

Pakistan-US-China Trilateral Relations in the Context of Evolving Geo-Strategic Calculus of Asia-Pacific

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Article Information	Abstract
Received: March 11, 2026 Revised: June 28, 2026 Accepted: June 29, 2026	This paper finds out the evolving nature of Pakistan's relations with United States and China. The geographical position of Pakistan being at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Indian Ocean provide it with strategic advantage as well as challenges amid escalating competition between Washington and Beijing. Through the framework based on the hedging theory and the middle power model, the paper investigates the way Pakistan copes with the intricate balance between its deep security and economic reliance on China, and its unequal relationship with the United States. This paper analyses the nexus between trade policy, critical mineral security, and U.S. foreign relations. Pakistan's strategic calculus appears to be driven by a confluence of key variables including economic vulnerability, persistent security threats, technological reliance, and internal political strife. All these factors, explain the limitations of the manoeuvring power of Islamabad on the international front. The results indicate that hedging provides a certain leeway to Pakistan in the short run, but more structural weaknesses particularly economic and political in the long run. This makes Pakistan incapable of realizing real autonomy in both economic and political domains. The paper argues that Pakistan's ability to follow this strategy will largely rest on its economic strength, reforms in governance and its capacity to deal with the growing security challenges in the Asia-Pacific calculus.
Keywords <i>Pakistan foreign policy,</i> <i>China-US rivalry,</i> <i>Hedging theory,</i> <i>Indo-Pacific,</i> <i>CPEC</i>	

1. Introduction

The Asia-Pacific region has experienced a fair share of severe geopolitical hardships over the past years, redefining the manner in which the giant powers and regional states interact with each other. Pakistan being at the junction of South Asia, Central Asia and the Arabian Sea is in the midst of this turbulent image. It does not have any set or one-dimensional relationships with China and the United States. They are ever changing, depending on history, strategic objectives, financial demands, and internal politics. In order to observe where Islamabad goes next, it is essential not only to examine its option in balancing between these two powers but also to analyse the tendencies of competition and cooperation as well as stability throughout the Indo-Pacific (Nagy, 2022).

Pakistan's relations with Washington and Beijing have not simply appeared out of thin air; rather they have been a product of regional alliances, colonialism baggage and Cold War politics. Immediately after gaining independence in 1947, Pakistan drew closer to the United States, becoming part of such

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alliances as CENTO and SEATO. The reason behind that move was not merely about friendship but rather to counteract India without letting the Soviet influence go out of control (Talbot & Singh, 2009). Simultaneously, Pakistan found an opening with China, particularly, following Sino-Indian War of 1962 that left Beijing and New Delhi on different sides of the fence. This precondition laid the foundation for a close Sino-Pakistani partnership that has subsequently deepened across energy projects, infrastructure development, military cooperation, and diplomatic engagement (Small, 2015). The US-Pakistan relationship has on the contrary been more of a rollercoaster ride. The periods of close collaboration have been followed by collisions over aspects such as human rights, nuclear policy, and conflicting approaches in Afghanistan (McMahon, 2013; Sattar, 2016). Simply put, the balancing act between Beijing and Washington in Pakistan is not recent but the stakes seem to be greater at present due to the dynamism of the broader Indo-Pacific. A series of prominent occurrences in recent years have underlined Pakistan in its fluctuation between Washington and Beijing.

1.1 Research Questions

This paper aims to answer these interlinked research questions:

Q1. How is Pakistan navigating its relationships with the United States and China in the context of intensifying US-China strategic competition in the Asia-Pacific?

Q2. To what extent is Pakistan's foreign policy characterized by a hedging strategy: maintaining strong ties with China while engaging the US in selective domains like trade, critical minerals, and security cooperation?

1.2 Objectives of the Research

This paper aims at offering an empirically based study on the strategic decisions of Pakistan in the changing Asia-Pacific order. The paper aims at establishing the forces and limitations that affect decision-making in Islamabad, but it also integrates the obstacles hampering its selection. It does not just assess trade flows, economic interdependence, and patterns of security cooperation, but also ideational variables, national identity, discourse of diplomacy, and the goals of strategic autonomy and all of them are placed under the scrutiny. The combination of these material and ideational factors together is what the research will seek to elucidate the current Pakistani position, along with making predictions about the possible future trends of the Pakistan-US, China and the overall regional situation.

