

## CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE: PAKISTAN'S BALANCING ACT BETWEEN U.S. PRESSURE AND IRAN'S AXIS OF RESISTANCE

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### ABSTRACT

Pakistan is a country with a strategic location at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East, and thus it cannot be ignored in the geopolitics of the region. Its geographical location close to Iran, the long-standing security cooperation with the United States (U.S.), strategic relationship with China, and the close political and economic relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) put Islamabad in a tricky diplomatic situation. New geopolitical realities, such as the worsening of U.S.-Iran relations, the growth of the Axis of Resistance, tightening of sanctions against Tehran, and the conflicts in the region between Israel, Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis have added to the foreign policy options of Pakistan. Pakistan has always tried to keep out of regional disputes without necessarily engaging in any of them but has always enjoyed good relations with all the key stakeholders. This paper will discuss the balancing policy of Pakistan between the U.S. strategic expectations and Iranian growing influence in the region through the prism of strategic hedging and neoclassical realism. The paper presents a case based on a qualitative study which is a secondary research and argues that Pakistan has pursued a pragmatic foreign policy that has placed strategic autonomy, economic security, regional stability and domestic security issues above alliance politics. Despite the fact that this balancing policy has helped Islamabad to be diplomatically flexible, geopolitical polarization and regional instability are still increasing and present a great challenge. The paper concludes that the future foreign policy of Pakistan will be more reliant on economic diplomacy, regional interconnectedness, and multi-vectoral interactions as opposed to strategic alliances.

**Keywords:** Pakistan, United States, Iran, Axis of Resistance, Strategic Hedging, Foreign Policy, Middle East, Regional Security.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The world order has been changing radically in the last 20 years in terms of geopolitics. The waning of unipolarity, the rise of multipolar competition, the rise of China, the new great power rivalry, and the unstable situation in the Middle East have all been a major change in the foreign policy calculations

of middle powers. Pakistan is one of the few states that are in touch with South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East and the Indian Ocean. This is a strategic position that gives tremendous geopolitical opportunities yet it also subjects Islamabad to rival external forces. The foreign

policy of Pakistan has been traditionally based on the principle of having strategic alliances with various powers without being directly involved in the conflicts in the region. Pakistan was a close ally of the United States during the cold war, in security organizations like the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Pakistan became again a frontline ally of the United States in the Global War on Terror, and received a significant amount of military and economic aid (Fair, 2014). But, the relations between the United States and Pakistan have had significant ups and downs. The American interests in the area of terrorism, Afghanistan, nuclear proliferation, and the strengthening of strategic relations between Pakistan and China have occasionally led to a worsening of bilateral relations (Kronstadt, 2023). At the same time, Pakistan has been trying to maintain friendly relations with its neighboring Iran even though Tehran is on bad terms with Washington. Iran is a special country in the foreign policy of Pakistan. The two nations have a 909 kilometer border, have had historical cultural relations and have a lot of potential in energy cooperation. However, the bilateral relations have been limited in the past by sectarian tensions, border security issues, sanctions against Iran, and strategic alliances that Pakistan has with Saudi Arabia and the United States (Rizvi, 2019). Pakistan has also been making it difficult to strategize in its environment due to the emergence and development of the Iranian axis of resistance. The Axis of Resistance is a collection of Iranian-backed state and non-state actors, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, the Syrian government, the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces, and the Houthi movement in Yemen that, together, aim to oppose American and Israeli influence in the Middle East (Juneau, 2019). The military conflicts between these actors, especially following the Gaza conflict of 2023, have intensified the instability in the region and put a strain on the neighboring states. This paper discusses the way in which Pakistan manages these conflicting forces by looking at how domestic political factors, regional security, economic interests and great power competition interact. It

contends that the foreign policy of Pakistan is becoming more of strategic autonomy as opposed to traditional alliance politics.

