

Geopolitics of Great Power Competition in South Asia: Evaluating Pakistan's Strategic Position between the United States and China

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ABSTRACT

*This Research explores the geostrategic rivalry between the United States of America and China in South Asia and its impacts on Pakistan. It begins by tracing the origin and historical evolution of US-China relations in the south Asian region, with a focus on their shift from cooperation to rivalry due to ideological differences and the influence of the proxy War. This research paper delves into the realm of economic power politics, military technology, exploratory the digital technological advancements in China and the United States and their role in shaping the strategic landscape of South Asia. A particular emphasis is placed on Pakistan's role in this context and the security challenges it faces vis-a-vis the US-China rivalry. This paper evaluates the repercussions of this rivalry on Pakistan's geopolitical and economic positioning. It analyzes Pakistan's diplomatic efforts to balance its relations with the two global powers, highlighting the complexities involved. The economic opportunities and challenges for Pakistan, including the impact of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on the nation's financial resources and international borrowing are also considered. The study addresses Pakistan's security and strategic considerations, particularly its involvement in the Afghan peace process and the implications for its defense posture and military engagements. It further explores Pakistan's relations with key regional actors, particularly India, in the context of the U.S.-China rivalry. This research is qualitative in nature as various online resources, books, articles and reports published in international relations are studied. This research paper provides an inclusive analysis of the US-China geostrategic rivalry in South Asia and its multifaceted implications for Pakistan within the context of the historical evolution of this rivalry, the role of military technology, and the intricate dynamics of Pakistan's geopolitical, economic, and security challenges within the context of great power's competition. The findings inform policy recommendations for Pakistan and shed light on the future prospects and challenges in the US-China rivalry in South Asia.*

**Keywords:** US–China rivalry, South Asia geopolitics, Pakistan foreign policy, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), regional security dynamics

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

South Asia has become a major hotspot in the growing strategic conflict between the US and China. The region has almost a quarter of the world population and is at the intersection of the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Indo-Pacific, which makes it of geopolitical and geoeconomic significance of the highest

order. The south Asian region is becoming the strategic necessity in the changing world order because of sea lanes in the Indian ocean, energy routes, and emerging markets. The US perceives South Asia through its Indo-Pacific strategy to cement alliances, especially with India, to counterbalance the emergence of China. On the other hand, China has increased its presence by building infrastructure, trading integration, and strategic connection programs like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and has intensified its involvement with other nations such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. This has led to South Asia being a convergence and a contest theatre where regional conflicts interact with great-power rivalries. The changing US-China competition is not just redefining alliances in the region, but is also affecting the foreign policy decisions and strategies of the states in South Asia as they have to walk the fine line between co-operation and caution. South Asia occupies a region of immense strategic importance, situated at the junction of East Asia, Central Asia, West Asia, and the Middle East. The area hosts vital energy transit routes and includes several of the world's fastest-growing and largest economies (Saboor, Ali, & Bhutto, 2022). In recent years, South Asia has emerged as a central arena for the intensifying geostrategic rivalry between the United States and China. This rivalry poses considerable challenges to the security and stability of the region, particularly for states like Pakistan. Navigating relations between these two major powers is critical for Pakistan's national security, economic development, and overall geopolitical stance. While the competition creates opportunities for economic expansion, it also heightens concerns regarding strategic dependencies and regional tensions, necessitating careful diplomatic engagement (Javed, Waseem, & Rafique, 2026).

The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, significantly heightened global attention toward South Asia's geostrategic relevance (Hussain & Khan, 2025). In the post-9/11 context, the region became a focal point for both the United States and China due to its strategic location. Pakistan's significance increased as a key actor in Sino-US strategic balancing, with its long-term alignment of interests with China reinforcing their cooperative ties. This strategic positioning has also enabled China to expand its economic and energy ambitions into areas traditionally influenced by the United States (Khizar & Hassan, 2024).

In This study discuss the Sino-US rivalry within the broader South Asian context, examining the dynamics of both powers' involvement in Southwest and Central Asia, while focusing on the implications for Pakistan's security. The United States' Pivot to Asia strategy encompasses the region from the Persian Gulf to the South China Sea, underscoring the strategic importance of the Asia-Pacific for Washington's economic, political, and security objectives. Pakistan's geostrategic profile is shaped by multiple factors proximity to the Strait of Hormuz, adjacency to India and China, access to the Arabian Sea, and location near contested energy corridors in Central Asia (Saboor et al., 2022; Javed et al., 2026).