1.3 Research Methodology and Data Collection

The research methodology employed in this research is based on exploratory, descriptive and analytical footings to systematically investigate the geo-strategic configurations shaping US-China great power competition in the Asia-Pacific and their implications for Pakistan's foreign policy and security. The qualitative approach was applied involving in-depth textual analysis of primary and secondary sources, including policy documents, official statements, strategic white papers, and scholarly literature. Journals of international repute were consulted as principal academic sources, drawing on peer-reviewed scholarship in international relations, security studies, and political economy. Additionally, internet-based sources and real-time data repositories were utilized to capture contemporaneous developments and day-to-day updates, ensuring the research remained responsive to the rapidly evolving strategic environment under study.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The proposed study is important on three dimensions. First, it examines Pakistan with nuclear capacity involving in unremitting conflict processes. Second, it anticipates the fact of Pakistan having geo-strategic role, which has been under-researched in greater Asia-Pacific discourse. The intersection

of these dimensions creates a case that would hardly appear in the current regional political discourse. The research adds to the body of literature on the topic of middle-power strategy, hedging theory, and great-power competition. The study also participates in the growing theoretical discussions that require the hybrid approaches that would combine the realist schools of thought with the concepts of hedging or balancing. These models will recognize the fact that states like Pakistan are strategic actors and independent decision-makers, rather than respondents to exogenous demands (Tahir, Kasi, and Qadir, 2025; Adil, Uzzaman, and Hera, 2024). The research has more than just a theoretical contribution, and has a provider of practical implications, as a policy maker in Pakistan, the United States and China.

The paper is based on empirical data between the period of 2020 and 2025, but its future projections reach to 2030. The infrastructure projects especially the CPEC are critical sectors of interest, as well as the interaction in the realm of trade and investment flows, security, and diplomatic alignment. Nevertheless, the study notes that it has some shortcomings such as the uncertainty of external shocks such as pandemics, wars and global financial crises, and the inability to have reliable information in sensitive security related fields.

2. Literature Review

The literature review excavates an extensive variety of concepts: theories of great-power rivalry, in particular, about the current tug-of-war between the US and China, the changing foreign policy approaches of Pakistan including the balancing, hedging, and non-alignment leans as well as the greater role of trade and connectivity initiatives. It also examines economic corridors, access to critical minerals and economic initiatives such as BRI and their flagship project in Pakistan, CPEC. In addition to that, previous research on trilateral relations and the overall regional security is introduced in the discussion to provide a more comprehensive background.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Sino-US rivalry remains a key element of contemporary international politics (Ali and Ali, 2021; Saeed and Yaqub, 2023). Hedging theory is the key concept that recurs repeatedly in this discussion, it is sometimes termed as a combination of balancing and bandwagoning. The hedging theory has emerged as significant framework of handling the uncertainty in the environment created by the great-power rivalry in which weak states attempt to deal with the problem. Thus, rather than aligning with one of the powers, most Southeast Asian nations like Pakistan seem to be hedging the benefit of working with both power like US and China in the security, economic and diplomatic spheres. The article, *Navigating Great Power Competition: A Neoclassical Realist View of Hedging*, emphasized that internal factors, such as the perceptions of leadership and domestic institutions, along with external pressures, the changes in the balance of power and the emergence of apparent threats shape such decisions (Marston, 2024). A significant part of the literature continues to rely heavily on structural realism or neorealism, particularly in the context of the reaction of states to shifting coalitions, increased threats, and changed military balances. Moreover, number of scholars argue that realism alone doesn't provide a full picture. They suggest that more nuanced explanations come from combining realism with other views such as institutionalism, hedging, and domestic-level variables (Waqar & Uzzaman, 2025; Shah, Gaho & Bukhari, 2025).

2.2 Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Balancing, Non-alignment, or Hedging

There are many studies focusing on how Pakistan is shaping its foreign policy among the growing rivalry between the US and China, with particular attention to strategies of hedging and balancing (Ali, et al. 2024). In the article *Trilateral Dynamics in Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Balancing China and Hedging the US*, Ali, Arshad, and Rogers (2024) argue that Pakistan is not simply aligning with one power but, pursuing a careful hedging strategy, enacting economic and military ties with China while engaging the America especially in trade and diplomacy. Based on this, Adil, Uzzaman, and

Noor-e-Hera (2024), in *Pakistan's Quest for Strategic Autonomy: Hedging against US-China-Russia Rivalries Post-2013*, highlight Pakistan's efforts to diversify its partnerships with China and the US. They show how Islamabad seeks security and economic cooperation with multiple actors, maintaining links with both the U.S. and Russia while also deepening its commitment to China through CPEC. This reflects a broader drive for strategic autonomy, give leverage to Pakistan to avoid overdependence on China or United States.

