



Pakistan at the Crossroads: Navigating CPEC, China-US Rivalry, and a Multipolar World

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Multipolar World Order, Geopolitics of Pakistan, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China-US Rivalry

Received : 5 May

Revised : 23 June

Accepted: 23 July

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ABSTRACT

The emerging world order is moving towards a multipolar dominated world with the emergence of China, revival of Russia, and the fading out of Western domination. This development has had tremendous impacts on local powers such as Pakistan whose geopolitical significance is given impetus by its strategic position at the intersection of the South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East. This paper will look at the geopolitical imperative of Pakistan in the new multipolar world order and how it is placed in the escalating China-US battle together with its participation in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The research will use a qualitative research design comprising a literature review, case study and document analysis based on theories of international relations like realism and complex interdependence by analysing the manner in which the geography and economic relations of Pakistan serves to enable it to wade through intricate global power politics. According to the findings, CPEC not only improves the Pakistani relations with China in terms of its economy improving its strategic importance but it also exposes Pakistan to difficulties in maintaining its traditional relationship with the United States. It is hard to determine the impacts of this change of order to other regions of the world and also the global geopolitical trends in the 21st century without understanding the positioning of Pakistan within with this change

INTRODUCTION

The idea of a multipolar world order represents an international system that does not feature world power aggregated in the hands of one superpower; instead, the power is dispersed among powerful countries and regional blocks. In contrast to bipolarity of the Cold War world (where the opposition between the United States and the Soviet Union was evident) or unipolarity after the fall of the Cold War (where the United States played the role of the sole master), modern international system is facing the move toward multipolarity. This new order is characterized by the emergence of China as a serious economic and military power, the rebirth of Russia in the region and in world politics, and the growing power of regional actors like India, Brazil and Turkey, and the relative diminishment in Western hegemony in dictating what happens to the global politics without any challenge. This development is especially pertinent in the 21st century as countries throughout Asia, Africa and Latin America are demanding their political sovereignty and establishing economic and strategic alliances outside their long-established Western structures. It is a changing environment that is redefining the global governance system, international trade relations, security relations and development projects. Pakistan in this situation has a quite strategic importance due to the geographical location being found in the intersection of east Asia and central Asia as well as the Middle East. It is located north-east of China, east of India, west of Afghanistan and south-west of Iran; thus, God gave it an outlet into South of Asia and into the land of resources called Central Asia and the Gulf. It is located near the Strait of Hormuz, which is the key maritime bottleneck of world oil sources, which has only added to its geopolitical importance.

Additionally, the active participation of Pakistan in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which falls within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China has given a new perspective into the importance of Pakistan. The concept of CPEC will transit the western region of China to the Arabian Sea via Gwadar Port in Pakistan and it will help to bring down the overreliance of China on the South China Sea and the Malacca Strait over energy imports and trade. This economic corridor does not only hold a hope of developing the infrastructure besides the economic growth and development of Pakistan but also a broader aspect of strengthening the strategic relationship between Pakistan and China particularly as Beijing invents alternative routes amid the increasing tensions with the US. Meanwhile, the growing rivalry between China and the United States, including the trade wars, competing technological capabilities, and the geopolitics of Asia and Asia-Pacific has put Pakistan in a precarious yet a potentially beneficial situation. Conventionally, an ally of the United States during the decades-long Cold War and as a member of the frontline coalition in the Global War on Terror, the shift of Pakistan towards China coincides with a wider shift in terms of foreign policy priority as the former attempts to balance its foreign relations on an economic and military level.

This is significant to grasp the changing faces of world power because Pakistan plays a pivotal role in this new multipolar world. The way it makes its strategies, generates alliances, and even economic initiatives are really interfering

with its growth as well as internal security; however, the areas where it changes stability is also dependant on regional stability, as well as its greater struggle of power with the United States. The placement of Pakistan will equally be a decisive element in geopolitical calculations of South Asia, the larger Asian continent and the global system at large as long as the global order keeps on changing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The world power status is already experiencing an intense transition to a multipolar world where the emergence of China and the revival of Russia are hampering the dominance of the western world dominated by the United States. In this respect, the geopolitical significance of Pakistan has been enhanced as the country happens to be strategically situated and engaged with big ventures such as China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). But what little substantial analysis exists about the issue of how Pakistan is managing its strategic positioning amidst the escalating tensions in the China-US rivalry and the emerging situation of the multipolar world order. A major question arises: What is the role of Pakistan in taking advantage of its strategic position around a multipolar system? What do its increased relations with China mean to its relations with the US and regional stability? These questions must be answered to have an idea of the challenges and opportunities ahead of Pakistan to get its foreign policy, economic resources and security interests aligned toward a more complex world.

