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# BETWEEN WASHINGTON AND BEIJING: REALISM, HEDGING, AND PAKISTAN'S POST-2025 DILEMMA

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## ABSTRACT

*The increasing tension between the United States and China has placed South Asia, and more importantly Pakistan, in the middle of global politics. The aftermath of the 2025 Indo-Pak war leaves Islamabad in a position of both disadvantage and great opportunity to exploit, all given its geography position. This article argues that Pakistan's strategic calculus cannot be explained by Realism or Hedging theory alone. Instead, it reflects a hybrid strategy: Realism highlights the systemic pressures of survival in a bipolar regional order, while Hedging captures Pakistan's deliberate efforts to diversify alignments, maintain economic flexibility, and safeguard strategic autonomy. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of policy documents, think-tank reports, and secondary literature, the study shows that Pakistan deepens reliance on China for security and infrastructure while simultaneously sustaining limited cooperation with Washington and multilateral institutions. By synthesizing Realism with Hedging, the article moves the theory of hedging to South Asia and shows that Pakistan holds agency to influence the nature of the transatlantic competition between China and the United States post-2025.*

***Keywords:*** *CPEC, Pakistan, China, South Asia, Hedging, Realism, US-India rivalry*

## INTRODUCTION

The rise of competition between China and the United States has recast and reshaped the shape of the world order. While traditionally the intellectual communities have focused on the Indo-Pacific and East Asia, South Asia has slowly but surely inflated from the periphery to the frontline of great-power competition. A historic swing state in diplomatic estimation, Pakistan today sits right where this changing equation will permute. Institute for Comparative Studies (India) of the science of strategy, the Indo-Pak confrontation of 2025 revealed the following strategic conundrums of Islamabad which simultaneously placed it and rendered it indispensable to Washington and Beijing (Yusuf, 2018).

International Relations academia has painted Pakistan in either the role of a lackey to the United States for decades, or in the role of a minor partner in China's regional aspirations. This clean, brash, framing conceals the complex facticity of Islamabad's foreign-policy conduct. As a matter of fact, since long enough, the capital has primarily been in search of approaches that are conformity-within-stability, simultaneously highly disguised in autonomy and pragmatism. This phenomenon is unique enough to be explained away by traditional Realism nor by the Hedging theory: Realism is a description of the mechanical laws of survival in an anarchic and asymmetric world (Waltz, 1979), and Hedging is a description of agency,

adaptability and unintended intolerance to extreme positions (Goh 2021).

Two arguments are made in this article. To begin with, this post-2025 strategic calculus of Pakistan is best described in a hybrid lens of Realism-Hedging that permits structural constraints and pragmatic agency. Second, Pakistan is not passively taking the outside world pressure but is adding its own contribution to the pattern of U.S.-China rivalry in South Asia arena. The analysis can provide a clear picture of how Islamabad balances overreliance on China and a selective approach to developing ties with the United States and multilateral institutions based on policy documents, reports of think tanks, and secondary scholarship.

That way, when the paper refers to Pakistan as the heart of a new strategic equation in South Asia, it will contribute to the theoretical discussion of hedging, and to policy discussions of order in the region.

## Theoretical Framework

### Realism and Systemic Pressures

Realism is considered one of the most prominent and influential theoretical approaches to explain the behavior of states in the study of international relations. Realism emphasizes the anarchical nature of the system of nations, with actors free to define themselves aiming for survival, autonomy and relative power in the vacuum left by no super state (Morgenthau 1948; Waltz 1979). For example, Classical Realists (it all comes down to power politics as exemplified by Hans Morgenthau) and Structural Realists (the distribution of capabilities in the configuration of the system is all-important as the main force shaping state behavior) were succeeded by each other.

In the case of South Asia, the logic of realism operates in the continuous rivalry that marks the relationship between India and Pakistan. The subregion has experienced repeated fires of war, the proliferation of nuclear military stockpiles, and an intensifying security dilemma in which each or all polities feel compelled to dedicate inordinate resources to defence. These structural tensions are intensified in the post-2025 context where Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy envisages India as a strategic balancing factor in the region as against China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as it concretizes itself through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Small, 2020In realist view, when evaluating the preferences of Pakistan with regard to alignment issues, the desire to survive in a hostile and asymmetrical regional environment has often been the overrunning factor.

### Strategic Behavior as a form of Hedging

The realist theory somewhat accounts for the structural constraints - it tends to underestimate the effectiveness of the initiative by smaller and middle powers. Hedging theory aims to fill this methodological void, by explaining how states take on hedging strategies of ambiguity that both reduce risk and increase opportunity in an interval of uncertainty (Goh, 2007; 2021). In the words of Evelyn Goh, hedging is a conscious eschewing of binary options which allows states to benefit from competing powers, while at the same time protecting themselves against negative contingencies. In addition, Kuik (2008, 2020) and Lim & Cooper (2015) state that hedging provides states with the flexibility needed to deal with a volatile regional environment.

When applied to Pakistan, hedging shows an identifiable pattern of intensification of security and economic relations with China, accompanied with the maintenance of strategic, albeit limited, relations with the United States to get access to finances, military support and diplomatic legitimacy (Lalwani, 2022). The fact that Pakistan is not totally subservient to China and at the same time is not hostile to the United States of America is evidenced by this two-pronged policy. Instead, it is actively creating a position that defends national independence, does not get entangled but gets maximum out of both tachycardia and humanitarian relationship partners.

### Hedging-Realism Synthesis

This paper uses a hybrid theoretical model that represents a combination of the Realism and the Hedging models. Realism describes the systemic requirements created by asymmetry in South Asia and great power competition, and Hedging describes how Pakistan performs agency to operate around such limitations. Bringing a pure-Realist perspective to bear

upon Pakistan's strategy would only render it look like a Chinese dependency structure, and by pursuing a pure-Hedging perspective alone would be ignoring the hostility between Pakistan and India and the susceptibility of the former to the latter.

