

## Impact of Shifting China-U.S. Strategic Dynamics on Pakistan's Geopolitical Positioning

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**Abstract:** The development of Pakistan's relations with China and the United States identify crucial turning points and contextualizing them within emerging global power dynamics. It focuses on U.S. primacy and Chinese growing assertiveness, examining Pakistan's role in the evolving geostrategic environment. The problem of existing paper is to understand how intensifying U.S.-China rivalry influences Pakistan's economy, security and regional standing, particularly in light of key projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The paper try to find to answer the following questions How does the U.S.-China rivalry shape Pakistan's strategic decisions and influence its economic cooperation, regional stability and geopolitical positioning? This question is explored through an extensive review of existing literature, with recent works by Zhao and Liu (2024) and Ahmed and Khan (2023) providing essential insights into the ongoing dynamics. However, there remains a gap in understanding how these shifts specifically affect Pakistan. The research employs Realism as its theoretical framework, drawing on the works of Mearsheimer, which emphasizes power

competition and strategic interests to analyze how states struggle for power in an anarchic international system. The research offers nuanced insights into the real-world consequences of major power rivalry on Pakistan's economic cooperation, regional stability and geopolitical positioning, providing valuable guidance for strategic decision-making in this complex environment.

**Keywords:** Geostrategic environment, U.S.-China rivalry, Regional stability, Realism, CPEC, Power dynamics

## Introduction

The interactions among major global powers significantly shape the geopolitical landscape. At this time, the underway rivalry between China and the United States exerts considerable influence and within this complex strategic environment, Pakistan circumnavigates an elusive balance between its historical alliances and the evolving demands of contemporary geopolitics (Anam et al., 2022). The course of Pakistan's bind with two global powers has experienced notable shifts, influenced by a series of events and a web of complicated geopolitical factors (Anwar, 2020). Analyzing this historical evolution is crucial for comprehending the current geopolitical context. This paper aims to explore the changing dynamics of Pakistan's attachment with the US and China, providing a deeper consideration of the present geopolitical scenario.

The strategic competition between China and the US has significantly altered global geostrategic scenery, with far-reaching implications for regional stability and power dynamics. Pakistan, located at the intersection of South Asia, Middle East and Central Asia finds itself at the crossroads of this intensifying rivalry. The evolving power struggle between two powers is not merely a bilateral contest but one that has profound consequences for countries like Pakistan, whose foreign

policy and external pressures and internal necessities increasingly shape security strategies. This paper explores the ramifications of the dynamic strategies adopted by China and the US on Pakistan, with special emphasis on the geostrategic environment, U.S.-China rivalry and regional stability, realism as a theoretical framework, the CPEC and the broader power dynamics at play.

The geostrategic environment in which Pakistan operates is characterized by a complicated interaction of regional and global powers. The rivalry between China and the United States has introduced new dimensions to this environment, with both powers vying for influence over key regions, including South Asia. The United States, traditionally a dominant player in South Asia, has sought to maintain its influence by strengthening ties with India, Pakistan's neighbor and historical rival. This strategic partnership is part of a broader U.S. tactics to contrariwise Chinese increasing risen up affect in the Indo-Pacific region. On the other side, China has deepened its strategic and economic links with Pakistan and looking the country as a key partner of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) particularly through the development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The CPEC has transformed Pakistan's geostrategic importance, making it a focal point of China's ambitions to enlarge its influence across Asia and beyond. This development has not gone unnoticed by the United States that interpret CPEC as a challenge to its own maneuvering benefits in the region. The U.S.-China rivalry has thus placed Pakistan in a precarious position, as it directs the competing demands and expectations of both superpowers. The strategic decisions made by Pakistan in this context are shaped by a need to balance these external pressures while safeguarding its own national interests. This balancing act has significant implications for regional stability, as Pakistan's choices could either exacerbate tensions or contribute to a more stable regional order.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a central element of the broader power dynamics between China and the USA. CPEC aims to develop connection between China and the Arabian Sea to provide a strategic position to China in the Indian Ocean region. For Pakistan, CPEC represents a major opportunity to address its economic challenges, through infrastructure development and increased foreign investment. However, CPEC is not merely an economic growth project; it is also a strategic initiative with significant geopolitical entanglement. The development of Gwadar Port, in particular, has raised concerns in the USA and India about Chinese aims in the region. The location of the port and close to the Strait of Hormuz is a critical chokepoint for global oil supplies that provides China a strategic advantage in securing its energy needs and projecting power in the Indian Ocean. The power dynamics surrounding CPEC are further complicated by the United States' efforts to cater Chinese hegemony in this region. The United States has expressed concerns about the lack of transparency and sustainability of CPEC projects, warning that they could lead to a debt trap for Pakistan. These concerns are part of a broader U.S. strategy to challenge OBOR, which it views as means of expanding Chinese influence at the overhead of other regional powers. Pakistan's role in these power dynamics is shaped by its need to balance its strategic partnership with China against the risks of alienating the United States. While CPEC offers Pakistan significant economic benefits, it also comes with geopolitical risks, as Pakistan becomes increasingly drawn into the broader U.S.-China rivalry. This has led to a elusive balancing act, as Pakistan seeks to maintain its strategic autonomy while avoiding the pitfalls of over-reliance on either power (Ali, 2020).