The work on "Between the Balancing and Hedging? The Foreign Policy Behaviour of Pakistan in the Power Struggle between the US and China" reveals that the behaviour of the country is different with respect to the sphere (Waqar, & Uzzaman, 2025). It tends to be more inclined towards China in certain domains including defence and infrastructure whereas in other domains such as trade, aid, or diplomatic support, it is aggressively seeking an equal footing with the U.S. Meanwhile, researchers stress that hedging is associated with risks. The factors that make Pakistan unable to continue playing both sides include economic dependency, domestic political instability, external pressure, and the consistent threat of security such as terrorism and insurgency (Shah, Gaho, and Bukhari, 2025; Waqar and Uzzaman, 2025).

2.3 Trade, Critical Minerals and CPEC Significance

Even in most of the literature, the CPEC remains a key articulation of Beijing's geoeconomic and geostrategic aspirations in South Asia in the context of BRI (Jasmin, et al. 2025). Such works as *Shifting Power Dynamics in South Asia: The Geopolitical Impact of China CPEC on Regional Rivalries* use a neoclassical realist approach and show how the systemic factors, the strategic interests of China, encounter internal constraints, including the economic capacity and political stability of Pakistan. This point of view can be used to explain the opportunities associated with CPEC as well as the vulnerabilities related to it (Manhas et al. 2025). Reading more recently, trade and critical minerals are now the areas of interest. Pakistan has signed investment deals with American firms in the infrastructure, logistics, and development of critical minerals such as rare earth, copper, gold, tungsten, and antimony in 2025 (AP News, 2025; Tribune Pakistan, 2025). These actions are the signs of new aspects in the relations between the U.S. and Pakistan which extend beyond the standard concern of security relationships (Zaidi, et al. 2025). Multilateral financing has also come into the scene. The fact that the Asian Development Bank gave a significant loan on the Reko Diq copper and gold project underlines the fact that the international actors are increasing their presence in the mining sector in Pakistan (Ghaffar, 2024). This not only spreads investment sources, but also puts a challenge to China, by giving Islamabad an opportunity to become less reliant and open itself to more external rivalry (Financial Times, 2025, August 21). Researchers also stress the increased focus on trade and logistics in Pakistan. Deals with U.S. and European corporations, as well as external infrastructure collaboration, are viewed as a wider initiative by Islamabad to diversify its foreign economic contacts and minimize the risks to them (Shah, Gaho, and Bukhari, 2025).

2.4 Trilateral Relations and Regional Security Complex

The three-way relationship among China, United States, and Pakistan has now been a growing area of research. The articles like the *Foreign Policy: Trilateral Dynamics* (Ali, Arshad, and Rogers, 2024) about Pakistan discuss the influence of the U.S. and Chinese policies on each other that are either complementary or contradictory and contribute to the development of the foreign policy choices in Pakistan layering the bilateral interactions that Pakistan has had. The other significant line of previous study relies on the Regional Security Complex (RSC) model that is proposed by Buzan and Waever. This model can be used to understand the tendency of security dependencies and threat perceptions to be regional. As an example, the article *New Dynamics in the Indian Ocean: A Study of Pakistan, China, and India under the Regional Security Complex* (Khizar, 2025) can be viewed through the prism of the RSC approach to the strategic, economical, and naval interconnection between China, India, and Pakistan in the Indian Ocean. The studies bring to the fore the fact that Pakistan exists in more than one security complex.

In the Indian Ocean, the problem of security of sea lanes and presence of the naval forces prevails; in the broader Indo-Pacific, Pakistan is sucked into the U.S.-China game; and in South Asia, it is heavily involved in the India-Pakistan conflict and Afghanistan affairs. Much of the academic literature is concerned with the way in which Pakistan is manoeuvring within and among these complexes either through port access agreements, infrastructure development, diplomacy or changing alliances.

2.5 The Geo-Strategic Developments in Asia-Pacific Region

The Asia-Pacific now seems to be commonly denoted as the Indo-Pacific, forming a focal point of the significant geopolitical changes, being characterized by the increasing great power competition and changing regional alliances. The United States as an example has been advocating events such as the Quad (which is composed of the U.S, Japan, India and Australia) as a means of counteracting the influence of China. A big part of this rivalry is played in the South China Sea where military activities and territorial assertions by Beijing have led to conflicts with Philippines and Vietnam (Kaplan, 2023).