In its synthesis of these two dimensions, this paper is devoted, without any counsel to the actions of Pakistan, to show both that Pakistan cannot at once avoid the structural restrictions of the great-power competition and that it cannot, in any case, overcome them in action. This synthesis offers the most general contextual understanding of the psychology of post-2025 strategic calculus in Pakistan, contextualizing how a reactive state has tried to become an actor with the capacity to influence regional change.

## Literature Review

### The dynamics of security as realism in South Asia

Hardcore realism has over the past few decades been the paradigm whereby scholarship on the volatile South Asia security situation has been dominated. In an anarchic international system, it is assumed by Morgenthau (1948) and Waltz (1979) that states pursue their survival by optimizing power. It is that spirit of reason that causes the boomerangs in the long history of the Indo-Pak confrontation, the history of which is reeking with episodes of warfare. The United States and China historically have played their part in reinforcing that pattern: US aid to Pakistan during the Cold War and the War on Terror was intermittent and ad hoc, and Beijing has evolved into a more reliable counter to India (Cohen, 2020; Small, 2020). Simultaneously, although Realism seems to portray Islamabad as a structurally flawed and not tactically nimble country, it is useful in understanding why Pakistan seems to be caught in the trap of outside alliances as a logical survival strategy.

### Neorealism, Security dilemmas and Regional Stability

To this end, Neorealist theories can be used in this analysis to underscore how power is distributed within/between the international system. The example of the worsening by the state of asymmetry of power of the worsening by the state of security dilemma under the articles by Fritz herz (1950): and by Walt (1987): that forming an alliance is so often used to counter the feeling of danger. Later, Tellis (2022) claims that nuclear asymmetries in South Asia played a role in increasing the destabilization of the region.

We must make slight adjustments to these models too when we consider the possibilities of the Indo-Pak war of 2025: here, Pakistan exhausted its remaining tricks but playing off Washington and Beijing both against each other at the same time, confusing the binary alignments that make sense of Pakistan and its traditional insecurity, but not of how it is possible to act so freely between the two great powers.

### Theory of International Relation Hedging

Hedging is currently one of the more powerful analytical concepts in place to elaborate on what occurs to state behavior in the circumstances of unsure conditions. It has been defined by Goh (2007, 2021), Kuik (2008, 2020) and Lim and Cooper (2015) as the strategic development of ambivalent hybrid strategies, which achieve maximum returns on both economics and security, without any binding commitments whatever. But even here the scholarship has been, so far, pathetically focused on Southeast Asia providing petty-minded reflections on what Venezuela, Singapore, and Indonesia must do to come to terms with the consequences of Chinese ascendancy. In sharp contrast, the South-Asian context has not received similar elaborate coverage in the hedging discourse with a telling lacuna in the literature. While such textbook hedging behavior typifies South Asia, including Pakistan, which maintains substantive engagement with the United States, while increasing engagement with China, this duality has hardly ever been engaged in theorizing within the heuristic framework of hedging (Lalwani 2022).

### Pakistan's Strategic Behavior in Great-Power Rivalry

Pakistan's foreign policy has come to be defined as a study of the nation's dependency upon more powerful states, which has converged to significantly limit the scope of scholarship on

this nation. Recent writings of Fair (2014) and Cohen (2020), for example, portray Pakistan as a "security rentier," dependent for its patronage on the U.S. Similarly, some other research has characterized Pakistan as a junior partner in China's regional goal (Shah, 2022). More recent scholarship provides a complicated reappraisal of the treatises. Rudita Ansari (2020), Mo Benny Afzal (2021), and Usher Lalwani (2022), have suggested that in terms of foreign policy, Islamabad deliberately pursues hedging policies by allying with China for strategic security and infrastructural development while remaining dependent yet cautiously engaging with Washington in order to protect fiscal and diplomatic footholds. As such, while this body of literature recognizes agency on the part of Pakistan, it is fragmented and episodic, without a consolidated theorization.

**Identified Gaps in Scholarship**

There are three types of contemporary thought that are defining: The limited room for manoeuvre of a large country like Pakistan, which could afford significant agency, is foreclosed in modelling it according to Realism or paternal models of dependency. Second, the current hedging literature remains geographically concentrated in East and Southeast Asia, thus side-lining South Asia-a region whose influence in international affairs is now growing rapidly and whose interests may no longer be ignored. Third, the post-2025 environment-one where competing Indo-Pakistan interests are redescending to the fore, a more formidable U.S.-China competition is set to ensue, and Pakistan's fragility of course is set to increase along with its fiscal and debt vulnerabilities-has only been addressed intermittently, if at all. Regarding these shortcomings, the current paper claims that the strategic calculus of Pakistan can be best characterized as a hybrid Realism-Hedging perspective that integrates structural determination and plasticity provided by agency.

**Post-2025 Strategic Context**

The war between India and Pakistan in 2025 will be a turning point in the history of South Asia. The local animosities were short-lived, but the echo of these animosities were felt in the arena of the political, in the arena of the economical and of the strategic. The war also introduced Pakistan with internal weakness vis-a-vis Indian conventional military strength but offered consequential space in the international arena to pursue a new resetting. The war showed that the relations between china and India are loose as a rule, foreign interest is present, and how south Asia turns to one of the primary centers of great-power competition (Yusuf, 2018).