China's rise has revitalized its engagement with Pakistan across multiple dimensions. Pakistan is a central component of China's Western Development Strategy and serves as a key energy corridor, a strategic counterbalance to India, and a crucial segment of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Hussain & Khan, 2025). Historically, great power involvement has directly influenced both conflict and cooperation in South Asia, the bipolar international system once intensified Indo-Pakistani security competition through alignment with respective global powers. Today, the competing dynamics of China and the United States continue to affect Pakistan's regional security environment. China's growing influence challenges US dominance in South Asia, prompting Pakistan to navigate complex security implications (Khizar & Hassan, 2024). Sino-US interactions in South Asia post-9/11 illuminates their impact on Pakistan's security calculus. While the United States and China sometimes cooperate, their rivalry remains pronounced, shaping Pakistan's strategic choices. As US-India relations strengthen, China's support for Pakistan intensifies, influencing regional stability and reinforcing the need for Pakistan to adopt nuanced strategies in addressing its security concerns amid a complex geostrategic landscape (Saboor et al., 2022; Javed et al., 2026).

The twenty-first century has witnessed the re-emergence of great-power competition, particularly between the United States and the People's Republic of China. This rivalry, driven by economic, technological, and military dimensions, extends well beyond bilateral tensions to reshape the geopolitical architecture of the Indo-Pacific and South Asia (Javed et al., 2026). Historically, the United States maintained primacy through alliances and security partnerships following the Cold War, while China has risen rapidly as an economic and strategic actor, promoting connectivity through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its flagship component, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Saboor, Ali & Bhutto, 2022; Khizar & Hassan, 2024). Within South Asia, this competition has complicated regional dynamics, as traditional alignments realign in response to shifting security perceptions and power balances. In this context, Pakistan's strategic position anchored by longstanding ties with both powers has become increasingly central, influencing its foreign policy choices and national interests.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The US-China great power race, the breakdown of the Pakistan-US relations, and the establishment of the Pakistan-China relations are widely discussed. Nevertheless, the implication of the US-China rivalry on the foreign policy of Pakistan is a little explored research topic. A lot of literature recognizes the important geostrategic location of Pakistan in Asia and how it can act as a pivot in regional power politics. In spite of this acknowledgement, the immediate geopolitical effects of the US-China rivalry on Pakistan are under-researched. This paper aims to address this gap by examining the impact of the competition between the two superpowers on Pakistani foreign policy and strategic decisions.

A literature review involves examining existing scholarly work to identify research gaps, related concepts, and theoretical frameworks relevant to a phenomenon, while establishing connections between data, concepts, and their impact (Webster & Watson, 2002). This review focuses on the US-China geostrategic rivalry in South Asia and its implications for Pakistan, drawing upon recent studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Lokman, Daud, and Ping (2021) argue that the escalating US-China rivalry in South Asia poses substantial challenges for Pakistan. Their work emphasizes Pakistan's delicate balancing act between the two powers, particularly in light of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While the BRI offers economic growth and infrastructure development, it also raises concerns regarding strategic influence, debt sustainability, and sovereignty, highlighting the relevance of offensive realism in analyzing Pakistan's strategic positioning.

Historical perspectives are central to understanding the rivalry. Anwar et al. (2020) provide a detailed account of US-China interactions in South Asia, showing how Cold War dynamics and evolving geopolitical interests laid the groundwork for contemporary competition. Similarly, Farooq (2019) examines the triangular relationship between Pakistan, China, and the United States during the Cold War, emphasizing the continuity of strategic alliances and interests that shape today's regional dynamics.

China's rise as a global power has significantly influenced US foreign policy in South Asia. Liao (2020) analyzes the US response to China's growing assertiveness, particularly through strategic partnerships with India to counterbalance Beijing's influence. Westcott (2018) highlights how the longstanding Sino-Indian border dispute impacts the broader US-China rivalry, affecting regional security and stability. In this context, Pakistan's strategic choices are informed by both its historical rivalry with India and its alignment with China to manage security dilemmas (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Smaller states in South Asia are similarly affected. Gong (2021) examines Nepal's navigation between the US and China, illustrating how smaller countries must balance economic benefits from China's BRI with

security assurances from the United States. Liao (2019) extends this analysis to the wider South Asian region, exploring how countries make strategic decisions under the pressures of great-power competition.

Regional cooperation is also influenced by the rivalry. Ahmed, Ahmed, and Bhatnagar (2020) investigate SAARC's role amid US-China tensions, highlighting challenges in harmonizing member states' divergent interests. Choudhury (2021) explores the economic dimension, particularly trade and investment challenges and opportunities arising from the BRI and the US Indo-Pacific strategy. Abdul Basit et al. (2020) examine Afghanistan's security dynamics, showing how US-China competition indirectly shapes regional stability and India-Pakistan relations.

Historical studies further contextualize the rivalry. Goh (2018) and De Graaff and Van Apeldoorn (2019) highlight how ideological differences and Cold War-era alignments contributed to the emergence of the US-China strategic competition in South Asia. Khan (2020) situates Afghanistan as a critical arena for contemporary rivalry, comparing modern geopolitical tensions to the historical "Great Game." These analyses underscore the strategic significance of Pakistan and Afghanistan as pivotal actors in the US-China contest for influence.

Collectively, this body of literature highlights that the US-China rivalry in South Asia is shaped by historical legacies, territorial disputes, and strategic imperatives, with Pakistan occupying a central role. These studies illuminate the intricate interplay of power, security, and economic considerations, emphasizing the need for nuanced foreign policy strategies to maintain regional stability.