### Theoretical structure

The geopolitical environment of South Asia, with Pakistan at its core, has been profoundly processed by the evolving strategic vying between China and the U.S. This rivalry, often analyzed through the lens of international relations theories, particularly realism and liberalism, offers significant insights into the dynamics that influence Pakistan's foreign policy and regional stability. This theoretical framework aims to dissect the ramifications of the U.S. and China strategic contention on Pakistan, employing realism as the primary analytical tool while integrating liberalism to understand the complexities of Sino-Pakistani relations. Realism, a preponderant theory in international relations, provides crucial structure for understanding Pakistan's foreign policy behavior amid the U.S.-China rivalry. Rooted in the notion that the international system is refractory and the states are inherently self-interested actors seeking survival and power, realism posits that Pakistan's strategic decisions are driven by the need to secure its sovereignty and maintain a power symmetry in a region marked by intense rivalry, particularly with India (Waltz, 1979).

From a realist perspective, Pakistan's alignment with China via initiatives like CPEC is a strategic maneuver to counterbalance India's growing influence, bolstered by its alignment with the United States. According to realists, "States form alliances primarily to enhance their security and power" especially in an anarchic international system where no central authority guarantees state survival (Mearsheimer, 2001). For Pakistan, aligning with China serves as a counterweight to India's military modernization and strategic ties with the U.S., which Pakistan perceives as direct threats to its security (Ain, May 24, 2023). The realist perspective

further explains that Pakistan's deepening ties with China are not merely based on economic cooperation but are rooted in shared security concerns. As India's military capabilities and regional assertiveness grow, Pakistan views China as a crucial ally to maintain regional parity. This partnership, from a realist standpoint, is a calculated move to prevent India from achieving regional hegemony, thereby ensuring Pakistan's strategic survival (Mendelson, March 20, 2014).

Realism also sheds light on the security dilemmas and potential for conflict that arise from the U.S. and China rivalry in South Asia. The construction of CPEC through the conflict ridden area of GB, which India claims as its territory, has exacerbated tensions between Delhi and Islamabad. Realists would argue that this development heightens the defense quandary, where actions taken by one country to augment its security (e.g., Pakistan's partnership with China) are perceived as threats by another state (e.g., India), leading to an arms race and increased instability (Jervis, 1978). Moreover, the evolving strategic collaboration between the Washington and Delhi further complicates Islamabad's security environment. USA sees India in capacity of counterbalance to Chinese influence in Asia, which aligns with India's strategic interests but simultaneously isolates Pakistan (Pant, 2012). In response, Pakistan deepens its reliance on China, reinforcing the security dilemma in the region (Siddique, 2021).