**U.S. Policy Recalibration**

One of the most important consequences of the post-2025 environment was a re-alignment of US policy in South Asia. Since nearly two decades, Washington relied on New Delhi as of its Indo-Pacific planning. However, India was rewarded by being morally and politically sanctioned by the United States to deny it capability to defend itself against weapons and trade embargoes (Tellis 2022) for doing the right thing by being on the side of the war (nukes and violation of human rights). Such interventions put a strain on bilateral relations between the United States and India and opened unwittingly diplomatic opportunities to Pakistan, the Nuclearism article, Freezing out Pakistan from Kashmir, claims. We see in this reshape Pakistan, which in Washington had long been viewed as a troublesome but essential partner, on whose shoulders America had found renewed leverages and fulcrums. The policymakers in the U.S. began to have a dialogue with Islamabad, not only through the prism of counterterrorism facilitation, but first and foremost, as an important participant, whose perception of the state of stability in the area and the way to handle a given crisis would matter to be heard. As a concept, the fact that the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, despite remaining an issue in Pakistan, remain a source of economic assistance, has merely been used to demonstrate that Washington will remain a piece of the survival puzzle in Pakistan (Afzal, 2021). Not a reconstruction, but a strategy reconsideration of how useful Pakistan could be in a policy of bipolarism.

**Gwadar and US National Interests**

Next came the added attention given to Gwadar Port by Washington, which was directly correlated with this repositioning.

Lab Provision, a defender, is devised to further enquire innocently into the role of the Gwadar project that initially started as a viable business undertaking as a graphic concession of dual-use components of the Port as useful as part of the naval operations in the future. Nearness to the Strait of Hormuz, and inter-relativism of the port to CPEC projects, are peripheral to the US or Chinese norms of strategic thinking (e.g. Small, 2020).

Washington's monitoring and talking politics of Gwadar indicates to the world that Gwadar is important to the US since Pakistan could potentially facilitate China's initiatives in the blue water naval ambitions. Crucially for Pakistan's geopolitical profile, while the reservations of the U.S. magnify its significance, paradoxically this elevates Pakistan and places it at the centre of discourses on security in the Indo-Pacific (Drew and Roy 2017).

**China's Deepening Role**

China used to be an important player in the lectures of Pakistan, however, China's image in Pakistan was further intensified because of U.S. foreign policy's new orientation that was calibrated after 2025. The war helped establish Beijing's sense of Pakistan as it could rely on Pakistan as its South Asian teammate. During these developments, China launched, for example, the second phase of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) with a much wider scope than infrastructure and including energy (renewable) and connectivity (digital) and even Defence cooperation. In addition, Beijing has included Gwadar in its wider 'Belt and Road Beyond' strategy, with Pakistan serving as a platform to project influence into the Middle East and Africa (Rafiq 2021).

That growth pertains to a whole-court effort to harden Pakistan to long-term Chinese thinking. The discursive labor of the trophe of iron brothers and a urinating class of Chinese capital was enough to motivate Pakistan as an affiliate but as a potentially erogenous point of contact that bisects Beijing's horizon (Shah 2022). Chronic excessive spins of both information and capital resources such as Chinese-supported ventures to help Pakistan furnish its power requirement and their inclusion in Chinese reliance capacity and Chinese strategic entrapment to settle its dues, even more place Pakistan in the red, and inscribe in Chinese dependence capacity and Chinese strategic entrapment to deliver its debts.

**Pakistan Wins Diplomatically**

According to Daska, Pakistan also had spectacular diplomatic gains during these epochal changes. Serious rounds of post-war peace negotiations in Islamabad followed which involved mediation between the Gulf rivals and provided forums to political factions in Afghanistan. Consequently, Pakistan became a strong conflict facilitator within the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and was not able to join western-leaning alternatives to multilateral utopia, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (Kuik, 2020) with China and Russia.

Very good diplomacy and that gave Pakistan a better image internationally. Simultaneously, when in the early decades of the twenty-first century, Islamabad continued to be defined as a security issue, it suddenly began to be recognized as a mediator of conversation and major stakeholder in the security of the area. This politicization is an indirect articulation of the externalization and projection of Pakistani policy actors on international polity (Lalwani 2022).

**The Power of Licensing - Why It Can Help or Hurt**

As it has reaped what it has sown, Pakistan is a very fragile dream. Its economy is still crippled, and it needs IMF missions and other bilateral aid. A broad concern about the possibility of getting into debt distress by over relying on Chinese debt, as well as continuing uncertainty in the U.S. about how well India trusts Pakistan. Further, the rising Washington alignment puts the security dilemma back on the Indian side as the need for successful rebalancing of the relationship becomes more pressing. But somewhere Pakistan can gain out of the fact that it stands between Washington and Beijing. By pursuing a hedging game - of

enjoying the advantages of both without committing herself to either Pakistan turns its burdens into resources. In this sense, the post-2025 is a turning point of the game: Pakistan is no longer a mechanism but becomes a driver of the expanding great-power politics in South Asia (Goh 2021).

**U.S.–Pakistan Relations Recalibrated**

**From Estrangement to Cautious Engagement**

Although U.S.-Pakistan relations were erratic, revolving between cooperation and total dearth of trust over the vast bulk of the post-Cold War era. Washington tended to view Islamabad through a few narrow frames, including counterterrorism in the era of the War on Terrorism, non-proliferation during the nuclear era, and regional stability in the period of the Afghanistan conflict (Cohen 2020; Fair 2014). The relationship was at its nadir by 2025, when shrinking aid flows, lapses of trust over militancy, and the American pivot to India in the larger context of the Indo-Pacific strategy were taken as factors.

The Indo-Pak conflict broke that pattern in 2025. India increased the conflict, that's why they had done the human rights abuses, so the US wanted to punish that India did and they did their nuclear track so that's how they made the escalation (Tellis 2022). Those sanctions weakened the U.S.-India relationship and gave Islamabad diplomatic space to re-orient itself. Rather than marginalized, Pakistan became an irreplaceable - and prickly - Washington ally. That was the process which made Washington shift his hostility to hesitant participation in the necessity, rather than the welfare principle.

**Logic of strategic necessity**

There are three reasons why Washington is interested in Pakistan after 2025. First, the most important aspect in the region is antiterrorism in Pakistan. Despite the 20 years of counterinsurgency operations, militant networks remain along the western border of Pakistan with the potential to spill to Afghanistan (Yusuf, 2018). U.S. leaders understand that a total withdrawal will weaken counterterrorism activities in the area.