Recent studies examine how smaller South Asian states navigate the US-China rivalry while pursuing national interests. Titumir and Rahman (2021) explore the implications of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for Bangladesh, highlighting the country's strategic efforts to capitalize on infrastructure development projects while maintaining stable relations with the United States and other global actors. Their analysis demonstrates how smaller states leverage agency to maximize economic benefits from great-power initiatives without becoming entangled in broader geopolitical competition.

Pardesi (2020) investigates Sri Lanka's foreign policy dilemmas in the context of US-China rivalry, focusing on the country's strategic location in the Indian Ocean. The study reveals how Sri Lanka balances economic and security interests between China and the United States while safeguarding sovereignty. Through interviews and policy analysis, the research emphasizes the challenges faced by smaller states in maintaining autonomy amid great-power competition, highlighting the nuanced diplomatic strategies employed to avoid being caught in the crossfire of intensified regional rivalry.

The broader literature also examines potential conflict dynamics between the US and China. Allison (2017) introduces the concept of Thucydides's Trap, suggesting that rising powers (China) and established powers (the US) face a heightened risk of conflict, including war. Rashid (2021) analyzes how technological advancements in military capabilities affect power projection in South Asia, emphasizing Pakistan's security considerations amid escalating US-China competition. Similarly, Khan (2016) and Madan (2021) discuss strategic options for Pakistan, underscoring the need for a careful balance in foreign policy to navigate competing pressures while maintaining regional stability.

Reports from the Senior Study Group on China and South Asia for the United States Institute of Peace (USIP, 2020) further highlight the risks associated with the rivalry, including the potential for regional crises, heightened conflicts, and an escalating nuclear arms race. These studies collectively emphasize the strategic importance of Pakistan within the US-China competition and the broader implications for South Asian security and economic interests.

While existing scholarship offers extensive analyses of the US-China geostrategic rivalry, most studies focus on macro-level implications or larger actors such as India or the Indo-Pacific region (Allison, 2017; Rashid, 2021). There is a noticeable lack of comprehensive research on the rivalry from Pakistan's perspective, despite its unique geopolitical positioning and long-standing ties with both China and the United States. Previous studies insufficiently address the specific challenges and opportunities Pakistan faces amid increasing great-power competition.

Additionally, although the BRI has been widely studied, there is limited research examining how China's BRI projects, and the US response to them, influence Pakistan's national interests and foreign policy decisions. Specifically, the impact on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its economic and security implications for Pakistan remains underexplored. Similarly, the literature does not fully assess the potential consequences of US-China rivalry on regional security, including risks of escalation between nuclear-armed states in South Asia.

To address these gaps, this study investigates the US-China rivalry in South Asia from Pakistan's vantage point, analyzing the strategic options available to Pakistan, and assessing the potential effects on regional stability and security. By focusing on Pakistan, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between great-power competition and South Asian security dynamics.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The growing great power rivalry between the United States and China has enhanced the geopolitical significance of South Asia. Pakistan has become a major state in this competition because of its strategic position, and regional alliances like US-India and Pakistan-China are becoming more apparent through CPEC. Nonetheless, it is important that Pakistan upholds a delicate and friendly relationship with both powers since its economy and security are weak.

The intensification of the US-China geostrategic rivalry in South Asia poses complex and multifaceted challenges for Pakistan. The problem explored in this study lies in understanding how this rivalry affects Pakistan's diplomatic positioning, economic dependencies, and security strategies. As the United States deepens its engagement with regional partners such as India and expands its Indo-Pacific strategy, Pakistan is compelled to reassess its traditional reliance on China while also seeking to maintain constructive relations with Washington. This dynamic generates strategic ambiguity and pressures Islamabad to navigate competing external influences that have direct implications for regional stability, economic development, and national sovereignty (Saboor et al., 2022; Hussain & Khan, 2025).

### **Research Objectives**

The main objectives of this research are as follow:

1. Analyze the drivers of the US-China Geostrategic Rivalry in South Asia, including economic, military, and political factors.
2. Assess the implications of this rivalry for the stability and security of South Asia, including the risks and opportunities for Pakistan.
3. Evaluate the strategies that Pakistan can adopt to mitigate the risks posed by this rivalry and capitalize on the opportunities it presents.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the main economic, military, and political drivers behind the United States–China geostrategic rivalry in South Asia?
2. How does the United States–China strategic competition influence regional stability and security dynamics in South Asia, particularly in terms of risks and opportunities for Pakistan?
3. What strategies can Pakistan adopt to effectively manage the challenges and opportunities arising from the United States–China rivalry in South Asia?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study examines the current great power rivalry between the United States and China based on theoretical approaches. It explores the impact of this competition on the existing global order. The paper especially assesses how it affects the relation between Pakistan and the US and Pakistan and China. Lastly, it suggests policy alternatives that Pakistan should adopt to sustain balanced relations with the two powers as a national interest. This study contributes to the literature on great-power politics by highlighting Pakistan's role in the evolving US–China competition. South Asia remains a critical theatre for geopolitical interests, and Pakistan's strategic decisions have broader implications for regional security and international relations (Saboor et al., 2022). Understanding these dynamics is crucial for policymakers, scholars, and regional stakeholders seeking to anticipate future trajectories of power competition and to develop strategies that bolster peace and cooperation. The findings offer insights into how middle powers can balance external pressures while advancing national interests in an era marked by strategic competition.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Norealism was introduced by Kenneth Waltz in *Theory of International Politics* in 1979, and it was a sophisticated form of realism and a critique of Hans Morgenthau. Neorealism maintains that states are driven to seek power and security by the anarchic nature of the international system and not human nature. Without a supranational authority, states depend on self-help and the maximization of power, exacerbating geopolitical competition and putting small states under pressure in great power competition. This study adopts Neo-Realism, a prominent strand of the Realist theory in international relations, as its guiding theoretical framework. International relations theories, concepts, and paradigms evolve over time and across contexts, and their relevance and interpretation vary according to the socio-political environment (Waltz, 1979). Therefore, this research focuses on the operational application of Neo-Realism rather than engaging in complex philosophical debates. Additionally, this approach extends beyond classical Realism by incorporating regional and domestic factors, recognizing that internal political dynamics significantly shape states' responses to external power rivalries. Scholars such as Hawitt (2005) argue that examining great-power competition in developing regions without accounting for domestic political contexts limits the explanatory power and practical relevance of the analysis.

The intensifying US-China geostrategic competition in South Asia has emerged as a critical factor influencing regional dynamics, with far-reaching consequences for Pakistan. Neo-Realism provides a lens to examine the strategic power interactions between these major powers and their implications for Pakistan's foreign policy, economic interests, and regional stability (Mearsheimer, 2001). Pakistan occupies a central position in this strategic landscape, where its decisions carry significant consequences for navigating the balance of power. On one hand, Pakistan's partnership with China offers substantial economic benefits, particularly through initiatives such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which enhances infrastructure development, trade connectivity, and economic growth. On the other hand,

these ties complicate relations with the United States, a traditional partner whose strategic priorities in South Asia sometimes diverge from Pakistan's interests (Saboor, Ali, & Bhutto, 2022).

Both the United States and China pursue diplomatic, economic, and military engagements across South Asia as mechanisms to counterbalance each other's influence. Pakistan's strategic location, coupled with its historical alignment with China, positions it as a key factor in this regional power contest. Meanwhile, US-Pakistan relations have experienced fluctuations, shaped by shifting strategic priorities and security concerns. Neo-Realism's concept of the security dilemma is particularly relevant in this context, as Pakistan's measures to enhance its security vis-à-vis India including its alignment with China are perceived by the United States as potential challenges to its regional objectives (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). Consequently, Pakistan's strategic choices reflect the necessity of managing a complex security environment while balancing the competing interests of these global powers.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Research design refers to an organized plan that aids researchers to combine various elements of research in a logical and coherent manner to answer research questions. It also enables the gathering and analyzing of data. This research paper explores the scope of the US-China great power rivalry and its implications on world politics, South Asia, and the foreign policy of Pakistan. To this end, descriptive, explanatory and exploratory research techniques are used in the study.

This study will adopt an inductive research approach, which emphasizes developing an in-depth understanding of the problem before initiating data collection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Such an approach facilitates a systematic and exploratory examination of the US-China geostrategic rivalry in South Asia and its implications for Pakistan. By first establishing a thorough comprehension of the subject, the study can identify key variables, patterns, and interconnections that influence Pakistan's strategic positioning within this rivalry (Yin, 2018).

The primary research strategy will be a case study, allowing for a detailed and context-specific investigation of the US-China competition and its effects on Pakistan. This method enables an intensive analysis of selected organizations and individuals engaged in foreign policy matters, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and faculty members from International Relations departments at major universities. The case study approach is particularly valuable for capturing the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of key stakeholders, providing nuanced insights into the dynamics of the rivalry (Stake, 1995).

### **Data Collection and Sources**

This research employs a qualitative descriptive design, drawing on secondary sources such as peer-reviewed journal articles, policy analyses, government reports, and reputable news outlets. Key sources include works from regional journals (Pakistan Journal of International Affairs, Journal of Media Horizons, Pakistan Journal of Social Science Review) and international analysis on strategic competition in South Asia (Saboor et al., 2022; Hussain & Khan, 2025; Javed et al., 2026). Contemporary news reporting on bilateral engagements and strategic developments (e.g., CPEC expansion, US strategic policy shifts) provides context and real-time illustration of the evolving environment. This mix of academic and media sources enables triangulation of evidence and a comprehensive understanding of trends.