Realism posits that such dynamics are almost inevitable in an anarchic international system where states prioritize their security and survival, often at the expense of regional stability. While the realist approach emphasizes the strategic benefits of Pakistan's partnership with China, it also highlights the potential risks of dependency. As Pakistan becomes more reliant on China

for economic and military support, its foreign policy options may become increasingly constrained (Rana, 2015). Realism suggests that such dependency can diminish Islamabad's ability to chase an independent foreign policy, as its actions will need to align with the interests of Beijing, particularly in the context of Beijing-Washington tensions. This strategic dependency is not without consequences. As U.S.-China rivalry intensifies, Pakistan may find itself in a precarious position, forced to revolve a complex geopolitical environment where its interests could be subordinated to the broader strategic objectives of China. Realists argue that while alliances are essential for survival in an anarchic world, they can also create vulnerabilities, especially when one state becomes overly dependent on another. (Walt, 1987).

### **Pakistan's alignment with U.S. and China: A historical analysis**

Since the independence, Pakistan established a strategic alliance with the United States, demonstrated by its participation in U.S.-led alliances such as SEATO and CENTO during the 1950s (Jabeen & Mazhar, 2011). This alignment reached its zenith during the Eisenhower administration when Washington sought strategic partners to halt the spread of communism over the course of Cold War (Javid & Mushtaq, 2014). The 1954 Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement, coupled with subsequent military and economic aid highlighted the depth of this alliance (Islam, 1983; Zaheer, November 09, 2021). This agreement formalized military cooperation between the two nations, with the U.S. providing substantial armed help to bolster the defense capabilities of Pakistan. Aid was meant not only at addressing immediate security concerns but also at fostering a long-term strategic partnership. The provision of military equipment, training and financial

assistance significantly enhanced Pakistan's military capabilities, establishing it as a key player in the regional power balance.

The formal establishment of diplomatic ties between Islamabad and Beijing on 21<sup>st</sup> May, 1951, marked a significant event, reflecting Pakistan's strategic shift towards diversifying its alliances (Zaho, 2022). A major turning point in this regard occurred in the 1960s, when Pakistan began to realign its foreign policy towards China. The Sino-Indian border conflict of 1962 played a pivotal role in this shift. As tensions between China and India escalated over territorial disputes, Pakistan found itself strategically aligned with China (Javid Umbreen & Jahangir, 2015). The conflict served as a catalyst for Pakistan to reassess its regional alliances and rethink its foreign affairs objectives.

The Tashkent Agreement of 1966, which expected to resolve the Indo- Pakistani War of 1965 made further tense relations between Pakistan and the USA despite being a key ally, the United States' perceived support for India during the Tashkent negotiations contributed to a growing sense of unease among Pakistan's higher authorities. This incident fueled Pakistan's inclination towards seeking alternative alliances, leading to a closer association with China (Lalwani, March 2023). Geopolitics witnessed another shift with American President Richard Nixon's sojourn in China in 1972 and the subsequent thaw in U.S.-China relations. Pakistan, acting as an intermediary, facilitated this historic rapprochement, contributing to a new geopolitical scene (Gilani, 2006; Baluch, 2006) (Baloch, 2006; Gilani, 2006). However, the normalization of U.S.-China relations did not restore the previous warmth in U.S.-Pakistan relations, as the dynamics had fundamentally changed.



The 1980s saw a resurgence of the Pakistan-U.S alliance during the Afghan- Soviet War. The Soviet aggression to Afghanistan in 1979 prompted the United States, under President Reagan, to view Pakistan as a crucial partner in resisting Soviet forces. Military and financial support from the U.S. flowed into Pakistan, particularly during the Zia-ul-Haq era, marking another phase of alignment with U.S. where its assistance to the Afghan mujahideen, channeled through Pakistan, solidified their strategic partnership during this period (Hilali, 2017). However, this alliance had significant long-term repercussions for Pakistan. The influx of military aid and foreign fighters, initially intended to support the Afghan resistance, led to the growth of militant groups within Pakistan (Shahbaz, 2023). The support provided to Afghan mujahideen contributed to the rise of factions that later turned against Pakistan, leading to internal conflicts and security challenges. The enduring consequences include persistent terrorism, internal instability and a strained defense environment. Furthermore, subsequent to Cold War, the changing dynamics in U.S. foreign policy strained bilateral relations, creating complexities in Pakistan's future geopolitical alignments (Hilali A. Z., 2002).