Second, Pakistan is a key to nuclear stability. Washington wants to see Pakistan nuclear armed given a lifeless war with its neighbour, India. In South Asia, especially after the 2025 war (Herz, 1950; Waltz, 1979), the escalation threats continue to be raised by nonproliferation analysts. Washington therefore wants to engage in minimal cooperation with the security apparatus in Pakistan to ensure that lines of communication in times of crisis remain open.

Third, the economic factor has again become an important engine. Washington is very important as Pakistan has a weak economy that relies on IMF bailouts, World Bank loans, and bilateral assistance. Politicians in America understand that this kind of unstable economy keeps giving China opportunities to take over through debt financing (Afzal, 2021) and local disruption. It is natural that Washington continues to control the economical survival of Islamabad by manipulating international organizations. The constant IMF reliance on Pakistan has led to a realization of the weaknesses inherent of the Country and the constraints inherent in international borrowing.

**Gwadar and the American Security Calculus**

Gwadar Port has become a major issue for the United States. Gwadar, formerly the crown jewel of the Belt and Road Initiative, has progressively been presented in Washington policy circles as a dual use site. Its strategic location close to the Strait of Hormuz, a bottleneck for worldwide energy supplies, heightens its importance. Small (2020) notes that it might help Chinese naval activities.

Following the 2025 war, Washington increased scrutiny of Gwadar, commissioning congressional hearings and think tank studies that warned of its capacity to undermine American naval dominance in the Indian Ocean (Rolland, 2017). Pakistan, on the other hand, has promoted Gwadar as a commercial hub, thereby stressing its development role. Doing so let's Islamabad benefit from Chinese investment while trying to reassure Washington. This dual narrative defines Pakistan's hedging plan: balancing U.S. issues without compromising Chinese initiatives.

**Economic Leverage and IMF Diplomacy**

The economic dimension is still at the centre of U.S.-Pakistan adjustment. Pakistan negotiated

successive IMF programs under intense U.S. influence in 2026 and 2027. Pakistan negotiated consecutive IMF programs under strong U.S. influence. Though they came with strict conditions on financial discipline, governance, and openness, these bailouts offered some brief debt stress relief. Though not well-liked inside Pakistan, these agreements highlighted Pakistan's reliance on financial institutions sponsored by Washington (Lalwani, 2022).

Simultaneously, Islamabad emphasized its Chinese backed initiatives to indicate to Washington that it had replacements. Though dangerous, this negotiating method allowed Pakistan to get easier terms in certain discussions. Aware of losing Islamabad completely to Beijing, U.S. policymakers granted phased flexibility in IMF requirements. Pakistan therefore turned its weakness into influence and got concessions by playing both ends.

**Diplomatic Engagements and Regional Role**

Pakistan's diplomatic value to Washington went above and beyond their two-way connection. Islamabad enabled backchannel discussions between Washington and the Taliban groups in Afghanistan in the years following the 2025 conflict as well as between Gulf competitors. Though American trust remained conditional (Kuik, 2020), these mediating initiatives raised Pakistan's profile as a regional mediator.

Moreover, Pakistan's inclusion in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) put it at the center of Chinese and Russian multilateralism. Although this drew Pakistan into conflict with Washington, it also strengthened its capacity to serve as a bridge engaging Western led organizations for financial assistance while participating in Eastern led projects for strategic depth. This balancing function underlined Islamabad's developing middle power identification as opposed to that of a peripheral country (Shah, 2022).

**Persistent Frictions and Limits of Recalibration**

Although the recommendations have once again succeeded, structural problems remain. U.S. lawmakers continue to suspect Pakistan because it has always relied on militant proxies, its governance is poor, and its democracy is almost always fragile (Fair, 2014). Furthermore, sanctions following the 2025 conflict are seen as provisional rather than permanent, hence Washington's long-term strategic wager on India has not been abandoned. This implies that Islamabad's chances to use U.S. contacts could be time limited.

Another danger facing Pakistan is that it will be used as a bargaining chip in the larger U.S.-China struggle. Over and over again gave the impression that Beijing is less about expanding its global influence than how the partnership between the two countries works with Washington which also has a part to play in this regard - Only to give the impression that it is being seen as an instrument rather than an equal partner (Afzal, 2021).

**An Opportunity within the Constraints**

Despite all this, Pakistan has managed to create a space in American thinking in terms of policies. Interestingly, Islamabad has re-entered Washington strategic calculations by pointing out the significance of counterterrorism co-operation, nuclear stability and interdependency of economies. Meanwhile, by emphasizing the developmental function of Gwadar in balancing, though without giving up, the effort of China, and the effort of the IMF, it has succeeded in appeasing the concerns of Washington without sacrificing Beijing.

This re-calibration demonstrates the logic of hedging within structural constraint: Pakistan maximizes profits without becoming too close (that is, with the help of U.S. economic institutions) and is becoming more involved in Chinese security relationships. As such, the future U.S.-Pakistan relationship is not a return to the Cold War-era alliance of necessity where both sides had no alternative but to turn to the other but is a relationship of contingent allyship premised on Need over faith (Goh 2021).

**China's Stakes in Pakistan**

**The Strategic Foundation of the Sino-Pak Relationship**

Though commonly called an "all-weather friendship," China's relationship with Pakistan took on fresh characteristics following 2025.

Historically, Beijing's ties with Islamabad were defined in military and strategic sense, balancing India's alignment with the Soviet Union during the Cold War and thereafter with the United States, Small, 2020. The 2025 Indo-Pak clash strengthened this reasoning: China saw that supporting Pakistan was vital not only for containing India but also for guaranteeing the long-term viability of China of its own strategic goals for Asia.