## 2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Pakistan is placed in a geopolitical reality that is in a state of conflict. On the one hand, the United States still hopes to see Pakistan collaborate in counterterrorism, regional security, and the overall Indo-Pacific strategic goals. Iran on the other hand is a key neighboring state whose regional power has increased with the Axis of Resistance despite the widespread international sanctions. Balanced relations with both actors have been more challenging since the U.S.-Iran tensions have been growing, conflicts with Iran-backed groups, and security issues of its own in the western border. Any major movement towards either of the sides will pose a threat of ruining the relations with the other and at the same time, will impact the economic interests of Pakistan, its international relations and internal stability.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The foreign policy of Pakistan has been pragmatic and flexible in terms of strategy. Researchers believe that the foreign policy of Islamabad is the expression of both systemic and domestic political restrictions (Rizvi, 2019). Instead of seeking ideological alliances, Pakistan has traditionally tried to maximize national security by diversifying alliances. According to Fair (2014), the relations between Pakistan and the United States have never been strategic but just transactional. Despite the fact that Washington has turned to Pakistan several times in times of crisis in the region, bilateral cooperation has often decreased as soon as the short-term security goals were met. This has been a cyclical trend that has led to a lack of trust in each other. Kronstadt (2023) also reports that the U.S.-Pakistan relations have been more selective after the events in Afghanistan, and they are based on counterterrorism, nuclear security, and regional stability, instead of the overall strategic partnership. With reference to Iran, Ehteshami and Zweiri (2007) point out that the regional policy of Tehran has changed tremendously since the Islamic Revolution. Iran is becoming more and more dependent on

asymmetric warfare, proxy groups, and ideological networks to increase the influence in the region without direct military conflict. Juneau (2019) suggests that the Axis of Resistance has turned into the main tool of power projection used by Iran in the Middle East. Tehran has instead of depending on traditional military strength, formed long term alliances with state and non state actors who are able to promote Iranian strategic interests.

Pakistan, in its turn, according to Abbas (2015), does not want to be involved in Middle Eastern conflicts intentionally due to the fact that the polarization of sectarianism might jeopardize the stability on the domestic level. The religious heterogeneity of Pakistan demands a well-calculated foreign policy that does not give the impression of leaning towards either Sunni or Shia geopolitical group. Neoclassical realism also describes the mediating role of domestic institutions, leadership perceptions and economic constraints in the effects of international systemic pressures (Rose, 1998). According to this view, the balancing policy of Pakistan cannot be interpreted only in terms of external geopolitical rivalry but it should also take into account domestic political factors, economic weakness and military considerations. The relationship between Pakistan and the U.S. and the Iranian approach to the region have been researched in the existing literature in detail. Nevertheless, there are comparatively limited studies that examine how Pakistan has been able to balance the U.S. expectations and the growing influence of Iran in the region in a cohesive theoretical framework. To fill this gap, this paper will integrate strategic hedging and neoclassical realism in explaining the changing foreign policy of Pakistan.

#### 4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework used in this study is Strategic Hedging Theory which is backed by Neoclassical Realism. Strategic hedging describes the way the middle powers react to uncertainty by not becoming committed to any particular alliance and having diversified relations with rival states (Kuik, 2008). Instead of being fully aligned with either the United States or Iran, Pakistan seeks diplomatic flexibility, which can help it to keep economic opportunities, minimize strategic risks,

and retain influence in the region. Neoclassical realism is an addition to this approach as it focuses on the fact that foreign policy decisions are not only made based on how power is distributed in the international system but also on domestic factors like political leadership, institutional capacity, military influence, economic conditions and opinion of people (Rose, 1998). The balancing policy by Pakistan is a manifestation of these domestic and foreign geopolitical forces. These theoretical approaches combined can be used to give a detailed approach to the analysis of how Pakistan tries to defend its national interests in the face of increasing U.S.-Iran rivalry.

#### 5. Pakistan's Geostrategic Importance in Contemporary Regional Politics

Pakistan is situated in one of the most strategic places in Eurasia. Pakistan is located at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Indian Ocean and borders China, India, Afghanistan, and Iran and has direct access to the Arabian Sea, via the Port of Gwadar. This geographical location has traditionally placed Pakistan as a key player in regional security, trade and great-power politics (Kaplan, 2012). The strategic importance of Pakistan has grown as a result of the appearance of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), one of the flagship projects of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China. CPEC links China with Xinjiang to the Arabian Sea via Pakistan, providing Beijing with an alternative route to trade, which is not dependent on the Strait of Malacca (Wolf, 2020). As a result, Pakistan has been at the heart of the Chinese regional economic and strategic interests. At the same time, Pakistan is significant to the United States due to its closeness to Afghanistan, Iran and the Persian Gulf. Despite the fact that the U.S. withdrawal of Afghanistan in 2021 diminished the short-term operational value of this country, Washington still considers Islamabad as a powerful regional player in counterterrorism, nuclear security, and the stability of the Indo-Pacific (Kronstadt, 2023). The fact that Pakistan is close to Iran makes its strategic environment even more complicated. Pakistan has a 909 kilometer long border with Iran and must strike a balance between border security, energy cooperation and

regional diplomacy and not to be involved in the confrontation between Tehran and the United States and Israel. The foreign policy of Islamabad is thus influenced by various, and in most cases conflicting, geopolitical factors. In contrast to Cold War alliances politics, Pakistan now wants to have strategic independence by involving itself with various partners as opposed to depending on a particular great power. This multi-vector foreign policy is indicative of the evolving regional dynamics and the understanding by Pakistan that to achieve economic development and regional connectivity, it needs to have stable relations with all its neighbors.