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

The study analyzes qualitative data through thematic content analysis. Primary themes identified include: strategic interests of external powers, diplomatic alignments, economic cooperation and contestation, and

security dilemmas. These themes are examined to explain the complex interactions between global powers and Pakistan's response strategies. Secondary data were synthesized to discern patterns and implications, allowing for informed discussion and logical conclusions about the geostrategic environment in South Asia.

### **Turbulent Pakistan–US Relations in the Foreseeable Future**

The United States and Pakistan relations have always been characterized by pragmatism rather than permanence. The bilateral relationship is often characterized by analysts as a marriage of convenience, where the depth of engagement and its warmth are the result of strategic needs as opposed to the common sense or cultural affinity. Following the creation of a diplomatic relationship, Pakistan and the US have been going through the history of rapprochement, cooperation, and estrangement. Though there have been times of cooperation, they have always been controlled by the overall regional interests of Washington and have had Pakistan mostly playing a reactive role. The history of this transactional relationship dates to the Cold War when geostrategic position of Pakistan drew into the US Asian calculus. Pakistan joined the United States under CENTO (Central Treaty Organization) and Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), providing access, intelligence and military assistance in exchange of strategic backing. The US assistance in the 1965 and 1971 wars with India was based on a broader geopolitical agenda rather than the immediate security needs of Pakistan. These swings underscored the fact that the bilateral partnership was inherently instrumental in nature. The trend of strategic convergence peaked with the Afghanistan-Soviet war (1979-1989), where Pakistan was the frontal state in the US-led campaign against Soviet influence in the area. The Mujahideen campaign was abetted by Islamabad, which provided invaluable logistical support and intelligence, and Washington provided massive military assistance and financial support. However, immediately when US interests were fulfilled, and the Soviet menace passed, American focus moved in another direction. Pakistan was left to bear the resultant instability in the region as well as domestic issues which highlights one of the underlying dynamics, namely, US involvement escalates when its interests are threatened but do not scale up when they are achieved or refocused. This history of exploitative interaction is a classic depiction of the underlying asymmetry in the relations between Pakistan and the US. Whereas the United States has been forward-looking in its regional interests, Pakistan has tended to be a reactive actor whose actions are informed by external agendas and not self-directed policy. All these experiences lead to one central truth: Pakistan is merely as important to the US in strategic terms as immediate geopolitical calculations, not as a long-term commitment to an alliance.

### **The post-9/11 Era: Cooperation and Strain**

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks led to a new, but still rather uncomfortable, partnership between Pakistan and the United States. Being close to Afghanistan placed Pakistan in a strategic position of Washington Global War on Terror leading to massive US aid, military co-operation and political endorsement. These actions supported the transactional nature of the bilateral relationship and proved that it was still the strategic interests that characterized engagement and not a long-term partnership. But the aftermath of 9/11 also revealed the underlying structural tensions in this alliance. Although Pakistan was offering critical strategic and logistical assistance, US drone attacks in tribal areas of Pakistan created dissatisfaction among the locals and also the issue of national sovereignty. Washington often put its work on counterterrorism ahead of the internal sensitivities of Pakistan, a move that cemented the belief that the Pakistani interests were subordinate to the larger American strategic imperatives. This time brought up a repetitive pattern in the bilateral relationship: cooperation is conditional and asymmetrical and is based on the short-term interests of Washington as opposed to a commitment. Pakistan has in the last ten years had its strategic charts complicated by the US relationship with India which is changing. US-India civil nuclear deal and the strengthening of military ties via the US-India strategic partnership have helped place India at the core of the Indo-pacific strategy by Washington. On the one hand, even though Pakistan remains a trusted ally in counterterrorism and stability in the region, the Indian promotion of India to a higher level

indicates an implicit and yet meaningful change to the US strategic course, which casts doubts on the ability and extent of its relationship with Islamabad. To Pakistan, such developments highlight the nature of its relationship with the United States which is volatile in nature. The US participation is seen to be based on situations of extremity but not a long lasting alliance structure. This instability is further heightened by the fact that Washington has been supporting India in its bigger plan of balancing the regional powers of China. Consequently, Pakistan will continue to experience the turbulence in relation to the US and the US strategic thinking will tend to find American India as the counterbalance to China and therefore Pakistan will be playing a rather peripheral and reactive role. Others structural reasons indicate that this turbulence is bound to continue. First, South Asia has now been transformed into a theatre of wider geopolitical rivalry, and the US, India, and China have common or even competing strategic interests. The orientation of Pakistan by China with its projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as compared to the close bond between Washington and India is making the triangular relationship that thwarts security calculations of the region. Second, national priorities do not fit together: the US is more concerned with counterterrorism, regional stability, and the India-China balance, but Pakistan is more concerned with border security, Kashmir, and counterinsurgency at home. Third, the domestic political factor in the United States cause a change in policy which is not based on a long-term strategic focus but on the election and legislative cycles. Lastly, the mistrust of the past still defines bilateral perception: Pakistan interprets the US activities as opportunistic, and a question of reliability and commitment exists on the part of Pakistan, which restricts the possibility of a lasting partnership. By these structural realities, Pakistan has both challenges and opportunities. To the one hand, the country will have to struggle with the uncertainty and possible marginalization in its interaction with the United States. Conversely, such an environment promotes the development of strategic independence and partnership diversification. The dependency can be mitigated through strengthening relations with China as well as interacting with emerging regional power as well as maintaining a wary stance with the US yet remaining flexible in foreign policy. In addition, the resilience to foreign turbulence can be strengthened by making investments in native defence means, conventional forces, nuclear deterrence, and new technologies, such as cyber and unmanned systems. Active diplomacy is also important. Pakistan needs to put its national interests into clear words, undertake confidence-building initiatives, as well as use multilateral forums to alleviate bilateral tensions. The unpredictable turns and changes in US engagement require the need to ensure the maintenance of strategic coherence and unity within the nation by means of domestic consensus on the foreign policy priorities. Pakistan can manage these turbulence in its relationship with Washington by balancing diplomatic prudence, defence modernisation and strategic diversification and protect its sovereignty and influence regionally.