METHODOLOGY

This paper entails a qualitative research methodology, which focuses on analysing the role of Pakistan in a geopolitical perspective of the multipolar world order emerging. The study will aim at offering a detailed comprehension of the topic by depending on intensive secondary data processing. The basis of its development is an extensive literature review that reviews the scholarly articles, policy documents, and strategic reports concerned with multipolarity, the China-US rivalry, and the foreign policy orientation of Pakistan. To present a specific-oriented analysis, the research will take the case study design where it will centre on China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) with an aim of decoding its strategic, economic and geopolitical impacts on the positioning of Pakistan. It also resorts to the analysis of documents, such as official governmental statements, agreements, and speeches of Pakistani, Chinese, and American leaders to analyze the priorities of the policy and the stories told by the states. Moreover, by using secondary data in the form of the think tank reports and foreign place journals the analysis is enriched with various points of view and empirical knowledge. The analytical framework being used in the research is based on theories of international relations notably realism and complex interdependence to determine how options and constraints in a multipolar world network influence strategic choice taken by Pakistan at the international level. The innovation of this method leads to a comprehensive and theoretically educative interpretation of the development of geopolitical role of Pakistan in the current international system.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Understanding the Emerging Multipolar World

The multipolarity concept means that a world system is one where there are several key influential countries where power is shared rather than monopolized by a superpower. In this kind of system, a number of countries have strong economic capabilities, military and political capabilities, which make them able to determine global governance together (Mearsheimer, 2019). Multipolarity is the opposite of unipolarism, where one state is dominating significantly without much balancing of the other countries (Ikenberry, 2018). The characteristics of multipolar world are the relative equal distribution of power where no country can dominate to dictate what happens in the world. Rather states will depend on strategic cooperation, competition and alliances which keep changing to safeguard and promote their national interests (Waltz, 1979). Additionally, multipolarity is associated with the emergence of regional powers and this is because these powers have significant influence in their geographical domain and serve on global decision-making. An example is the way, India is exercising extensive power in the South Asia region through economic growth, military modernization and in their strategic alliance (Mohan, 2003). By the same token, Brazil is evidently significant in Latin America, and South Africa is a regional leader in Africa (Kupchan, 2012). International system in multipolarity is therefore becoming more complex, dynamic and uncertain because the international governance is no longer controlled by any single decision maker, but by negotiations, contestations and compromises between powerful states. This further complexity is enhanced with the coming in of non-state actors, multinational businesses and international institutions which also affect the politics in the world that have become so interconnected (Bickerton, Hodson, & Puetter, 2015).

Shift from Unipolarity to Multipolarity

One of the major characteristics of the politics in the world of the 21st century has been the shift of global affairs toward being multipolar after being unipolar. With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the U.S became the uncontested superpower in control of politics, economy, and the military of the world as it was referred to as the unipolar moment (Ikenberry, 2018). At this stage, international relations were dominated by US-led organizations, alliances, and liberal doctrine of economy that other states could hardly counterbalance. But this unipolar regime has been slowly changing owing to the few important reasons. To start with, the emergence of China has completely changed the world power distribution. The dynamism in the Chinese economic development, its new stride towards technological advancement and the modernization of its military facility have placed it in a position to expand its scope and challenge the US dominated order especially in the Asia-Pacific region. Due to such programs as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its most vital part, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China is redefining both connectivity and economic and strategic interdependence in the region (Allison, 2017). Secondly, Russia has again become a great power with access to vast energy resources, strong military capabilities, and aggressive foreign policies, indicating its will to offset NATO

and Western stage in its actions in Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), and Syria (2015 onwards) (Stent, 2019).

Moreover, the European Union, in spite of its internal political and economic issues, still has the collective economic, diplomatic, and regulatory power on the world stage, influencing the international trade standards, environmental policies, and human rights advocacy (Bickerton et al., 2015). New regional powers have joined the global power map in the form of India as an increasingly economically large and demographically powerful nation, Turkey as a strategically located yet militarily aggressive country, and Brazil as South America in its diplomatic and economic relations with the rest of the world (Kupchan, 2012; Mohan, 2003). With this change of multipolarity, there is increased strategic rivalry, realignment in the region, and restructuring of international alliances. It has also created new tangles in international politics, because states now have to manage an international order meant to be characterized by widely shared power, in which unilateralism can no longer be as free and unlimited as in the past (Mearsheimer, 2019). In the new multipolar order, the geopolitical role of Pakistan becomes a decisive factor since it occupies the location at the intercourse of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, participates in the project (CPEC), and balances between great powers, such as China and the United States.