In the 1990s, following the end of the Cold War, Pakistan was compelled to reassess its diplomatic relationships amid a reshaping global political situation. Its longstanding confederation with the USA underwent a shift as U.S. priorities evolved (Zaidi & Saud, 2021). The atomic experiments conducted by two rivals Islamabad and Delhi in 1998 led to the imposition of sanctions by the United States, further straining bilateral relations (Tahira, 2022). This diplomatic isolation posed significant challenges for Pakistan, prompting it to seek alternative partnerships, most notably with China. The decision to tilt towards China was based on well-considered factors. Economically, China offered Pakistan avenues for development, trade and investment, which were crucial during a period of

international sanctions (Liu & Ahmad, February 25, 2020). Chinese rise as a world economic titans presented opportunities that Pakistan could not afford to ignore. Strategically, aligning with China provided Pakistan with a reliable partner in a region characterized by uncertain dynamics. China's growing influence in global affairs made it an attractive ally for Pakistan.

The strengthening of ties between Pakistan and China during the late 1990s laid the foundation for a deeper alignment that has persisted into the 21st century (Hussai et al., 2020) (Hussain et al., 2020). This strategic recalibration was not merely about finding a new ally; it reflected Pakistan's adaptability in response to changing geopolitical realities. The strategic partnership with China has since become a cornerstone of Pakistan's foreign policy, offering economic collaboration, military cooperation and diplomatic support (Kumar, 2006).

The 21st century saw a further extending of Chinese alignment with Pakistan. CPEC launch in 2015 stands out as a significant milestone (Dawn, April 20, 2015). This infrastructure and economic development project, part of China's OBRI, has become a mainstay of the Pakistan-China partnership (Wolf, 2020) (Wolf, 2020). The deepening economic ties, demonstrated by massive China's economic stake in infrastructure and energy projects of Islamabad, highlight defense realignment towards Beijing in recent years. Several factors have been instrumental in shaping Pakistan's geopolitical alignments. Geopolitical considerations, driven by security concerns related to India, have consistently played a pivotal role. Economic interests, represented by the transformative impact of CPEC on Pakistan's economic perspectives have become increasingly prominent (Arshad & Haidong, 2017). Pakistan is deeply impacted by the transitions in international power politics, specifically Chinese ascent as a global power, have also influenced Pakistan's alignment choices. Moreover, scholars

have emphasized the significance of domestic politics and leadership changes in shaping the foreign policy decisions and trajectory of Pakistan (Raashed & Anwar, November 20, 2020).

### **China-U.S rivalry and Pakistan**

Pakistan, strategically located at a crucial intersection of South Asia, Gulf and the Central Asia which is important key spot within evolving geostrategic environment. The strategic analysts of counter are acutely mindful about the ongoing tensions between Washington and the Beijing, recognizing the possible implications for Pakistan's relationships with both global powers. The United States is a primary export market and a preferred educational destination for the nation's elite of Pakistan. In contrast, Pakistan's principal supplier of arms, China has established unparalleled economic collaboration through the CPEC, a project valued at an estimated \$62 billion (Afzal, June 2020).

A key manifesto of competition between Beijing and Washington is "U.S. pivot to the Indo-Pacific, a strategy intended at counterbalancing China's influence (Chen, 2013)". China – U.S. trade war along with disputes over South China Sea have heightened tensions, contributing to the complexities of the region (Kim, October 22, 2023; Zaheer D. M., 2023, p. 48). China's assertiveness in territorial disputes, coupled with its Belt and Road Initiative, has further fueled concerns among neighboring countries. This evolving dynamic forces countries like Pakistan to steer the delicate balance between the two superpowers.