### **Structural Drivers of Future Turbulence**

There are some structural premises which indicate that the volatility in relations between Pakistan and the US will continue. South Asia has turned out to become a strategic battlefield between the United States, India, and China. Although Pakistan still maintains historical and strategic relationship with China, especially via China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and defence relations, much of the US perceives Pakistan within the context of an India-based strategic calculus. This three-way relationship in which Pakistan, India, and China are connected in a web of overlapping security- and economic-related interests increases the likelihood of periodical cooperation interrupted by the elements of mistrust and strategic reticence. This instability is also increased by the differences in national priorities. Counterterrorism, regional stability, and the balance of power between India and China are the top priorities of the United States. By the contrast, Pakistan focuses on Kashmir, border security, and internal counterinsurgency. These disparities in the strategic preferences allow a natural tension between the two countries because Washington and Islamabad tend to view regional security matters at cross purposes, drawing the extent of complete harmonisation on the same page. There are also domestic politics that are inherent in the United States and contribute greatly to bilateral dynamics. The Congress, elections, and the opinion of the citizens often affect the aid, military collaboration, and diplomacy. Such variability, which is less shaped by any

long-term strategic consistency than by domestic political needs, has long been the bane of US policy towards Pakistan, and its continuity and predictability. After some time, the repetitive patterns of engagement and disengagement have developed mistrust towards each other. The actions of the US are often viewed as opportunistic because they may seek to achieve short term strategic aims but not long term relationship development. On the other hand, the US has expressed doubts on the dependability of Pakistan especially regarding counterterrorism promises and implementation. Such mutual suspicions provide a structural obstacle to the further development of the relationship, restricting the possibilities of long-term and strategic cooperation.

### **Implications for Pakistan**

Considering these structural facts, Pakistan needs to refocus its foreign policy and strategic posture in order to maneuver through the natural volatility of the relationship between the United States and Pakistan. The use of Washington as a key security guarantor is no longer an option. Rather, it is important that Pakistan intensifies its historic relationships with China, keeps on strong regional relationships and looks into the possibility of engaging with other new emerging powers like Turkey and Russia. This kind of diversification may offer alternative sources of security making it less dependent on a single outside patron and will help hedge the risks in changing American priorities. The creation of native defense forces is also of great significance. There is a necessity to invest in conventional troops, nuclear deterrence, and the emergent technologies such as cyber capabilities and unmanned systems. Trusting too much on outside powers leaves the national security prone to the vagaries of foreign interest affecting Pakistan. Pakistan could enjoy a lot of autonomy in its defense and deterrence position by developing self-reliance and making sure that continuity is not compromised by outside forces. Along with modernization of the military, Pakistan needs to pursue proactive diplomacy to cope with the times of tension with the United States. This involves the ability to express national interests clearly, taking on confidence-building steps, and using multilateral forums to enliven the process of friction reduction and misunderstanding prevention. Strategic diplomacy is a stabilizing instrument, which can be used to cope with the episodic turbulence without sacrificing national priorities. Domestic consensus is also very important. Since the US involvement is a sensitive issue in the history of the country, Pakistan has to create an extensive support base on its foreign policy. The control of the perceptions of the people makes the nation go through times of bilateral turbulence and makes the policy decisions more legitimate. A knowledgeable and cohesive domestic policy offers a cushion against international pressures and a bargaining point at the world arena. The recent intensification of the US-India relations point to the fact that, in the future the relationship between Pakistan and the US will only be turbulent and conditional, with periods of cooperation between them being interspersed with periodic strategic deviations. The structural factors in support of this volatility include power rivalry in the region, incompatibility of security interests, internal politicking in the US, and the perception of trustworthiness. All these combined indicate that Pakistan should have a cautious, pragmatic and future-oriented approach to its strategies. In the case of Pakistan, the way ahead would be to have a thorough examination of the strategic environment. Pakistan-US relations are predictably turbulent, and diversifying partnerships, modernizing their defense, developing strategic independence, and strengthening the resilience of the diplomatic process are key steps in managing the expected turbulence in the relations. Finally, the future of security and stability of Pakistan will be determined by how it can fit into the changing global priorities as it tries to protect national interests and stay flexible strategically in a rapidly growing regional and global environment.