Pakistan's Geopolitical Significance

Pakistan boasts of the greatest geopolitical importance because it is in one of the geographic positions in the world, located between South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia (Hussain, 2020). India is its eastern neighbour, also a regional rival which is a nuclear power; Afghanistan is a western neighbour, which is a country of severe strategic importance to the global powers because of its security flows and connectivity prospect (Rais, 2017); Iran is a western neighbour, full of energy resources and is central to regional politics imprisoned by a passionate border with China, the second largest economy and an emerging global superpower, located to its northeast (Sial, 2014). Besides, its southern frontiers spill into the Arabian Sea providing direct water access to the Middle East, Africa, and other parts through the Karachi and Gwadar strategic ports (Wolf, 2019). This geographic location converts the country of Pakistan into an important transit point of the regional and international trade and energy corridors (Small, 2015). Indeed, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which has been positioned as a major aspect of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) implemented by the Chinese government is being established based on a very simple fact to take advantage of the geographical advantage associated with Pakistan by linking the Chinese western province of Xinjiang to the Arabian Sea via Gwadar Port (Ali, 2020). Besides negating the need of China on the longer routes of the sea through the Strait of Malacca, it is also a way of bringing Pakistan into a large network of economic integration (Javaid & Jahangir, 2020). Moreover, the geographical position of Pakistan in close connection to the Central Asian republics like Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan increases its prospects to become a transit route, oil and gas pipeline, especially since countries like TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Pipeline) connect the sources of

energy in Central Asia with consuming markets in the South Asia (Kugelman, 2013).

Geographically, Pakistan is in a vantage geographical position and therefore a critical stakeholder in the security affairs of the region (Rais, 2017). It was a frontline state of the US during the cold war as it was near the southern border of the Soviet Union (Sial, 2014). Its current location is, nonetheless, a source of interest to global powers to date, as with the activities of regional conflicts, counter-terrorism actions, and connectivity and resource rivalry (Hussain, 2020). Proliferation of ports, especially the Gwadar Port has also posed some strategic issues to the United States and India since it leaves China with maritime reach near the Persian Gulf, which is capable of creating alterations in the existing naval and economic dominance in terms of the Indian Ocean Region (Wolf, 2019). Besides, stemming out of its geographical position, Pakistan has the leverage of Afghan peace process, access to trade to landlocked Afghanistan, and wider regional security frameworks (Javaid & Jahangir, 2020). In short, the geography of Pakistani is its best geopolitical resource which defines its foreign as well as security needs and economic integration policies (Small, 2015). It brings Pakistan not as a state of South Asia and instead as a pivot state between Middle East, Central Asia and East Asia thus becoming a state of utmost importance in the new multipolar world order whereby regional inter-connection, maritime access and strategic depth result in the distribution of power and competition (Ali, 2020).

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) under the China plan of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) signifies one of the most ambitious and most strategic projects on the plan. It is a multi-billion-dollar project worth more than 60 billion dollars (Wolf, 2019) aimed to construct and develop a network of highways and railroads, pipelines, and energy projects between the Gwadar Port in the Pakistani province of Balochistan and Kashgar in Xinjiang in China (Wolf, 2019). It tries to revolutionize the infrastructure of Pakistan with projects involving construction of modern highways like Karakoram Highway expansion project, Lahore- Kareachi motorway and upgrade of Gwadar port which is planned to be a large deep-sea commercial port and naval base (Small, 2020). CPEC has multi-dimensional goals. Economically, it will promote the process of Pakistan development by attending key bottlenecks and in particular, those related to energy and transport and industrial sectors. Pakistan has a history of severe energy deficit, the result of which has been a stagn that afflicts industrial productivity as well as economic growth. The CPEC has such energy projects as coal generating stations, dams, and solar projects to generate more than 10,000 MW of energy to mitigate such shortages (Javaid & Javaid, 2016). There are also the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in other provinces in CPEC which aim at encouraging foreign investment, job creation, technological transfer, and industrialisation and thus to integrate Pakistan into regional and even international supply chains (Hameed, 2020). Besides, CPEC helps Pakistan to strengthen the strategic partnership with Beijing, provides Islamabad with an

influential counterbalance to its main enemy in the region, India and increases its bargaining potential in the regional policy (Small, 2020).

CPEC is also geopolitically far-reaching though. The increase in Chinese Presence at the Gwadar Port has been raising uneasiness to the United States, India and other Pacific states as they fear the expansion of Chinese Navy in the Indian Ocean considering that Gwadar has become part of China String of pearls strategy aimed at positioning a chain of strategic ports and installations along Indian Ocean (Wolf, 2019). This has given a new twist to the China-US tussle in the Indo Pacific region and increased strategic competency and Pakistan has become an even more sensitive strategic issue in the considerations to increase regional security.