This situation suggests that policy architects of Pakistan must embrace a prudent strategy in conducting mutual relations between U.S. and China, avoiding any inclination to align exclusively with one side (Ali, 2020). Pakistan's decisions

on this geopolitical chessboard have direct implications for the regional balance of power. Alignment with China provides Beijing with a strategic foothold in South Asia; while Pakistan is historical, ties with U.S. continue to shape interests of United States in the region (Siddiqi, 2022; Afzaal, March 2022). The burgeoning alignment between Washington and the Delhi, intended at countering Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific, has drawn marked attention in Islamabad, introducing both opportunities and challenges for Pakistan (Ranter, 2016). The intensifying rivalry between the two powers has the potential to exacerbate long standing India-Pakistan conflict, potentially leading to an arms race and heightened intelligence capabilities on both sides, driven by the broader U.S.-China competition (Siddiqi, 2022). In Aug 2019, the Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi decided to rescind the special status of Kashmir and Ladakh heightened tensions among Islamabad, Beijing, and New Delhi along the contested borders of Himalayas. Chinese and Indian Constant border standoff offers Pakistan a chance to challenge India in partnership with China. However, this reactive strategy also provides Washington with an opportunity to strengthen its relationship with New Delhi in its border disputes with China. Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy, initially focused on collaboration in maritime, has stretched to assist India in addressing regional challenges brought about by China, which holds significant implications for Pakistan. Although an abrupt shift in the region's dynamics is currently unlikely, recent announcements following the U.S.-India Dialogue about the United States sharing geospatial intelligence and advanced missile technology with India have raised concerns in Pakistan. India's primary objective in enhancing its strategic alliances with the USA is to ultimate place itself as a regional superpower, while the U.S. aspires to see Indian economic growth surpass that of China (Madan, June 23, 2017).

The defense competition between China-U.S. also significantly affects Pakistan-Iran relations. Both global powers have divergent views on Iran, with the United States imposing sanctions and withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal, thereby straining its ties with Tehran. In contrast, China maintains robust diplomatic relations with Iran, condemning U.S. policies and fostering cooperation. Despite challenges such as U.S. and Indian opposition to projects like CPEC and the impact of economic sanctions on Pakistan-Iran relations, the strategic location of the Gwadar seaport has the scope to enhance trade relations between Iran, Pakistan and China. Initiatives such as the proposed connection of Chabahar and Gwadar through highways and Pakistan-Iran gas pipeline are under discussion, which could foster trilateral trade relations. However, these efforts face significant challenges, including regional security concerns related to terrorism, political instability and opposition to CPEC from the Delhi and Washington (Zaheer D. M., January 25, 2023).

China's initiation of CPEC can be understood as a strategic input to the U.S. Pivot to Asia policy, reflecting a countermeasure directed at mitigating U.S. influence in the region, specifically when it comes to India. Evolving dynamics of major power rivalry have prompted China to assert its geopolitical interests in South Asia through transformative initiatives like CPEC, which offer significant economic benefits for Pakistan. However, the success of CPEC is threatened not only by India but also by the United States. The economic upliftment anticipated from CPEC presents a new challenge for India, which has faced difficulties in isolating Pakistan on various international platforms concerning terrorism and extremism (Madan, June 23, 2017). Moreover, Pakistan's involvement in BRI has led to improved relations with Russia. In 2014, there was a notable improvement in relations between Russia and Pakistan, culminating in an agreement for military

exercises, which were eventually conducted in 2016. Apart from the normalization of military-to-military interactions, both nations have demonstrated a readiness to integrate South Asia with the Eurasian landmass through CPEC. (Marwat, August 18, 202). For Pakistan, engaging with Russia offers a strategic avenue to counterbalance its foreign policy in light of the strengthening defense relations between U.S. and India.

On November 4, 2019, former President of U.S. Donald Trump unveiled the Blue Dot Network during the 35th Asian Summit in Bangkok, Thailand. The initiative, supported by the USA, Australia, Japan and later India on February 25, 2020, aims to attract global investors to contribute to infrastructure development worldwide. Delhi's active involvement in the initiative is crucial, significantly contributing to its economic development plans. Additionally, it positions India to compete with and potentially surpass China and other nations, thereby strengthening its global standing through the Blue Dot Network (Bibi, 2023). Recent developments, including the withdrawal of U.S. from Afghanistan has resulted in geopolitical changes in South Asia, have added further complexity to the dynamics of region. Involvement of Pakistan in mediating peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, coupled with its careful balancing between USA and China, highlights the sophisticated nature of its geopolitical strategies (Mohan, August 22, 2021). China-USA engagement in reactive strategies and countermeasures, Pakistan's strategic choices become increasingly critical. The geopolitical shifts resulting from the withdrawal of USA from Afghanistan have significant impacts not only for regional influence of Pakistan but also for its economic ties and security considerations (Sarwar & Siraj, 2021).