Meanwhile, China is still expanding its economic and strategic footprint through BRI. This growth has prompted a reactionary move, such as the Build Back Better World initiative supported by the U.S. or the Free and Open Indo-Pacific plan of Japan (Panda, 2024). To make it even more complicated, the fact that North Korea continues to pursue nuclear capabilities and the heightened level of activeness of ASEAN in its diplomatic activities only strengthens the Indo-Pacific as a place, where cooperation and competition are continually going hand in hand. All these dynamics are transforming the global security order and the overall economic environment (Smith and Hu, 2025).

2.6 Rise of China's Naval, Economic, and Diplomatic Power

The high rate of modernization of the Chinese Navy has drastically changed the sea power in the Asia-Pacific. On the basis of a new Congressional Research Service (CRS) study, the PLAN currently has more than 370 battle force platforms, comprising amphibious platforms, major surface combatants, submarines, and support vessels. This figure is projected to increase to approximately 395 ships in 2025, and 435 in 2030. Besides pure shipbuilding China is also enhancing its C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance), improving its logistics, doctrine and manpower, indicating a wide program of modernized capabilities (O'Rourke, 2024, January 30). As part of showing the interest in a more global outlook, China has extended naval activity not just to its traditional near-seas (the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea), but also to the Western Pacific, the Indian Ocean, and even European waters (O'Rourke, 2024, January 30).

Meanwhile, Beijing is still using the BRI as a foreign policy and economic instrument. The CPEC continues to be the centre of attention in South Asia, offering energy, port, and transport infrastructure. The new deals (2024-2025) indicate a new beginning of dedication, and more investments in mining, energy, and agriculture, with more robust security assurances to Chinese workers. The recent situation was also updated by new statements of both Pakistani and Chinese officials, which are recommended to remain updated with the latest information. China has also increased its diplomatic reach to the members of ASEAN, Pacific Island States and Coastal states of the Indian Ocean, and the more visible presence in bilateral and multilateral Indo-Pacific forums. Even though some nations are becoming increasingly cautious of their reliance on Beijing, Chinese soft power in the form of trade, culture exchange, development assistance, and regional deals remain one of the primary instruments of influence.

The most recent demonstration of naval strength was the dual aircraft carrier drills of the Liaoning and Shandong in the South China Sea which aimed to enhance combat readiness, coordination and power projection (Ryall, 2024, October 17). The United States has tried a complex approach as a

reaction to the growing influence of China. This is coupled with military modernization and the increased alliances like the Quad and AUKUS and at the same time heightening competition in trade and advanced technologies.

2.7 Security Partnerships and Alliances

AUKUS was established in 2021, to drive cooperation among the U.S., the U.K and Australia in the most advanced spheres such as quantum computing, hypersonic and defence technology, nuclear-powered submarines, and intelligence sharing. It has since become a primary means through which Washington has been trying to push back against the rising activity of China in the seas (Mecalf, 2023, November 20). The Quad, however, is commonly discussed in less emphatic, more diplomatic terms. It emphasizes the communicated dialogue, the construction of infrastructure and provision of public goods, yet it is difficult not to notice its strategic advantage. It is regarded by many as an extension of the overall US effort to establish smaller, more focused alliances known as minilaterals to ensure that China remains within check. In this arrangement, the Quad assists in strengthening certain very significant regional norms, directly pertaining to freedom of navigation, maritime safety and ensuring that important shipping routes are free and secure (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2025, January 27).

2.7.1 Capacity and Military Posture

The US has been constantly increasing its military presence in the Indo-Pacific by establishing more forward bases, rotating forces and ships in the region. More frequently, it is raising its naval presence, investing in submarines and anti-submarine warfare, and conducting more frequent exercises with allies individually and in groups (O'Rourke, 2024, January 30). An important component to this exercise is the Pacific Deterrence Initiative or PDI. It was introduced in the 2021 fiscal year, and it is basically a funding structure that is designed to enhance deterrence and the upgrading of infrastructure in the region. Fundamentally, the PDI is an indication of Washington regarding the difficulties of increasing aggressive behaviour of China (Nicastro, & Kaileh, 2023).

2.7.2 Economic Competition, Technology and Trade

Technology and supply chain security are increasingly becoming directly related to U.S. foreign policy. One of the main priorities is to ensure that the country does not rely too much on China when it comes to supplying such commodities as semiconductors and rare earth elements, among other important minerals. The trade policy that was once slightly independent is now strongly linked to these strategic issues. In export restrictions, tariffs, the push to bring supply chains back home, reshoring or the push to relocate them to proven allies and partners, sometimes referred to as friend-shoring.