### **Pakistan and China are Strategic Partners**

The relationships between Pakistan and China have shown a positive curve since the formalization of diplomatic relations between the two countries, despite the fluctuations of the regional political situation and changes in the leadership in both states. However, unlike most bilateral relationships that are limited

within and through certain sectors, the Pakistan-China relationship has paid off in several fields, which include trade, defense and diplomacy. The economic integration is in the form of China being one of the largest trading partners to Pakistan. China has sold a lot of weaponry and military technology to Pakistan in the defense industry than the United States, and this has enhanced the strategic capabilities of Islamabad. At the international level, China has been a firm supporter of Pakistan on key world matters on a diplomatic level. Markedly, the initial veto that China made following its acquisition of a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) was to obstruct the entry of Bangladesh which was an indication of its dedication to the national interests of Pakistan. The two-way relationship has reached a new strategic stage because of the inauguration of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a 62 billion-infrastructure and power project. CPEC is not only enhancing the economic relations, but also strengthening the strategic collaboration between Pakistan and China, a partnership that has become strong and multidimensional, going beyond the old-style diplomacy and showing a long-term cooperation in the region. The strategic environment of Pakistan is complicated in the environment of the great-power rivalry that is constantly ongoing and increasingly confrontational and exists between the United States and China. The most reasonable way to pursue is to strike a balance between balancing strategies and outright band wagoning in order to protect its national interests. This method is also known as hedging strategy; it entails a mix of both cooperative and cautious policies which enable a smaller or middle power to coordinate its contacts with two rival major powers at the same time. Hedging allows Pakistan to gain the maximum flexibility in strategy. Through an interaction with both the US and China, Islamabad will be able to enjoy the economic, military and diplomatic advantages of each and reduce the risks involved in one-sidedness. This two-track strategy will enable Pakistan to change its policies dynamically with new regional and global priorities, becoming less vulnerable in an unstable international system. The viability of hedging is also supported by the current change of course of the Pakistani foreign policy. Historically based on geopolitical and traditional security issues, it has become clear that Pakistan has given a renewed focus on geoeconomics as an overriding factor in its strategic calculus. Such efforts as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) can be viewed as the illustration of such a transition that has been combining economic growth with strategic alliance. Simultaneously, Pakistan is sustained to maintain operative relations with the United States in other domains like counterterrorism and regional security which denote an adaptive and calculated foreign policy. The situation of hedging is the most viable and sustainable since the great-power competition is a complex situation and Pakistan being a middle power does not have all the resources to match the US. It enables Islamabad to play without taking risks, ensure national sovereignty and engage in economic growth without being coerced into a single course. Simply put, hedging balances the twin demands of collaboration and caution and this presents a framework of strategic thinking that Pakistan has to operate within, to protect its interests in a very dynamic and competitive global system.

### **Key Findings: Pakistan in the US–China Great Power Competition**

The classic definition of a great power is a state that has enormous economic resources, unparalleled military strengths, and the ability to influence the world political and security agenda. China is a great power according to these metrics. Its fast economic development, military prowess, and growing sway in the world institutions are an indication that it means a threat to the world order that has been dominated by the US. The advanced military technology of China such as A2/AD systems, DF-21/DF-26 ballistic missiles that are commonly referred to as air ship killer is a direct threat to the US strategic domination. China has surpassed the US in the major indicators in the economic context, such as purchasing power parity (PPP), contribution to world growth, and trade partnerships. One might be able to study the US-China great power struggle through the prism of offensive realism wherein the emerging powers are bound to create strategic rivalry among established hegemonies. Within the last 15 years, the United States has tried to maintain the status quo in the liberal form of the international order whereas China has gone on a path of trying to remodel or possibly create a different international order. The period after the financial crisis of 2008 can be termed as a turning point; China became more proactive in terms of global geopolitics as it is no longer