Current Scenario (2024-2025)

By 2024-2025, CPEC is in its second phase which is more interested in industrial collaboration, agricultural modernisation as well as socio-economic development. Although the initial stage was centered to a great extent on the energy and transport infrastructure, the current one involves operationalisation of SEZs in Rashakai (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), Allama Iqbal Industrial City (Punjab), and Dhabeji (Sindh), which are supposed to attract foreign direct investment, drive export growth, and create job opportunity (Government of Pakistan, 2024). Nevertheless, this has not been an even flow through administrative sluggishness, the fear of insecurity, and financial escalation in Pakistan, such as the increase in foreign liability and political uncertainty after 2024 general elections (Express Tribune, 2024). A big challenge is the aspect of security. Ambushes on Chinese nationals employed in the CPEC projects, particularly in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has made China raise questions over the safety of its workforce prompting tightening of security measures and further involvement of Special Security Division of Pakistan in CPEC protection (Dawn, 2024). Also, recent sources show that China is re-assessing its investments based on Pakistanis financial limitations and payment abilities with project oversights on anything that has practical economic benefit (Reuters, 2025).

In spite of these issues, CPEC enhances the geo political value of Pakistan. China is still Pakistan largest source of foreign direct investment as well as partner in diplomacy especially when Islamabad is having chilly relations with the United States and therefore diversification of foreign policy in the face of rising tensions of China-US competition (Small, 2020). Further, Pakistan government has confirmed its intentions to accelerate the completion of CPEC as it considers it as imperative in the stabilisation of its economy and connectivity with Central Asia to its Vision Central Asia policy (Government of Pakistan, 2024). At the geopolitical front, CPEC has brought the South Asian rivalries to the fore, as India takes issue with the route going through Gilgit-Baltistan, which it also claims as an extension of the larger Kashmir conflict (Hussain & Hussain, 2017). The United States has also raised river concerns over growing dependence of Pakistan on China whose longterm debt sustainability issues, as well as strategic convergence considerations, have posed a concern especially where it comes to its Indo-Pacific strategy to counter the Chinese rise (Wolf, 2019). To

conclude, CPEC does not represent just an economic corridor but a strategic change game. It provides Pakistan with economic revitalisation opportunities in terms of energy security, infrastructure development, and industrial growth, and at the same time makes it more deeply embedded in strategic architecture of China. In parallel, it ushers in new geopolitical problems, with Pakistan having to figure out its place in the new multipolar world system with its brewing China-US rivalry, comprising of security dilemmas in its region, and limitations of domestic governance.

China-US Rivalry and its Impact on Pakistan

The rival strategic competition between the United States and China that has gained momentum in the twenty-first century is based on America and China holding divergent views of the world as they perceive it. The US still advocates the liberal international system supported by the principles of free markets and democracies, and China presents an alternative, focusing on the state-led development and non-interference (Zhao, 2020). This rivalry can be seen in trade disagreements, technology constraints, gathering of military forces in the Indo-Pacific, and contestation in multilateral organisations like the UN and World Bank (Mastro, 2019). This rivalry cannot be regarded as a distant phenomenon by countries like Pakistan that are strategically seated at a crossroads of geopolitics and whose implication to this happens to be multidimensional.

Impact on Pakistan's Foreign Policy Alignment

The worsening rivalry between China and the US has greatly transformed the foreign policy decision that Pakistan takes. Throughout its Cold War, Pakistan was considered an influential partner of the US, a non-NATO ally, and it was a member of the defence treaties, SEATO and CENTO (Akhtar, 2018). But after US swung towards India, particularly after the US-India Civil Nuclear Deal 2005; Pakistan lost its strategic confidences in Washington. This change opened the door to an even stronger alignment with the country, with which it had a long-term relationship since the 1960s: China. Adding to that the establishment of CPEC in 2015, a project within the framework of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, further facilitated the positioning of Pakistan in the global strategy of China (Small, 2020). In contemporary times, the foreign policy of Pakistan is also distinguished by a desire to be able to keep a balance between its historical connections with the West and the economic and strategic reliance that it is having on China, a balance that is getting harder with the worsening of the rivalry.

Impact on Economic Development Choices

The China-US competition has presented an opportunity and a limitation to Pakistan economically. CPEC investment has enhanced energy supply, road, and port systems in Pakistan, which has ensured that long-term development traps have been resolved (Wolf, 2019). Nonetheless, issues are raised concerning the debt sustainability, the absence of transparency in the contracting, and the insufficient job creation opportunities to Pakistani citizens (Ahmed, 2020). Meanwhile, the dependency of Pakistan on the Western financial institutions in terms of balance of payments support is not less severe. To illustrate, the IMF programmes of 2019 and 2023 by Pakistan had to be approved by the boards in which the US held the majority voting rights (Akhtar, 2018). Therefore, Pakistan

is in a situation where it would not afford triggering off either the Chinese or the Westerns as investment and funds would continue to flow into the country and financial aid sustained by the West to stabilise the economic condition.