Scenarios According to the position of Beijing, Pakistan is not a friend only, but a kind of buffer country between the Arabian Sea and China core and, by extension, Africa continent and the Middle East, Pakistan can offer a physical route bypassing the controversial South China Sea and the Malacca Strait is at a risk (Rolland, 2017). Pakistan has based its long term strategic calculations on China based on this geostrategic role.

**The Belt and Road Development of CPEC**

The BRI in Beijing has been focused on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Initially facing the road network Northern, power plants and Gwadar Port CPEC turned facing the changing priorities after the conflict of 2025. It is digitally connected, green powered and strengthened industry in Phase II of CPEC announced by Beijing (Rafiq, 2021). An indicator of this diversity is that Pakistan became an active recipient of aid and a main test-tube of China with its developing BRI policy.

Applications for artificial intelligence, 5G networks, and e-commerce portals made up the digital Silk Road component of CPEC II. These investments sought to position Pakistan as a regional digital commerce centre. Additionally aimed at lowering Pakistan's chronic energy deficits while increasing Chinese technical penetration into its grid, renewable energy initiatives solar, wind, and hydroelectric sought to achieve these goals (Afzal, 2021). The conversion of CPEC into a multisectoral project shows how Beijing regards Pakistan as a testing ground for spreading its development paradigm outside.

**Gwadar: The Dual-Use Dilemma**

The most obvious monument of China-Pak collaboration is still Gwadar Port. For China, Gwadar is a marine entrance for oil and gas from the Middle East as well as a logistical center for products going to Africa and Europe (Rolland, 2017). Beijing may benefit from the port's strategically advantageous position close to the Strait of Hormuz in guaranteeing energy supplies throughout crises. Scenarios; just as per position of Beijing, Pakistan is not only a friend, but a kind of buffer Country between the Arabian Sea and the China core and subsequently the Africa continent and the Middle East, Pakistan can provide a choose of physical path bypassing the controversial South China Sea and the Malacca Strait is under threat (Rolland, 2017). It is on this basis of a geostrategic role that Pakistan has pegged all its long-term strategic calculations on China. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has caught the attention of the BRI in Beijing. Accessing the road network Northern at the beginning of its work, power plants and Gwadar Port CPEC faced the altered priorities after the conflict of 2025. It is robotically linked, green energized and fortified industry in Phase II of CPEC propagated by Beijing (Rafiq, 2021). One signifier of such heterogeneity is that Pakistan has become an active recipient of aid and a primary test-tube of China with its developing BRI policy.

**Defence and Security Cooperation**

Beyond infrastructure, the Sino-Pak relationship now pivots on defence ties. Pakistan's main arms supplier, China offers fighter planes, naval frigates, drones, and missile technology (Shah, 2022). Collaborative projects including the JF17 Thunder fighter programs represent the extent of defensive collaboration. Beijing stepped up shipments of sophisticated systems—including unmanned aerial vehicles and air defence technology to improve Pakistan's deterrence capabilities following the 2025 conflict.

These transfers are incorporated into a long-term plan to bring Pakistan into China's military industrial complex rather than simply transactional ones. Joint exercises, intelligence-sharing, and naval Cooperation in the Arabian Sea shows how security ties have grown. Pakistan so serves as a main support of China's western defensive perimeter, therefore

extending Beijing's Strategic reach beyond East Asia (Lalwani, 2022).

**Economic Stakes and Debt Concerns**

Despite a dramatic rise in Chinese economic influence in Pakistan ever since 2013, the post2025 era intensified the concerns regarding debt reliance. As the result of CPEC loans, energy projects, and new digital investments, Islamabad became indebted to Beijing. The antagonists blame the very concept of borrowing as the reason why Pakistan is being left out when it comes to monetary independence (Rafiq, 2021).

However, Pakistani authorities argue that such loans have much-needed developmental and infrastructural benefits that have never been considered by the Western organizations. They point out that Chinese loans often do not have the high political demands of IMF programs. However, not everything depends on the long-term risks of relying on Beijing: economic overdependence, which can be compromised on the Chinese policy and has no chance to fight. The leaders of Pakistan thus have the uphill task of realizing the benefits of Chinese financing without being sucked into the trap.

**China's Broader Strategic Ambitions**

The growing association being formed between Beijing and Islamabad is impossible to comprehend outside of its context. They are part of the bigger scheme by China to change the world governance and regional order. As a source of influence to expand Westward, China bases its western circle on Pakistan in the Belt and Road Initiative. China is building the Gwadar on the Indian Ocean and thereby endangering the American dominion on the sealift (Rolland, 2017).

At the same time, Beijing is experimenting with strategic patronage in its relations with Islamabad. China informs other middle powers that they can offer reliable alternatives to the institutions of the West by supporting Pakistan. The same message resonates in some of Africa, the Middle East, and central Asia because Beijing presents itself as a non-western partner with no ulterior desires (Goh, 2021).

**Pakistan's pivotal role in the Relationship**

Pakistan has been able to behave unilaterally within the Sino-Pak alliance despite the observation of dependency. Islamabad has expanded its power infrastructure and footprint using Chinese financing. At the same time, it has reached the best deal so far with Beijing regarding all debt and technology transfer conditions in the background of the United States invasion (Afzal, 2021).

There is no doubt that Pakistan diplomacy demonstrates that the country is not only a passive recipient of Chinese charity but an active participant of the process of cooperation. To show this, digital and renewable focus of the programmatic agenda on Islamabad is not a Beijing strategic-driven agenda but local needs. This goes to show that Pakistan can match up with Chinese investments and fulfil its requirements of development without losing too much manoeuvrability.

**Risks of Overdependence**

However, there are great risks associated with over reliance in Beijing. By militarizing Gwadar, Islamabad may find itself at war with the United States and an equivalent penalty may be imposed or rather applied like the one imposed on India after 2025. In addition, excessive dependence on Chinese loans can undermine the ability of the Pakistani government to pursue its own foreign policy. There is a risk that the notion that Pakistan is becoming a Chinese satellite demeans the general sentiment in the country and complicates the efforts toward government through democratic means.