2.8 Regional Responses

India, ASEAN, Japan, Australia and other players in the region do not sit by and watch the United States and China fight over influence; they constantly strike their deals by hedging, balancing and by stepping up and down the ladder. An example is that India has gradually been joining the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) by building more naval infrastructures, enhancing its domestic shipbuilding capacity, conducting joint exercises with the US, Japan, Australia, and ASEAN members, and extending its maritime presence. Its longstanding rivalry with China, ineffective border claims, and the desire to become a formidable regional power are some of the policy reactions that have caused India to seek an answer to these issues (Bala and Kumar, 2024).

The case among member states of the ASEAN is highly heterogeneous. Countries like Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam are gradually focusing on the multilateral norms, freedom of navigation, and more emphasis on the discourse of the South China Sea issues. On the other hand, some of these

states such as Cambodia and Laos have more of a soft approach to Beijing. It is still debated by scholars whether or not ASEAN serves as a central political actor, but the majority of scholars agree that the organization keeps playing a major role as an arena of controlling diplomatic interaction, rivalry, and balance of power at the regional level (Jayaram, 2024).

In the meantime, Japan and Australia are beefing up the defence ties with each other and with Washington. The maritime power that Australia is about to increase includes the thinking of obtaining nuclear-powered submarines via AUKUS. On its part, Japan is deepening its partnership with other countries such as South Korea, India, and Pacific Islands, as well as increasing the access level of U.S. troops and investments in Self-Defence Forces (Medcalf, 2023, November 20). The smaller states particularly the southeast Asian and the Pacific islands are walking on thin ice. They want stronger security partnerships, sometimes with the U.S. or Europe, but at the same time they rely heavily on China for economic ties. Many of them are trying to diversify their options carefully, without triggering the kind of tensions that come from openly choosing sides.

2.9 Implications for Trilateral Relations (Pakistan-US-China)

The strategic environment that Pakistan is now operating in is quite more disputed thanks to the many regional developments. It concerns both Washington and Beijing since it is affected by a number of factors, including the increase in the naval strength of China, strengthening of the American allies, and balancing of other states, including Japan, Australia and India (Khan, et al. 2019). Pakistan's geography gives it significant leverage to Gwadar port, access to major sea lanes, its position near the Indian Ocean, and its border with Afghanistan all make it strategically valuable. But that leverage only really works if Islamabad can manage its internal challenges while carefully navigating pressure from both the U.S. and China.

3. Pakistan's Strategic Interests: Security, Economy, Trade, and Ideology

The asymmetry of traditional military strength, the tactical use of nuclear deterrence, and Kashmir conflict issue are still the core aspects of the foreign policy of Pakistan (Sattar, 2016). What is more, the situation is complicated by internal security threats, such as terrorism and separatism in Balochistan, which makes it more difficult to present the state as a stable one and attract foreign investment (Shah, Gaho, and Bukhari, 2025). These economic hardships have accumulated with time, which is depicted by worsening balance of payment, high rate of foreign debt growth and high level of inflation which has remained a burden to the people whether knowingly or unknowingly. To deal with such complex challenges, multilateral intervention and international cooperation are the required steps.

Pakistan has significant mineral resources that could prove to be strategic resources because they include copper, gold and rare earth. However, other than the possibility of mismanagement of resources, the main problems facing Pakistan involve the diversification of its trade model and making it appealing to foreign direct investment, as highlighted by modern literature. Infrastructure connectivity is an important element of the strategic framework of Pakistan. The cloud of the infrastructure, energy, and logistics projects known as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is the essential plan of transforming Pakistan into an economic centre between South and Central Asia and achieving the access to the Arabian Sea.

Pakistani diplomacy is also guided by ideological factors besides its economic aspects. Foreign-policy formulations are pragmatic and determine the orientation of the country informing it both on its Islamic identity and a strong strategic independence. By stable declarations of the leaders in Islamabad, the foreign policy practised by Pakistan does not suggest an expansion of the interests of any great power or a proxy system; it is instead aimed at ensuring the state makes its independent choice.

3.1 Economic, Military, Infrastructural Dependencies on China

China and Pakistan frequently refer to their relationship as an all-weather one, yet the relationship is not free and pure. This has seen approximately 81 percent of all the major weapons exported into Pakistan in the last five years, which is comprised of fighter jets, missile systems as well as submarines which were both imported by China (Indian Defense News, 2025). Such excessive dependence demonstrates the extent to which Pakistan is dependent on Beijing, in regard to high-tech defence gadgets. China has invested billions of dollars in such projects as the Gwadar port, railways, power plants, and road networks through CPEC. This reliance grew even more in 2025 when both nations signed an agreement to develop cooperation in infrastructure, mining, and offshore oil exploration (Reuters, 2025). The supply of capital by China is not without conditions; it is always accompanied with financial and political conditions. There is also a security cost that has been incurred. Islamabad has been forced to deploy large numbers of military and police forces in order to safeguard the interests of the Chinese personnel and engineers working in Pakistan. The security resources distribution mentioned above depicts how an infrastructural dependency can spill over into domestic security issues (Kuszevska, & Nitza-Makowska, 2021).

