a course of its own.

There are also limitations of regional dynamics. Afghanistan is still not going well; India is diplomatically aggressive; Iran has sanctions against it; and the Gulf is experiencing uncertain shifts. Such uncertainties can disorient the course of regional integration in Pakistan or cause it to become excessively dependent on one partner (China) in terms of strategic insulation (Baloch, 2022). Moreover, U.S. renewed hostility toward China may cause polarization of multilateral organizations such as UN, SCO or IMF, reducing the room available to non-aligned countries such as Pakistan.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is understaffed and marginalized in most decision making processes. Formulation of policy is usually reactive, based on military calculus or shock (Shah, 2014; Kugelman, 2021) instead of being analytical, information-based, or citizen-driven.

So long as Pakistan does not invest in the reform of foreign service, think tank building and academic-policy interface, foreign policy will remain shallow, sans vision and coherent.

The external orientation of Pakistan is not the only thing that spells out strategic destiny in future, but internal transformation is equally important. The last and final part is a conclusion to the arguments made in the paper and restates the reasons why there is a need to pursue a balanced, sovereign and region-first approach to foreign policy which is feasible.

Conclusion

There is a reckoning point in the foreign policy of Pakistan. Since the global order is gradually transforming to a multipolar as opposed to the U.S-led unipolarism, it is time that Pakistan changes its traditional mode of patronage by foreign powers. The strategic balances of its present stance are no longer upheld, i.e. dependence on security versus sovereignty, economic aid versus autonomy, and the formation of alliances versus regional integration.

This article has held that the East and West dichotomy is a myth. Pakistan needs to devise a third way, a foreign policy based on strategic hedging, region-encompassing cooperation, economic rebalancing, and restructuring of the institutions. This needs more than one other overture-clandestine-it takes institutional shapes in the manner in which Pakistan imagines, plans, and conducts its international affairs.

The future is a steep one though. The most advanced foreign policy model will implode in the face of domestic turmoil, failure of accountability by the elite, and economic indulgence. However, there is an upside linked to such pressures of realignment in the world as well: The opportunity to find its voice, not as an obliging client but as a self-respecting middle-range state with muscle and determinant capabilities, a state that can influence its fate.

The reformulation of foreign policy based on self-respect, strategic patience and regional peace can assist Pakistan in becoming not a US trifle in the global competition, but a self-governing agent in a world that has ceased being either Eastern or Western, but global in its movements.

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