Impact on Regional Strategic Positioning

The competition has increased the significance of Pakistan in the western part of Asia. As far as China is concerned, Pakistan offers an access point to the Arabian Sea via Gwadar Port, circumventing Malacca Strait, which is prone to the US military blockade (Small, 2020). CPEC passes through Gilgit-Baltistan and also joins China directly to its western province of Xinjiang where the mobility of troops and logistical infrastructure is fast in time of emergency (Wolf, 2019). To the US, Pakistan has been significant in terms of counterterrorism collaboration with the region as well as surveillance of Talibans in Afghanistan. But the Pakistani commitment to China has also caused the reduction of the US defence and economic aid, and Washington is growing more and more affiliated with India to gain balance in the Asian continent with China (Pant & Joshi, 2017). This is aggravating regional polarisation under which Pakistan and China are pitted against India and the US.

Impact on Strategic Autonomy

The growing Chinese-American confrontation puts pressure on the Pakistani strategic autonomy. The heavy reliance on China can eventually make Pakistan an accessory partner in the ambitions of Beijing in the greater South Asian and Indian Ocean regions (Siddiqui, 2020). Conversely, failure to engage with China would deprive Pakistan of valuable economic and defence awards particularly as funding through US assistance has become politically conditioned and controversial in Washington (Rafiq, 2020). Pakistan, in its effort to diversify association with Turkey, Gulf states, Russia, and Central Asia, is also driven by the fact that the new world order is being polarised and there is the necessity to maintain strategic flexibility.

Impact on Domestic Political Economy

The rival has found its way into the domestic political economy of Pakistan. Through increased spending, Chinese investments have strengthened incumbent governments, creating tangible related infrastructure benefits, whereas in US-run institutions such as the IMF, fiscal consolidation (which tends to be politically unpopular) effectively becomes a conditional requirement (Ahmed, 2020). Moreover, the information technology and telecommunications industries in Pakistan are experiencing dualities concerning the usage of China-made 5G technologies and those in the Western world, which may interfere with future digital infrastructure and data security models (Zhao, 2020). The competitiveness, therefore, influences the external foreign policy besides the internal economic governance as well as technological decisions in Pakistan.

Strategic Dilemmas and Future Challenges

All in all, the China-US rival offers Pakistan long-term strategic dilemmas. Its excessive dependence on China can hurt relationships with Western countries necessary to trade and provide financial support, whereas its withdrawal with China would jeopardise important infrastructure, connectivity, and defence developments (Siddiqui, 2020). This is a very tricky multipolar world and it

needs tactful diplomacy, internal economic reinforcement, and the expansion of strategic ties to prevent being a puppet of great power games. In the new multipolar world, the Pakistani geopolitical existence presents not only facilities to exert its position but also a call to make shrewd independent choices in order to protect its national interests as the competition in the world grows.

Strategic Challenges for Pakistan

1. Regional Instability and Security Threats

Pakistan still experiences some serious security challenges under the subject of the instability in the region. The US pulling out of Afghanistan, the Taliban coming to power, has produced a vulnerable security situation that has multiple effects and implications, including the danger of terrorism, refugees, cross-border militancy, which have direct impacts on the domestic security and managing of the international boundaries of Pakistan (Khan, 2021; Yusuf, 2021). Even more, a changing state of affairs in Afghanistan has generated strategic uncertainties because militant organizations can get safe havens and put at risk counterterrorism advances and borderlands, particularly Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan (Rana, 2022). Moreover, the constant flare-ups with India on the issue of Kashmir, regular tensions at the border along the Line of Control, and buildup in arms have kept South Asia in the shade of a possible future conflict, preventing any cooperation, connectivity, and economic integration in the region (Haider, 2020; Wirsing, 2020). Bilateral relations were further soured when Hindu nationalist politics in India overthrew Article 370 in the Kashmir region in 2019 and deployed troops along the borders, sealing peace-building channels between the countries (Fair, 2021).