3.2 Relationships with the United States

Even though China is still the close partner of Pakistan, of late, Islamabad has been striving to restore its ties with the United States. A few developments stand out:

3.2.1 Critical Minerals Cooperation

Pakistan signed contracts estimated at USD 500 million with the companies of the USA, including Strategic Metals and Mota-Engil. The deals are aimed at exploration and processing of rare earths, copper, gold, tungsten, and antimony. It is proposed to establish a polymetallic refinery in Pakistan, which will be shifting the process of extracting resources to the processing stage of resource utilization (Kahyarara, & Simon, 2018).

3.2.2 Top-Tier Diplomatic Contacts

The participation of a U.S. delegation, led by State Department official Eric Meyer, in the Islamabad Minerals Investment Forum and its subsequent meetings with Pakistan's civilian and military leadership, affirmed that Pakistan's mineral sector is perceived by Washington as having strategic value (Edelman, 2024).

3.2.3 Diversification Strategy

These actions indicate the intention of Pakistan to draw the attention of Western investment and technology, decrease the excessive dependence on China and expand the range of external relationships. In this way, the Islamabad not only establishes new growth opportunities but also better bargains with not only Washington but also Beijing (Shah et al. 2025).

All this portrays the delicate balancing exercise of Pakistan. Chinese support on one hand comes with the crucial infrastructure and security assistance but on the other hand, there is the danger of Islamabad becoming excessively reliant. Conversely, by accessing U.S. trade, investment and mineral partnership, Pakistan has another way into the future. Nevertheless, the options of Pakistan are few. Its ailing economy and recurrent security problems are taking their toll in the amount of space it has to negotiate. That being said, how Pakistan interacts with the two powers indicates its willingness to have certain degree of strategic freedom. Furthermore, Pakistan's policy orientation vis-à-vis Washington and Beijing is not formulated in vacuum. These are the creation of internal and external forces. Four core determinants underpin Pakistan's recalibration of its trilateral alignment, namely

economic constraints, persistent security challenges, technological and infrastructural development, and the need to ensure domestic political stability.

3.3 Economic Pressures

Unstable economy is arguably the over-riding factor in the Pakistan's foreign policy. By mid-2025, the public debt in Pakistan had increased to a high of 80.5 trillion rupees which is estimated to be equal to 70.2 percent of the GDP, compared to the 6768 percent of the previous year (The Express Tribune, 2025). This debt is mostly domestic and interest payments take a significant portion of the federal budget by themselves (The Nation, 2025). The economic pressure has been further worsened by climate shocks and supply chain disruptions. Farming production has been destroyed by flooding, and the inflation that had dropped to 4.10 December 2024 has in turn bounced back (The Express Tribune, 2024).

3.4 Security Issues

The security threats continue to dominate the foreign alignments in Pakistan. Militant factions such as Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Baloch separatists still attack military convoys, and infrastructural projects including the Chinese investment. Such attacks impose a lot of pressure on the state resources (Saeed, et al. 2025). Despite the military's ongoing counter-insurgency operations, the escalation of violence in Waziristan in 2025 underscored the fragility of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region (Saeed, et al. 2025). The tension involved in border conflict with Afghanistan has only made matters worse, making it difficult to manage the refugees and their trade across the border (Bangakh, et al. 2024). Meanwhile, the nuclear stance of Pakistan against India remains the focus of the country in its general security policy. As much as nuclear capability is a deterrent, it makes alliances no longer easy since there is increased risk of escalation. To the U.S., the nuclear capabilities of Pakistan pose an added degree of concern with regard to proliferation that impacts the extent to which Washington would be willing to go in its assistance (Adil, Uzzaman, and Hera, 2024; Waqar and Uzzaman, 2025). Under these pressures, Islamabad's options are constrained. It must maintain close security relations with China while also securing U.S. aid and counterterrorism support.