#### **6. U.S. STRATEGIC PRESSURE ON PAKISTAN**

The United States and Pakistan have been involved in a series of cooperation and mistrust in their relations. Pakistan became a member of the U.S.-led security organizations like SEATO and CENTO in the Cold War to counter the Soviet influence. The next time that Pakistan became Washington's main regional ally was in 1979 when the Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan and Pakistan helped the Afghan resistance groups (Fair, 2014). Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Pakistan became a front line partner of the U.S. in the Global War on Terror. In the period between 2001 and 2021, Pakistan was heavily assisted in terms of military and economic support in exchange of counterterrorism cooperation. Nevertheless, the mutual trust was slowly undermined by the disagreements in the militant safe havens, drone attacks, and Afghanistan (Tellis, 2008). The U.S. pullout in Afghanistan changed the bilateral relations. Although Pakistan continues to be a key to the stability of the region, Washington has changed its strategic focus to the Indo-Pacific, rivalry with China, and enhancing its alliance with India. This shift has raised an issue in Pakistan of a perceived loss of strategic value to the United States. The U.S.-India strategic relationship has also been strengthened, further complicating the security situation of Pakistan. The defense deals, intelligence cooperation, and programs like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) have strengthened the view of Pakistan that

Washington is starting to regard India as its key regional ally (Pant & Joshi, 2022).

Regardless of these changes, the United States still hopes that Pakistan will cooperate in counterterrorism, nuclear proliferation, illicit financial networks and stability in the region. Washington has also constantly pressurized Islamabad to abide by the sanctions regimes against Iran, especially in the areas of energy cooperation and financial transactions. The most notable one is the Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline. Despite the fact that the project has the potential to boost the energy security of Pakistan, the U.S. has imposed sanctions on the project several times, thus postponing its execution. Islamabad is thus confronted with the dilemma of meeting its domestic energy demands and the possible economic impact of breaching American sanctions (Khan, 2020). The reaction of Pakistan has been mostly diplomatic as opposed to confrontation. The governments of the past have tried to maintain good working relations with Washington and at the same time increase their partnerships with China, Russia, Gulf states and their neighbors.

#### **7. IRAN'S AXIS OF RESISTANCE AND REGIONAL INFLUENCE**

The foreign policy of Iran has changed tremendously after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Being isolated in the region and threatened by military forces on a regular basis, Tehran slowly worked out the policy of asymmetric deterrence and indirect projection of power. This strategy led to what is now referred to as the "Axis of Resistance" (Juneau, 2019). The Axis of Resistance is a web of state and non-state actors that is backed politically, financially, or militarily by Iran. Key elements are Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Palestine, the Syrian government, Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces and the Houthi movement in Yemen. The Axis is not a centralized military alliance but a loose network that is joined by the resistance to Israeli and American influence in the Middle East (Ehteshami & Hinnebusch, 2019). To Iran, the Axis has a number of strategic aims. First, it expands Iranian influence outside its borders and decreases the reliance on the traditional military

strength. Second, it offers a strategic depth as it prevents direct attacks on Iran. Third, it enhances the bargaining power of Tehran in the regional negotiations. The regional importance of the Axis grew significantly after the battles in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza and Yemen. In October 2023, the eruption of the war between Israel and Hamas escalated the tension in the Middle East, as various Iran-backed groups became directly or indirectly engaged. This intensification raised the issue of the instability in the region, the security of the sea in the Red Sea and the likelihood of a broader regional war.

Although Pakistan has always enjoyed friendly relations with Iran, it has never wanted to be linked with the Axis of Resistance. Islamabad is on the Palestinian side and often criticizes the civilian killings in Gaza, but it never promotes armed operations carried out by Iranian-supported groups. This difference is based on the long tradition of Pakistan to resolve conflicts by diplomacy and respect the sovereignty of states. In addition, Pakistan is also apprehensive of the local repercussions of the sectarian conflicts in the Middle East. An open alignment with the regional policy of Iran might further polarize sectarianism in Pakistan and overt support to anti-Iranian alliances may hurt bilateral ties with Tehran. This has led to a policy of cautious neutrality by Islamabad.