2. Internal Security and Terrorism

On a domestic level, Pakistan still has to deal with the problem of terrorism and violent extremism, even though some major counterterrorist campaigns, including those called Zarb-e-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasaad, broke up much of the militant infrastructure in the tribal belt (Javaid, 2021; Abbas, 2020). Nevertheless, the remnants of Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other regional allied groups continue their presence, posing a threat to the stability in the tribal areas as well as within the cities, most especially in Peshawar, Quetta and Karachi (Ahmed & Khalid, 2022; Rana, 2022). The menace weakens the hope of foreign investment, provides social insecurity and makes the economy bear a huge security burden by forcing it to spend much on defence and internal security (Zaidi, 2020). Also, sectarian conflict and radicalisation are tenacious issues, and the threat of the spread of Daesh-Khorasan (IS-K) to Afghanistan brings additional internal security concerns (Yusuf, 2021).

3. Structural Weaknesses and Economic Vulnerabilities:

The economic weaknesses of Pakistan are severe, as the economic causes include a large amount of external debt payments, continuing fiscal deficits, small volumes of international currency reserves, and frequent dependence on IMF bailout funds to support macroeconomic balance (Zaidi, 2020; Hussain, 2021). The structural vulnerabilities of the country are steady energy shortages, poor industrial output, shallow export profiles, low tax-to-GDP ratios, and low human development measures, which restrain the potential increase in the economy over time (Rizvi, 2019; Ahmed & Khalid, 2022). Moreover, use of

remittances to stabilise the current account is an indication of the absence of structural change into export-led industrial development and technology upgrading (Hussain, 2021). These economic issues are further compounded by the presence of political instability, inconsistency in policy, failure in governance, and corruption that cause uncertainty in the investors and limits the avenues of sustainable development (Ahmed & Khalid, 2022; Haider, 2020).

4. Strategic Dependence and Policy Dilemmas

Pakistan is over dependent on external powers and another strategic issue the dependence leads it to dilemma in foreign and security policy. It is strongly allied with China under the China- Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that has boosted both economies and strategic deterrence against India, yet it has also caused concern in both Washington and New Delhi at the emergence of Chinese influence in South Asia (Small, 2020; Hilali, 2022). Souring relations with the US especially following the withdrawal of that country in Afghanistan and increasing Indo US strategic convergence poses threats to Pakistan in terms of its access to defence equipment, diplomatic backing in multilateral forums and favourable trade regime (Fair, 2021; Yusuf, 2021). The issue of balance between strategic relationship of Pakistan with both China and United States with strategic autonomy and bloc politics is a fundamental foreign policy concern of the policymakers in Pakistan (Hilali, 2022).

Strategic Opportunities for Pakistan

1. Becoming a Trade and Connectivity Hub

The geographical position of Pakistan remains one of the major strengths of the country. It lies on the border between South Asia, Central Asia, West Asia, and China and can provide a natural bridge of trade, energy, and transportation routes (Wolf, 2019). The establishment and execution of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) increases this prospect as it links Gwadar Port to the Xinjiang province in China using a series of road, rail and pipeline networks. When operating fully, Gwadar Port would compete with other ports in the region (Dubai, Chabahar), to act as a deep-water port that will perform as a transit station of Central Asian Republics (CARs), Afghanistan, and western China (Javaid, 2021). In addition, improvement of trade routes like the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline and CASA-1000 electricity initiative would ensure Pakistan becomes a part of the regional energy networks, followed by alleviating the domestic energy downfalls plus offering the midway income (Hilali, 2022). Pakistan also has an opportunity to use the chances of trans-continental rail connections in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to strengthen its position in the global chains of supply. Nevertheless, security of routes, the simplification of customs and investment in logistical infrastructures continue to be key priorities in order to obtain full advantage of these benefits (Ahmed & Khalid, 2022).

2. Attracting Investment and Promoting Economic Diversification

The foreign direct investment (FDI) has already increased in the areas of energy, transport, logistics, and cement as a result of infrastructural and energy investments through CPEC (Wolf, 2019). Under CPEC, Special Economic Zone (SEZ) has been implemented to capture investment growth in manufacturing

services, agriculture, and mining sectors through industrial clusters that provide job opportunities and boosts export activities (Ahmed & Khalid, 2022). But investment flows depend on the reform of domestic policy. To attract long-term investments, and achieving this is fundamental in promoting ease of doing business by streamlining regulations, digitising taxation systems, sustaining the policies or consistency of the policies and enhancing mechanism of protection to investors (Rizvi, 2019). Further, the economy should be diversified by developing non-traditional industries like information technology, renewable energy, tourism and extraction of minerals so that Pakistan does not remain over dependent on textiles and agricultural products. This diversified would not only help widen the tax base; rather it would help reduce the condition of being reliant on IMF bailouts, opening up new ways of growth in a sustained manner (Hilali, 2022).