3.5 Technology and Infrastructure in Pakistan

For Pakistan, infrastructure represents a dual-edged asset. Gwadar Port is positioned as the flagship of CPEC and the vehicle for Islamabad's goal of connecting the Arabian Sea to Central Asia as a regional trading centre. Yet operationally, no Pakistani seaport functions at full capacity, constrained by inadequate inland linkages, elevated insurance costs, and ongoing security challenges in Balochistan (Business Recorder, 2025). The increased reliance on China has been further aggravated by the fact that it has been involved in the construction of the surveillance system in Pakistan. In September 2025, an Amnesty International report revealed that Pakistan has been operating systems made by Chinese company the "Lawful Intercept Management System" and the Web Monitoring System to intercept phone conversations and internet traffic (Reuters, 2025). Although the tools reinforce the security of a project and internal security, they also generate a debate over the issue of sovereignty, digital rights, and Pakistan becoming too reliant on the Chinese technology. This dependence is evident in the magnitude of resources that Islamabad has to allocate in ensuring that the investments of foreigners are safeguarded. As an example, there is a Perimetric Security System consisting of 675 cameras installed to protect Chinese workers and facilities in Gwadar (Pakistan Today, 2024).

3.6 Domestic Politics and Stability

Domestic instability continues to deteriorate the quest to attain consistency in the foreign policy of Pakistan. The civil-military tensions, frequent changes in leadership, and recurrent outbursts of street-level activism have continuously weakened the Islamabad's capacity to make strategic commitments

in the long term. Policymakers tend to take a cautious step even where there are concrete economic gains of closer engagement with the United States, because of ingrained discourses of sovereignty and a long-standing sense of anti-Westernism (Shah, Gaho, and Bukhari, 2025).

The environmental shocks have added to this vulnerability. The massive floods that hit Punjab and Sindh provinces in mid-2025 displaced millions of citizens, broke the food-supply chains, and new emergency fiscal reallocations were necessary (Hote & Koike, 2025). Such developments limited the budgetary funds, as well as the confidence of the people in the state to plan and respond to crisis (Jan et al., 2025). To add to this crisis, governmental attempts to limit internet accessibility and increase surveillance systems undermined civil upheaval and brought up serious issues concerning the endurance of democratic leadership in Pakistan (Ahmed et al., 2024). Such internal vulnerabilities cannot but affect the foreign orientations of the foreign-policy of Pakistan. Washington often bases its cooperation on the governance reforms, which leaves a conflict between normative expectations and strategic interests. On the other hand, Beijing significantly underpins the governance issues to the benefit of the infrastructure building and investment priorities (Sial, 2023). This difference highlights the intrinsically different concepts of the role of Pakistan as a strategic partner that are employed by the United States and China.

4. Implications for Pakistan's Foreign Policy and Sovereignty

Systemic lack of economic efficiency and endemic security concerns have restricted the autonomy of the Pakistan's foreign policy. Pakistan's reliance on China to fund infrastructure, develop capital and military hardware has strengthened asymmetric relationships that deny the country manoeuvrability (Ahmed et al., 2025). On the other hand, any attempt to secure concessions in American trade or investment in the vital mineral sectors are usually associated with a set of conditionalities concerning the strategic alignment and governance reforms. The excessive reliance on either of the partners reduces the hedging ability of Pakistan. Pakistan's over reliance on China can limit the opportunities of engagement in the United States, whereas increasing the closeness with Washington can arouse the suspicion of Beijing, which will have to be diplomatically reassured (Khan, 2024). Consequently, the imperative to balance relations between the United States and China constrains Pakistan's sovereign autonomy in external policy formulation.

These external limitations are aggravated with domestic frailties. Investments made by Beijing, especially through CPEC are still susceptible to continuing terrorism and separatists' attacks in Balochistan province (Siddiqui, 2025). The growing cost of project and increasing security threats have generated massive risks for investment. Militancy and refugee flows are ways through which domestic instability transcends boundaries, which increases the level of insecurity in the region (Khan and Ahmed, 2024). Both Beijing and Washington understand Pakistan's fragility and struggle to gain the influence by providing financial aid and security. This rivalry poses the danger of trapping Pakistan in terms of strategic engagements at the expense of its hedging approach. Political instability in Gwadar and other coastal hubs is not merely a domestic concern for Pakistan; it also threatens to disrupt key maritime economic corridors that underpin China's Belt and Road Initiative and broader Indo-Pacific connectivity (Siddiqui, 2025).