The difficulty then, is to harmonize, on the one hand, the positive aspects of the Chinese development and, on the other hand, make strategic reliance not kill the sovereignty. Hedging theory suggests that only by avoiding becoming overcommitted to a particular side smaller countries gain an opportunity to take advantage of the rivalry among great powers, to the benefit of the countries themselves (Kuik, 2020). Pakistan has the ability to remain at this balance Will determine whether its alliance with China will be its weakness or its strength.

**Conclusion: China's Stakes and Pakistan's Dilemma**

China has many interests in Pakistan including military, economical and strategy. Beijing has quite a friend in Islamabad, but it is also part of its global strategy. Chinese diplomatic cover, security assurances and infrastructure subsidies have all favoured Pakistan. However, behind this correlation, are the dangers of domestication, addiction and trapping.

The greatest war that Pakistan will face will be its struggle to utilize Chinese aid without losing its independence. It will base its ability to negotiate this conundrum on its ability to hedge skilfully using the Chinese investments to develop without losing ties with the United States and other friends. In this way, the Sino-Pak collaboration after 2025 demonstrates the fundamental paradox of middle power environments in great power rivalry: how to gain the benefits of a great partner and at the same time avoid the costs of dependence (Goh, 2021).

**Risks Facing Islamabad**

**Economic Fragility and Debt Dependency**

The situation of having a poor economic foundation is one of the most pressing problems Pakistan will face after 2025. It is not repeat bailouts by the International Monetary Fund that can correct the ills afflicting the nation such as low levels of foreign reserves, high rate of inflation and structural failures, such as taxation and the system of government (Afzal, 2021). Apart from occurrences of similarity in terms of foreign debts, the variable of inclusion of the Chinese loans as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has subsidized the infrastructure. Analysts caution this dependence on Beijing, within its turn, will lead to the conclusion that Islamabad will be found weaker once its bargaining power during the further conversation (Rafiq, 2021). Debt dependency also reduces the policy independence in Pakistan. Even though Chinese loans do not include the conditionals of Chinese Western initiatives, they do pose long-term repayment challenges. In the meantime, cut social spending through fiscal restraint using leverage packages on IMF U.S. This two-fold monetary reliance limits the ability of Pakistan to make its own economic policies and, therefore, makes the country powerless in the face of external pressure by Beijing and Washington.

**Strategic entrapment of great power rivalry**

The second danger is that strategy may work against you. The intention of that may be recorded in the registration of the sentinel as close to the convening margins as the Gnossible in servient person in regards to Gwadar Port in accepting that the tether as the critical role is by the means of the duo of deadlocks and magnifying this position by affirming the rein increasing importance of this superimposition unless as a happening or as a similar ad in quickening deprivation of this greatness to India were itself was warranting the presence in the manner of the duo of deadlocks and magnifying such posture by affirming

Anything that will lean Islamabad too much in favour of Beijing will have the side effect of Western sanctions and isolating her diplomatically. Dependent relation on Washington continuously, on the other would risk Chinese investments, military aid and energy programmers. Pakistan would become a victim of crossfire between the U.S and China without the power that the nation would have got through escalation. At worst, Islamabad would have to submit to either side and, in not doing so, undermine the policy of ambiguity it has chosen.

**India's Enduring Hostility**

The 2025 war made it clear once again that India is the primary security threat to Pakistan. India is still regarded as a long-term strategic partner of Washington even amid sanctions imposed on New Delhi. It occurs that plans of American help to Pakistan are more reasonable and provisional at a single moment, U.S India affairs are produced on the standards of Indo-Pacific and Islamabad part are more imperative (Tellis, 2022).

The distance between the two opponents continues expanding because of the Indian traditional dominance, increasing development of the defense industrial base, and modernization of the naval force (Cohen, 2020). And the finished endurance of the security Pakistan must pay very much money to defense even at a cost of economic growth. In

addition, another military standoff is still a possibility. Islamabad so enjoys a geographical location where aggression by the eastern neighbour continues to fuel insecurity despite world shifts in alignments that rely on increasing tension along the northern borders or terrorist attacks / breaches.

**Domestic Political Instability**

Internal political unrest worsens outside weaknesses. Another problem is that even in Pakistan, foreign policy is sometimes hard-to-realize due to civil military antagonism, poor democracy, and poor politics (Fair, 2014). Dissatisfaction of the population with economic austerity caused instability following 2025 due to regular changes of the government. Such internal crises undermine the bargaining authority that Islamabad has both with Washington and with Beijing because allies abroad do not always accept reliable promises made by a given government.

Furthermore, complicating the efficient execution of significant infrastructure projects are governance flaws and corruption. Delays in CPEC projects, power outages, and unequal distribution of resources fuel public doubt regarding the advantages of international cooperation. Without domestic political stability, Islamabad runs the danger of not being able to fully exploit outside opportunities.

**Terrorism and Security Spillovers**

Over the past decade, counterterrorism capacity has grown, yet the militant bodies continue to operate across the Pakistan western borders and in the metropolitan peripheries. They pose a threat in two directions simultaneously: they not only undermine the reputation of Pakistan in the global community but also undermine domestic security (Yusuf, 2018). Militant havens also complicate relationships with Washington, which is extremely sensitive to acts of terrorism. Any re-emergence of any cross-border militancy would imply diminished United States financial assistance, or bargaining power in the regional environment.

At the same time, unrest in Afghanistan continues to roll into Pakistan. Refugee movements, weapon smuggling and radical recruitment pose a threat to internal security in Islamabad.