3. *Enhancing Regional Integration and Connectivity Frameworks*

The involvement of the Pakistani government in such regional cooperation systems as the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) can be a source of promoting economic, energy, and security-related cooperation with surrounding countries (Hilali, 2022). Through enhanced diplomatic and trade relations with Central Asia, Iran, Turkey and Russia, Pakistan is in a position to connect its economy into bigger regional systems enabling the movement of trading activities of the landlocked CARs to the Arabian Sea via Gwadar. Moreover, the stabilisation of its west with cooperative security systems with Afghanistan can also open trade to central Asian countries bringing Pakistani products to new markets and making regional trading. Rail and road constructions that would connect Pakistan with Uzbekistan through Afghanistan, as well as make it part of the BRI projects being developed by China, would provide a transparent transport infrastructure (Javaid, 2021). Such projects would enhance transit revenue, lower logistics expenditures and integrate Pakistan into the international supply chain reinforcing Pakistan economically and geopolitically.

4. *Expanding Defence and Strategic Partnerships*

Pakistan strategic environment has the possibility of diversifying the defence and strategic ties beyond the traditional orientations. Although China is the nearest strategic partner of Pakistan, its interrelations with Russia in the field of defence cooperation, Osijve joint military practices, and negotiations about energy schemes indicate an emerging practical relationship (Small, 2020). In exactly the same way, strong defence-related relationships with Turkey, which include transferring military technologies, collaborating in manufacturing defence products, and in naval cooperation develop the innovative ability of Pakistan and broaden the weight of its diplomacy. It is also vital to enhance strategic tie-ups with Gulf countries. Investors and sources of financial aid have been Saudi Arabia and UAE. Extending such relations to incorporate energy-driven joint ventures, petrochemicals, and tourism, and logistics can have economic and geopolitical rewards (Rizvi, 2019). Besides, the strong presence of Pakistani diaspora in the Gulf offers bargaining power in terms of labour exportation, remittances and other strategic bargaining power.

5. Playing a Balancing Role in Global Politics

Pakistan can be strategically placed to act as a balancer of big powers in the new multipolar world order scenario. The fact that it is an all-weather ally of China, US strategic ally in defence, increasingly stronger relationships with Russia and long-standing relationships with Gulf states gives Islamabad much diplomatic room to manoeuvre (Small, 2020). This mediating role is vital in the efforts to balance strategic independence and economic, security, and technological collaboration with several partners. In the above example, Pakistan could take advantage of the relationship that it enjoys with China to develop infrastructure at the same time involving the US and other Western allies to access trade, transfer technology, and finance. On the same note, further induction of Russia in terms of energy, defence, and regional security processes stabilizes geopolitical status, and liaison with the states of the Gulf guarantees financial stability and energy security (Hilali, 2022). Strategic neutrality can enable Pakistan to stay out of great power politics and pursue its national agendas, rise on the global map, and play an active role in regional peace and stability (Rizvi, 2019).

6. Strengthening Domestic Stability for External Gains

Since external strategic opportunities can be maximised as the last resort, Pakistan has to first enhance their internal stability. Before investment attraction and regional integration, there must be political cohesiveness, institutional continuity, counterterrorism achievements, better law and order and inclusive governance (Ahmed & Khalid, 2022). Human capital will be augmented by boosting education standards and quality, skill set and gender inclusion, whereas investor trust issues will be enhanced through administrative and anti-corruption initiatives in the public sector. The presence of a stable and solid domestic would help Pakistan to further negotiate on international matters confidently and with credibility.

7. Pakistan's Foreign Policy Choices in the Multipolar World

There have been critical realignments in the foreign policy set up of Pakistan in order to negotiate its way through the dynamics of a multipolar world order that is emerging. The weakening of unipolarity post-Cold war and China and other powers in the region such as Russia now form a reality whereby a pragmatic approach has been needed based on multi-alignment and strategic autonomy. A reoriented foreign policy of Pakistan relies heavily on the China-Pakistan strategic partnership considering its major implementation in the form of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The CPEC plus is a project worth more than 60 billion dollars that involves investments in energy, transport infrastructure, Gwadar Port, and industrial territories that are intended to reshape Pakistan into a regional hub of interconnectedness (Small, 2020). This partnership in the economic sphere is accompanied by an effective defence component as well as various military exercises and the adoption of a common voice on various matters including security in the region and resistance to the Indian hegemony in South Asia (Javaid & Jahangir, 2021). Analysts observe that China offers strategic protection to Pakistan in its conflict with India, and vice versa, Pakistan can grant access to the Indian Ocean to China so that the two

countries became operationally useful to each other; a factor that ensures both geopolitical support of each other (Korybko, 2020).