#### **8. PAKISTAN-IRAN RELATIONS: COOPERATION AND CONSTRAINTS**

Since the independence of Pakistan in 1947, Pakistan and Iran have been having diplomatic ties. Historical, religious, and cultural ties exist between the two countries, and the two countries have common interests in border security, regional stability, and economic cooperation. There is a lot of unexploited potential in economic relations between Pakistan and Iran. The rich natural gas reserves in Iran can be used to reduce the chronic energy shortages in Pakistan and increased cross-border trade can be used to spur economic growth in the border provinces of Balochistan and Sistan-Baluchestan. Nevertheless, bilateral economic cooperation has been greatly limited by international sanctions that have been imposed on Iran (Rizvi, 2019). Another aspect of bilateral

relations is security cooperation. The two nations are faced with issues that touch on cross border militant groups, smuggling and illegal trafficking. The presence of armed organizations along the Pakistan-Iran border has been known to occasionally attack within the countries, creating diplomatic tensions. The weakness of bilateral security relations was shown in January 2024 with cross-border missile attacks by both Iran and Pakistan on militant targets. However, the two governments quickly resorted to diplomatic talks and this averted the further escalation and reiterated their dedication to honor the sovereignty of each other. This episode demonstrated the strength of the Pakistan-Iran relations amid the security crises every now and then. The other limitation is due to the close relations between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Saudi Arabia continues to be among the biggest providers of financial aid, job opportunities to Pakistani laborers and investment in Pakistan. Islamabad therefore needs to strike a delicate balance in its relationship with Riyadh and Tehran to ensure that it does not get caught up in the regional conflicts. Pakistan has thus been keen on dialogue, mediation and cooperation in the region. Islamabad does not want to be involved in anti-Iran coalitions or to promote Iranian ambitions in the region, instead, it wants to engage constructively with all the actors in the region.

#### **9. PAKISTAN'S STRATEGIC BALANCING: A POLICY OF HEDGING**

The concept of strategic hedging is the most appropriate way of understanding the contemporary foreign policy of Pakistan. Hedging allows states to have several strategic relationships at the same time without having to make any exclusive commitments to a particular power as opposed to the traditional politics of alliances (Kuik, 2008).

There are a number of illustrations of the hedging strategy of Pakistan.

➤ First, Pakistan has defense relations with the United States and at the same time, is enhancing its strategic relationship with China via CPEC, defense cooperation and economic integration.

- □ Second, Pakistan has a good political and economic relationship with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and maintains diplomatic relations with Iran.
- 3) Pakistan supports Palestinian rights in the international arena but does not take part in the conflicts with Hamas, Hezbollah, or other groups supported by Iran.
- □ Fourth, Pakistan is able to contribute to the counterterrorism efforts in the region and avoid being pressured to join military alliances against other states in the region.

This moderate stance indicates that Pakistan is aware that its national interests are best fulfilled by being flexible in its strategies and not ideology-oriented. This strategy is further supported by economic factors. Pakistan is plagued with frequent fiscal difficulties, energy crisis, foreign debt repayment, and reliance on foreign financial institutions. The presence of good relations with several foreign partners increases foreign investment, development aid and diversification of trade. The foreign policy decisions are also affected by domestic political factors. The religious diversity in Pakistan, civil-military relations, the views of the people on Palestine and an issue of sectarian harmony are some of the reasons that should compel the policymakers to seek moderation as opposed to confrontation. As a result, Pakistan is becoming more and more a facilitator between the rival actors in the region, rather than a member of the geopolitical blocks. This is in line with the wider trends of middle powers that are aiming to enjoy strategic autonomy in an increasingly multipolar international system.

### 10. Challenges to Pakistan's Balancing Strategy

Despite the fact that Pakistan has been able to balance its relations with the United States and Iran through its strategy, it is now facing a lot of geopolitical, economic and security challenges. These limitations complicate the maintenance of a neutral foreign policy with the increasing regional rivalries.

#### 10.1 Escalating U.S.–Iran Rivalry

The most significant threat is the escalating conflict between the US and Iran. After the U.S.

pulled out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 and the reinstatement of sanctions, the bilateral tensions have been at a high level. Later military conflicts with the Iranian-supported forces in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and the Red Sea have contributed to the increase in the instability of the region even more. The strategic location of Pakistan, being close to Iran, and the long-term strategic ties with the United States puts Islamabad in a precarious situation. Any development into open military warfare would compel Pakistan to make tough diplomatic choices which would sabotage its policy of neutrality.