## Pakistan-SCO and US-China Rivalry

The formation of the SCO was the result of negotiations between the Central Asian Republics (CARs) and China, occurring during a period when both China and Russia were navigating their democratic recovery, while the CARs faced significant challenges related to state-building and border security (Khetran & Khalid, 2019). The SCO was officially established in 2001 in response to shared security and military concerns, especially those related to border areas. Key drivers for its formation included the rise of religious extremism, international terrorism and ethnic separatism. Over time, the SCO expanded its scope to encompass economic development and regional stability, promoting a shared identity and cooperation on issues of mutual concern (Irfan et al., May 2017).

Although not a full member, the United States secured observer status within the SCO, allowing it to participate in meetings. The U.S. has consistently expressed concerns regarding regional security, particularly in relation to Afghanistan and Central Asia, which aligns with the SCO's focus on addressing security challenges (Ziegler, 2013). Despite lacking voting rights, the U.S. has actively pursued cooperation within the SCO framework, particularly in the domain of counterterrorism initiatives. In 2017, Pakistan and India were granted permanent membership in the SCO, with China supporting Pakistan and Russia backing India (Habib & Zhu, January 22, 2020). This expansion marked a significant milestone, enhancing regional integration and strengthening the SCO's influence in South & Central Asia.

Involvement of Islamabad in the SCO reflects a strategic balancing act in its ties with both Beijing and the Washington. The complex history of Pakistani-U.S. relations in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks have provided essential context for



understanding Pakistan's role within the SCO (Khan, October 26, 2020). The multilayers nature of these ties is evident in various instances of collaboration, particularly in counterterrorism efforts. However, tensions have occasionally arisen due to divergent interests, especially concerning Afghanistan and issues related to nuclear proliferation. Pakistan strategically leverages its SCO membership to balance these alliances, utilizing the organization as a diplomatic bridge to engage with both USA and the China simultaneously. The delicate balancing act highlights Pakistan's capacity to navigate the complex dynamics of the China & U.S. rivalry.

Pakistan's membership in the SCO contributes significantly to regional stability amidst the ongoing U.S.-China rivalry. Collaborative efforts within the SCO framework, particularly through the Regional Counter-Terrorism Structure (RCTS), play a vital role in enhancing stability in South Asia (Foot, 2006) (Foot, 2006). Pakistan's involvement in intelligence-sharing, joint exercises and other counterterrorism initiatives within the SCO strengthens its ability to address regional security threats (Wallace, December 13, 2014). These joint initiatives and conflict resolution mechanisms provide a platform for member states, including Pakistan, to address regional constraints. However, concerns have been raised about the potential for the SCO to become a proxy battleground for U.S.-China competition, with their respective allies vying for influence within the organization, thereby posing challenges to regional stability (Sharma, 2021).

Participation in the SCO enhances Pakistan's regional influence, strategically positioning it between the spheres of influence of Beijing and Washington. Membership of SCO establishes Pakistan as a key player, enabling it to contribute actively to the regional discourse. Alignment with China bolsters Pakistan's regional standing, offering opportunities for significant policy contributions. Concurrently, Pakistan uses its involvement in the SCO to maintain



influence with the United States, demonstrating diplomatic finesse and participating in initiatives aligned with U.S. interests (Khetran & Khalid, 2019). This strategic balance positions Pakistan as a crucial actor, effectively leveraging its SCO membership to exert influence on multiple fronts.

### Conclusion:

The two powers rivalry affects geopolitical positioning of Pakistan. As the competition between these two global powers intensifies, Pakistan finds itself strategically navigating of historical alliance with the United States and deepening cooperation with China especially through CPEC. This balancing act is critical for Pakistan as it seeks to maintain its national interests amidst external pressures. Pakistan's strategic decisions, influenced by realism and historical context, impact regional stability and the broader power dynamics within South Asia. The complex interaction of security concerns, economic dependencies and shifting global alliances highlights Pakistan's challenging position in the evolving geostrategic scene.

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