willing to acquiesce with the wishes of the US and Washington started crafting containment policies. The Pivot to Asia concept by the Obama administration was a good example of the multi-lateral method of isolating China in the region whereas the unilateral confrontational policy was not as effective as the Trump administration. In the management of the rise of China, the Biden administration has tended rather to revert to a multilateral approach, which was used by Obama. China has responded by using both economic and institutional instruments in order to exert its influence. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the formation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the active participation via BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) are some of the initiatives that put the US-led economic and political systems into question. Such moves do not only widen the international influence of China, but also provide alternative institutional structures to bypass the conventional structures that are Western dominated. The US-China rivalry has also changed regional alliances. The strategic alliance between India and the US has been enhanced as well as the bonds between Pakistan and China have been strengthened. The fact that Russia is warming up to Pakistan and freezing up to India also shows the changeable nature of alliances as a reaction to the great-power politics. Such changes highlight the realist doctrine which asserts that states seek national interests rather than lasting friendships and hostilities in the international system. In this international setting, the relationship between Pakistan and the US can be seen as the trend of expedient involvement that has traditionally characterized bilateral relationship. The term marriage of convenience is an appropriate term to define the relationship since 1949. Cooperation has consistently been at its highest point when US regional interests were at risk as evident in the case of the Cold War and the post-9/11 era when Pakistan strategic location played the key role that was crucial to the success of the Global War on Terror. Nonetheless, the relations have gone wrong on several occasions as the US priorities changed over time, as was observed in cases of the drone strikes in Pakistan, the Osama bin Laden operation, and in the Salala post incident. On the other hand, the relations between Pakistan and China have been very stable and profound. This alliance has spread in terms of trade, defense and diplomacy, and it has proved to be resilient regardless of changes in the politics in the region as well as changes in leadership. China has become the biggest trading partner of Pakistan since the level of trade has increased to more than 14.5 billion in 2020 compared to 85 million in 1952. China has sold more than 17.2 billion TIV of arms to Pakistan almost on a 2-1 basis as compared to those supplied by the US. China has been a consistent advocate of Pakistan diplomatically at international stage including the UN Security Council and other multilateral institutions and its long-term investment is also cemented by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The present strategic dilemma in Pakistan is due to a changing global and regional situation. Inclination of the US will also exacerbate the US-China relationship whilst conforming solely to China may instigate wrath of Washington and even infiltrate entry to very important global economic institutions. US great power rivalry with China, especially in the Indo-Pacific, places Pakistan in the situation when it is not in a position to govern the systemic pressures but has to go through them wisely. The hedging policy stands out as the most viable foreign policy to be applied to Pakistan. Through a balanced approach to both the US and China, Pakistan will be able to enjoy maximum economic and strategic security without taking risks of excessive reliance on one great power. Hedging will enable the Islamabad to have a degree of strategic flexibility in ensuring that it balances relations with the rival powers without jeopardizing national interests. This will be in keeping with the current approaches where the foreign policy of Pakistan has undergone a paradigm shift to no longer be a purely security-oriented approach but instead a geoeconomics-oriented one, which places an emphasis on the economic development and connectivity and strategic alliances as opposed to the traditional security concerns. Finally, the foreign policy of Pakistan must focus on stability and strategic independence, as well as the multilateral involvement. Through prudent negotiations of the US-China antagonism, capitalizing on its alliances, and investment in its domestic economic and defense capabilities, Pakistan is able to safeguard its sovereignty, give itself a firmer regional standing and guarantee long-term national security in a dynamic international context.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **US and China: Strategic Interests in South Asia**

The United States pursues strategic objectives in South Asia to maintain its global influence and counter China's expanding power. Key elements include strengthening security partnerships (e.g., with India and ASEAN states as part of the Indo-Pacific strategy) and promoting a rules-based regional order (Khizar & Hassan, 2024). Conversely, China's approach emphasizes economic connectivity through BRI and deepening defense and infrastructure cooperation with countries like Pakistan (Saboor et al., 2022; Javed et al., 2026). Pakistan's engagement with China, especially via CPEC, exemplifies how Beijing's investment-led diplomacy enhances its strategic foothold.

### **Pakistan's Strategic Dilemma**

Pakistan faces a balancing act between sustaining its strategic partnership with China and managing its relationship with the United States. Deepening US-India cooperation under the Indo-Pacific framework complicates Islamabad's security calculus, pushing it to hedge while avoiding alienation of either major power (Hussain & Khan, 2025). Simultaneously, economic challenges and the need for foreign investment heighten Pakistan's dependence on external engagements, potentially limiting its strategic autonomy.

### **Implications for Regional Security**

The rivalry has contributed to a more polarized security environment in South Asia. As the United States and China vie for influence, smaller regional actors including Pakistan must navigate shifting alliances and competitive economic offers. Increased military cooperation between the US and India, and the strengthening of China's strategic ties with Pakistan, reinforce bloc-like tendencies, which may elevate regional tensions and complicate conflict resolution prospects.

## **CONCLUSION**

The US-China geostrategic rivalry in South Asia is redefining regional power dynamics. Pakistan, positioned at the crossroads of this competition, confronts strategic challenges that impact its foreign policy, security strategies, and economic interests. The findings suggest that Pakistan's efforts to balance ties with both powers are critical to safeguarding its national interests; however, this balancing act is increasingly complex due to shifting alliances and external pressures. Constructive diplomacy and strategic autonomy are essential for Pakistan to manage the impacts of great-power rivalry without compromising its stability and development.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Pakistan should enhance diplomatic engagement with both the United States and China to diversify its strategic options and reduce dependency on a single partner.
2. Investment in domestic economic reforms can reduce vulnerability to external economic pressures and strengthen negotiating positions in foreign partnerships.
3. Encouraging inclusive regional mechanisms that involve all South Asian states can help mitigate bipolar tensions and promote collaborative security frameworks.

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