Pakistan however is wary not to ruin its long established but on-again off-again relations with the United States. Pakistan has traditionally relied on the US as a huge supplier of defence equipment and recipient of assistance, and the US has shown its influence via international financial institutions and regional diplomatic systems (Kugelman, 2021). Despite this, the Indo-Pacific plan that forms the strategic partnership between the US and India has meant that Islamabad can no longer be central to the regional view of the US in the region, yet Pakistan still enjoys cooperation with the US on counterterrorism, security as well as in terms of diplomatic relations, especially in relation to the stability of Afghanistan beyond the fall of 2021 by the Taliban (Raza, 2022). Besides China and the US, the Pakistan also has active diplomatic relationship with the Islamic world that is under the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

Saudi Arabia has been a strategic partner by granting economic bailouts, oil on deferred payment and employment of more than two million Pakistanis who are sending major remittances to the home country (Javaid & Jahangir, 2021). Although the other relations are sometimes tense, including disputes over the Kashmir conflict (disagreements to have Pakistan recognize the Kashmir issue C2014 Malaysia and Pakistan have reached an agreement to solve the Kashmir issue) and attempting to find alternate Islamic leadership platforms, as in the case with Turkey and Malaysia, the alliances with Saudi Arabia and the UAE are based on religious identities, economic interdependence and security issues that exist in the region especially against Iran. Moreover, the policy by Pakistan on Russia has been rebalanced, and sentiments of the Cold War are overcome. Over the past several years, Islamabad and Moscow have conducted common military drills, concluded defence contracts, and have started the Pakistan Stream Gas Pipeline project, which is likely to raise Pakistan energy security and enrich the state with its economic connection (Raza, 2022).

The rapprochement is also in line with Russia overall shift towards South Asia in line with its Greater Eurasia strategy, as Pakistan provides a significant route towards integration with the region of Central Asian republics. Besides, the Pakistan outreach to central Asia has been added with the Vision Central Asia policy, emphasizing on trade, energy, and connectivity. The CASA-1000 program and the prospective development of railway connections across Afghanistan to Uzbekistan mean that Pakistan is planning to position itself as a South and Central Asian connection, which will help mitigate excessive dependency on the historical markets and allies (Korybko, 2020). In general, the foreign policy actions of Pakistan portray a practical response to multipolarity whereby Pakistan is keen on enjoying strategic autonomy by having a diversity of partnerships. Pakistan is trying to balance external pressures by further developing relationships with China, approaching the US with caution, strengthening the relationship with Russia and Central Asia, and standing firm on relationships with Islamic countries, so it does as much as possible to maximise its geopolitical and economic interests as the global order around it quickly changes (Small, 2020; Kugelman, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, Pakistan is at a boiling point of the new multipolar world order. As the bridge linking South Asia, central Asia, West Asia with China and as a trade route in the world markets, its geographic location is strategic. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is an example and connects Pakistan to the Belt and Road Initiative of China and provides substantial economic gains to the countries due to the development of infrastructure, energy securities, and trade integration. Nonetheless, the rivalry between China and the United States is increasing, presenting opportunities and challenges. Though getting closer to China increases Pakistan economic and strategic worth, it is important to keep the relations with the United States balanced since United States has a long and strong history with Pakistan in terms of military, economic, and diplomatic terms as well. Moreover, the geopolitical location of Pakistan demands deliberate negotiation of the regional tensions, especially, the complicated relationship of Pakistan and India, and the fact of the insecure security situation in Afghanistan.

In order to enhance its presence in the world affairs in this multipolar world, Pakistan needs to diversify China and US partnership to cover diplomatic, trade, and security relationship with Russia, Central Asian countries, European Union, and Asian countries of the ASEAN so that it can offer strategic autonomy to increase its chances of avoiding dependence. Increasing the level of regional connectivity by faster dispatch of CPEC, improving Gwadar Port, and the connection to the larger regional system of transportation, and energy exchange can transform Pakistan as a center of trade and energy, where investment can be invited and longer-term sustainable economic growth can be met. Additionally, an optimum foreign policy that balances the two countries (China and US) and their relationship and also executes multilateral engagement by joining the UN, OIC and the SCO, will help Pakistan look after its interest without embroiling itself into the great power tussles. Finally, the political stability, institution reforms, and economy diversification is essential to ensure that Pakistan has the possibility to present itself as a safe partner and meet its potential as a strategic state. Pakistan's geopolitical role in a multipolar world thus represents both challenges and opportunities, and by leveraging its geography, strengthening internal stability, and pursuing diversified partnerships, it can enhance its global standing and contribute positively to regional and international peace, connectivity, and development.

FURTHER STUDY

This research still has limitations, so further research is needed on the topic of Pakistan at the Crossroads: Navigating CPEC, China-US Rivalry, and a Multipolar World in order to perfect this research and increase insight for readers.

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