A central strategic dilemma facing Pakistan is its unstable economic situation. By the middle of 2025, the total public debt was about 80.5 trillion rupees, making 70 percent of GDP (World Bank, 2025). The cost of debt servicing takes a huge fiscal burden limiting the spending of funds on social welfare and development. It is exhibiting inflation that is expected to be 7.5 percent in FY2026 and is mainly fuelled by high food and energy prices. The balance of payment pressures is exacerbated due to chronic trade deficits, low tax base, and poor export performance (Ahmed, 2025). The high dependency of Islamabad on the usage of the International Monetary Fund, China, and the Gulf states has helped the country to avoid default but at the expense of policy freedom since their requirements as a conditionality limit the economic sovereignty. The disasters caused by climate, such as the

devastating floods which hit Punjab and Sindh in 2025, have further burdened the fiscal ability and necessitated costly emergency responses and foreign aid (Jan et al., 2025).

The security situation is also not more stable. Militant violence is still ongoing in the northwest and Balochistan. The recent high-profile attacks like the 2025 Mastung bus bombing and the suicide attack of Mir Ali highlight the long-term nature of the threat of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Baloch separatists. Even today militant groups still have the potential to carry out advanced operations aimed at attacking the assets of states and China as seen in Operation Baam (Bukhari, 2025). The ongoing unrest, including smuggling, militia infiltration and the offer of safe havens to the extremist groups, along the Durand Line remain to create instability and mutual suspicion between Islamabad and Kabul (Omrani, 2009; Wagner, 2018). Intrinsic governance deficits further increase these external pressures. Endemic corruption, institutional weakness, and the presence of uncontrollable spaces systematically undermine state authority (International Monetary Fund, 2025; Jan et al., 2025). At the same time, civil liberties are increasingly facing opposition. The alleged use of surveillance technologies produced in China to provide mass surveillance and intercept telecommunications have led to some of the most basic issues in terms of theoretical privacy, state transparency, and the sustainability of the democratic establishment in Pakistan (Ahmed et al., 2024; Yilmaz et al., 2025). All these dynamics together shedding light on the structural constraints under which Pakistan has to choose its foreign-policy. The combination of economic precariousness, security weaknesses as well as the inadequacy in governance is what reduces the autonomy of Islamabad as well as the ability to act strategically between Washington and Beijing.

5. Conclusion

The paper concludes that how Pakistan fits into the escalating competition between the United States and China in the Asia-Pacific, a phenomenon that is caused by a combination of geo-strategic realignments, economic vulnerability, security pressure, dependence on technology, and political restraint at home. The discussion demonstrates that Islamabad does not align fully with either great power. Instead, it pursues a selective strategy of balancing and hedging between their respective interests. Thus, by deepening cooperation with China through infrastructure, defence, and trade initiatives — most notably CPEC — while simultaneously pursuing engagement with the United States in critical minerals, trade facilitation, and diplomacy, Pakistan enhances its strategic autonomy. The United States ought to focus on the long-term and stable economic relationships with Pakistan, which should not be conditional upon abrupt governance changes. On the other hand, China would enjoy the advantages of becoming more proactive in the governance and social issues of Pakistan, which would lead to less opposition to CPEC projects in the region, and increased sustainability of the long-term project.

The strategic freedom of Pakistan is limited with the poor administrative organization. High debt obligations, inflationary, sustained trade deficits and dependence on external funding cripple its negotiating capacity using a strong position. That is the way Chinese investments are dealing with critical infrastructure gaps and are strengthening long term dependencies, undermining bargaining leverage. Security issues such as militancy in Balochistan, cross-border issues in Pakistan and other countries among others also complicate this balancing process because it increases the reliance of Pakistan on foreign security support and endangers foreign-based projects. The example of Gwadar port and assistance in digital surveillance infrastructure demonstrate the two-sided character of the external involvement like providing connectivity and development but also increasing the worry over the statehood, surveillance, and homegrown instability.

In the present geopolitical context, Pakistan is driven by multiple strategic imperatives intended to expand its policy space and preserve room for manoeuvre. To begin with, Pakistan must secure fiscal resilience by expanding its tax base, curbing revenue leakages, and maintaining transparent and sustainable debt practices, especially in relation to Chinese-financed projects. To mitigate strategic vulnerability, Islamabad needs to decrease its dependence on bilateral financing from the United

States and China by broadening its funding base to include multilateral development banks, private investors, and regional partners. The partial reinforcement of security systems in the area around foreign-financed infrastructure, particularly in volatile places, like Balochistan, requires the improvement of intelligence efforts, focused development projects, and genuine incorporation of locals. Extensive participation of local communities in the development of key infrastructure projects would not only help to counter complaints that militant groups use to recruit and financially sustain them. The ability to decrease reliance on external technological suppliers and the increasing strategic independence can be achieved through investments in indigenous technological capabilities and strengthened regulatory frameworks, especially in the fields of artificial intelligence, semiconductors, and renewable energy.

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