**Perceptions of Dependency and Sovereignty Concerns**

Lastly, Islamabad is operating on the invisible yet significantly large risk of being perceived both internationally and internally as over dependent on external benefactors. Since China apparently became a reliable ally, the opponents foresees that Pakistan will become a customer to enjoy military and economic advantages at the cost of independence (Shah, 2022). In the same vein, U.S financial institution power grabbing is usually viewed by Pakistani citizenry as undermining independence.

These are perceptions that weaken domestic authority of the making of foreign policy. It is depicted in numerous demonstrations of people against IMF demands or the concern that Chinese take over key resources such as Gwadar. Without solving this internal bitterness at binding its own diplomatic freedom and placing its own hedging program directly on her neck, Islamabad shall lose it.

In 2025, there will be overlapping weaknesses that characterize the situation in Pakistan. Weakness in economy restrains the independence of the policy, necessity to change it restrains the great-power rivalry. Besides economic obstacles, perceptions of dependency present political risks that only limit the options open to Islamabad. These weaknesses demonstrate the volatile nature of the Pakistani situation: there are opportunities, but once again they are tightly connected with threats that will soon crow out the accomplishments of the strategy.

**Strategic Autonomy opportunities**

**Taking advantage of Great-Power Rivalry**

Dangerous as the rising rivalry between the U.S and China has been, it has given Pakistan an opportunity to emerge as a more formidable bargained. Painstakingly maintaining connections with both Washington and Beijing may help Islamabad to secure concessions that are not possible in a unipolar or entirely bipolar environment. In this connection, in particular, has favoured Pakistan the fact that China nowadays is increasingly becoming to negotiate

a preferable settlement with the IMF and to affect the Repayment of the Debt between the two Countries under the U.S. diplomatic Cover (Lalwani, 2022). This bilateralism which failed to form any open attachments yet to the best extent achievable exploited rival powers can be described as hedging (Goh, 2021).

**Gwadar as a Connectivity Hub**

The controversies notwithstanding, Gwadar Port has given Pakistan a special chance to become a regional connectivity centre. The transformation of Gwadar into a commercial hub and a trade and logistic city rather than a military base will allow Islamabad to capture the attention of Central Asian republics, Gulf nations, and European-based companies that are willing to consider a new trade route (Rolland, 2017). Pakistan Gwadar is interested in Pakistan history in the sense of gateway to integration regionally as part of more globalized global strategies of diversified supply chains with less marine bottlenecks.

Gwadar can introduce sustainable strategic level advantages, employment, and incomes in Pakistan run properly. The other form which engages the silent legal modification that Islamabad would not defeat Western anxieties, yet maintain Chinese funding, but they can arrange that the port operations occur transparently and with limited intervention of the third party. Such a balance would enable Pakistan to convert a region of high-stakes major-power rivalry into a regional trading region.

**Expanding Diplomatic Influence**

Diplomatic Influence has led to significant diplomatic success in the post2025 world that Pakistan can now leverage. Through the blinking on the discussions in the gulf, it has established itself as a moderator in the region and indeed participated in all Organization of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) participations and interventions in Afghanistan (Kuik, 2020). To project itself as a good stakeholder rather than a security liability, Islamabad could focus on its stabilizing functions.

There are other advantages of this diplomatic post. It is through this that Pakistan can enhance its participation in Asian multilateral organizations and enhance its ties with middle powers such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Furthermore, in collaboration with these types of work on the practitioner level as the Belt and the Road, maintaining channels open with organizations in the West, Pakistani strengthens the middle power label.

**Harnessing CPEC Phase II for Development**

Islamabad can revise its economy through the digitalization, renewable and industrial divisions of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Even though Pakistan has spent in the solar projects to abridge the time span in executing costly designs of new energy (Rafiq, 2021), it gives certain comfort that they are linked with the world's technological transformation even though it is to be furnished later in the next years currently.

These programs when managed properly can address many of the existing developmental issues such as unemployment and electricity shortage. Islamabad can also adopt local capability through the transfer of Chinese technology and by encouraging participation of locals in CPEC undertakings rather than continued dependence on foreign expertise. Such an approach would transform CPEC into an external investment policy into a local development and innovations engine.

**Engagement with Multilateral Institutions**

The continued contact with the western based multinational organizations also offers the possibility of independence in Pakistan. Despite the limitations of IMF and World Bank development projects, they also provide access to world financial markets, technical expertise and government reform. Focusing can create a more credible scenario for the implementation of Change in the state of Islam, in negotiating the conditions of adjusting with China in Assignment Help (Afzal, 2021).

The fact that Pakistan is a member of the both the OIC and the SCO also gives it more bargaining power in terms of diplomacy. Islamabad positions itself as a bridge between conflicting systems of governance by consistently playing a subordinate role at both Western and Eastern led forums. These two

aspects allow it to have middle power status and cement the policy of hedging.

**Soft Power and Image Transformation**

Another untapped opportunity is the ability of Pakistan to change its global image. Terrorism, instability, and dependency have been issues for the state over the decades (Fair, 2014). The post2025 environment also creates opportunities to re-brand itself as a developmental partner, connection hub, and an issue-solver in diplomacy. This process can be facilitated through cultural diplomacy that promotes interaction between schools in various countries and investments into the ability to communicate through the media to the whole world.

Pakistan can fight poor stereotypes and form even larger alliances of friends by promoting narratives of survival, cultural diversity, and economic peers. Since soft power is not physical like military or commercial wealth, it is crucial in ensuring sovereignty in foreign politics.

**Middle-Power Potential in a Fluid Order**

Finally, the most promising opportunity lies in the capacity of Pakistan to develop middle power identity. Hedging theory suggests that smaller states may adopt the pattern of great-power or middle-card vagueness as a means for gaining strategic autonomy, but they can only be successful if they are willing to change (Kuik 2020). Through its geographical location, strategic capabilities and diplomatic relations Pakistan could play a critical role in the South and Asia region and outcome.

Performance by middle powers is less a matter of material superiority to big powers and more the product of their association with regional powers, their negotiating skills to resolve conflicts, or the means to influence the formulation of standards. Pakistan has the potential of becoming a middle power, capable of affecting outcomes in the multipolar system, should it capitalize its diplomatic achievements, properly address CPEC, even strike a balance between the interests of the U.S. and China.

There are various ways of how Islamabad after 2025 could increase independence. Great power rivalry, positioning Gwadar, spoliating diplomatic power, and leveraging maximum developmental benefits of CPEC can help create sources of strength out of structural weaknesses in Pakistan. Its operational opportunities are further enhanced by its simultaneous engagement with the multilateral groups as well as efforts to project soft power. The only way through which Pakistan stands a chance of prospering is to streamline its hedging endeavours into a plausible middle power instead of partisanism.

**Conclusion and Policy Implications**

Thoughtfully, the given paper will work the hedging theory to South Asia, which is under research in existing literature, and produce how Realism and Hedging would assist will be achieved to demonstrate middle power conduct.

The 2025 splintering of South Asia by the IndoPak war reversed the Southern power position of Pakistan but also provided new access points to agency. The role of Islamabad in international relations has generally been reduced to several decades of dependence on the rest of the world, although the post 2025 scenario shows a more complex picture. In its Foreign Policy behaviour, Pakistan repeats a two-fold logic: on the one hand, Hedging reveals the structural constraints imposed by the incessant competition with India and major power contest, and, on the other, Realism explains the agency by which Islamabad manoeuvres between Beijing and Washington. This type of survival with heightened pragmatism can best be described as the Pakistan dilemma in the post-2025 era.

The paper outlines that the Islamabad environment is empowering and constraining at the same time. On the one hand, political instability, dependence on debts, financial insecurity and terror acts continue to limit independence. The place strategic Pakistan, the Gwadar control, invisibility in multilateral institutions, and Pakistan capacity to mediate outcomes in the region is a route to increase power on the other. The trick to these limitations is that they are offset by the opportunities to convert it into assets that can bring very important strategic value.

The 2025 war made Washington reconsider its relationship with Pakistan in terms of relations. Serial surveillance was undertaken following

the embargo on India, the review of Gwadar and recognition of the contribution of Pakistan toward counterterrorism and nuclear non-proliferation. But this perfection remains until it is very much. How to maintain this contact without losing independence is the opening to Islamabad. Learning to prove itself as trustworthy in smaller circles of influence (economic management and crisis management) allows Pakistan to stay at the table even if Washington bets long-term on India.

Pakistan envisions opportunity as well as threat in its Chinese dealings. Increase investment in CPEC Phase II, a military role and the creation of technological infrastructures and organs, Beijing presents more developmental space and preventing influence in Islamabad. Until recently, the schools of thoughts, to the effect of worshipping the eschatological luxury of debt crisis prize and the sentiment of lost sovereignty, are the dependent relationships with the Chinese financial aid. Pakistan must hence ensure that CPEC befits national interests by converting Chinese assistance to long-term development dividends instead of a one-time rescue. By bringing to pass debt rescheduling, as well as negotiating technological transfers, Islamabad has already demonstrated its agency. The trick to this strategy is preventing the entrapment which is to be consolidated.

The other avenue, by which Pakistan may find a strategic autonomy is by diplomatic victory in the world fora. It is part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, organizational member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation dialogue in a region can show it that it is capable of good dialogue. In order to solidify its position of being a middle power, Pakistan goes the extra mile of positioning itself as a transit point between the western and the eastern destinations. In addition to a rhetorical appeal, the identity is linked to practical benefits that would assist Islamabad to multiple its relations and prevent over-relation to a single patron.

The policy ramifications go without saying. Pakistan must take the first step of establishing a domestic foundation. The bad thing about its foreign policy is its economic insufficiency. It will not be possible to balance it externally to achieve autonomy unless it is financially stable. Assurance of credibility in the outside environment will present the challenge of prioritizing tax changes, good governance and human capital investments. Second, Islamabad needs to target Gwadar with its message to emphasize business association when addressing the Western issue of militarization. Inadequate proportions of outside involvement may play a role in easing tensions plus strengthening the port growth desire. Third Pakistan needs to tighten its discriminatory relations with the United States. Islamabad needs to focus on mutually beneficial cooperation in economic governance, stability in crises, and counterterrorism, rather than seeking additional cooperation in the form of bipolar relations with these countries resembling the Cold War. American interests can be preserved in such small yet important spheres without impacting relations with China. Fourth Islamabad is to make sure that maximum Chinese support can be accommodated through synchronization of CPEC projects, domestic developments goals, there should be transparency and to make sure that the projects need capacity building and infrastructure. The tactic would turn Chinese investments into empowerment toolboxes instead of a dependency.

Pakistan must finally invest in soft power, and what is referred to as strategic communication. In terms of foreign image, it is long since determined by instability and terrorism. As a city of cultural diplomacy, edifying affairs, and gifts in foreign discourses, the city of Islamabad can establish a new image of a competent actor. And the effect of this image changes on foreign investment, and alliances and foreign legitimacy; not cosmetic.

It is the inflection point of Pakistan after 2025 that will allow it to retract its identity of being a reactive security burden despite failing to entirely mitigate structural issues. Those can only be successful by pursuing a hybrid Realism-Hedging engagements: accepting systemic constraints but maximizing on the possibilities presented by great power to agency a middle power in active becomes. The experience of Islamabad may be utilized as an opportunity as long as it helped to arrange the domestic changes, address the foreign relations

cautiously, and spend money on finances image.

Well, whether conscious or not it is its own ability to negotiate that which will make Pakistan future and not the decision of Washington or Beijing after all. Rather than alignment or separation there will always be a means of forward which is the most important one of building a strategic autonomy and this would be a massive reform to the diplomatic south Asian relations.

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