#### 10.2 Border Security and Terrorism

The militant groups that operate along the common border of Pakistan and Iran are still a security threat to the two countries. Weak border management and challenging topography are used by separatist groups, such as militant groups operating in Balochistan province in Pakistan and Sistan-Baluchestan province in Iran to carry out attacks. The cross-border events sometimes create diplomatic tensions even though the two governments have been cooperating regularly. The continued instability in the border distracts resources of the larger cooperation in the region and makes bilateral relations difficult.

#### 10.3 Economic Constraints

The weak economic situation in Pakistan has a great impact on the foreign policy choices of the country. Constant fiscal deficits, foreign debt, inflation and energy shortages augment reliance on foreign financial institutions and foreign investment. The United States still has a significant influence in the institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). As a result, Pakistan should think twice about the economic consequences of the policies that may lead to secondary sanctions or the Western financial aid being cut. In the same vein, despite Iran having enormous energy reserves which would have assisted in curbing the energy crisis in Pakistan, U.S. sanctions have postponed energy projects like the Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline. Pakistan is thus confronted with the dilemma of

meeting short-term economic demands and the diplomatic interests at large.

#### 10.4 Sectarian Sensitivities

*The religious diversity of Pakistan is a domestic issue that needs to be taken care of through foreign policy. The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has sometimes escalated sectarian tensions across the Middle East and South Asia as a result of regional rivalry. The Pakistani governments over the years have thus not taken overt stands which can be construed to favour either Sunni or Shia geopolitical blocs. The social cohesion of the country is also a factor that should be taken into account in the foreign policy of Islamabad.*

#### 10.5 Great Power Competition

Another challenge is the increasing strategic rivalry between China and the United States. The strategic relationship between Islamabad and Beijing has been enhanced by the close relations that Pakistan has with China especially in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Meanwhile, Pakistan is still trying to establish positive relations with Washington. It is necessary to be very diplomatic in dealing with the two powers. Any feeling that Pakistan is decisively heading towards one of the strategic camps might limit its diplomatic flexibility and economic prospects.

### 11. FUTURE PROSPECTS

The foreign policy of Pakistan will probably remain focused on strategic independence and not an exclusive alliance politics. This can be assessed by a number of factors.

➤ First, the shift in the world towards multipolarity offers more possibilities to middle powers to diversify their external relationships. Pakistan is able to maintain simultaneous relations with China, the United States, the Gulf states, Turkey, Central Asia and Iran as opposed to depending on just one major power.

➤ Second, the economic connectivity of the regions is likely to gain more importance. Energy cooperation, trade corridors and infrastructure development projects can foster increased regional interdependence amidst the political rivalries.

➤ Third, the economical interests of Pakistan will most probably influence the future diplomatic

choices. The stable relations with the neighbors and the leading world powers will be needed to attract foreign investment, increase exports, enhance energy security, and enhance regional trade.

➤ Fourth, Pakistan can become more of a mediator in the conflicts in the region. Islamabad has in the past had diplomatic relations with other hostile countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. Despite the limited mediation opportunities, the foreign policy of the country is balanced, which offers Pakistan with a possible diplomatic advantage.

However, this will necessitate sustained diplomatic involvement, institutional coordination and political stability within the country to keep this strategy alive. The crises that may be experienced in the region in future may put more pressure on Islamabad to take more explicit policy positions.

### 12. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the discussion in this paper, there are a number of policy suggestions.

#### 1. Strengthen Strategic Autonomy

Pakistan ought to keep on seeking an autonomous foreign policy on the basis of national interests as opposed to unique strategic affiliations. Strategic autonomy increases flexibility of diplomacy and minimizes exposure to international pressure.

#### 2. Expand Regional Economic Diplomacy

There should be more focus on regional trade, energy relations and economic integration with the neighboring nations. Restoration of regional trade will help to decrease the political tensions and encourage economic development.

#### 3. Improve Border Management with Iran

To ensure that militant organizations are not able to use the border vulnerabilities, Pakistan and Iran need to institutionalize intelligence sharing, joint border patrols, and coordinated counterterrorism mechanisms.

#### 4. Diversify International Partnerships

Pakistan must also keep on building diplomatic and economic ties with various foreign countries, such as China, the United States, the European

Union, the Gulf Cooperation Council, Turkey, and the Central Asian countries. The diversified partnerships minimize over reliance on a given actor.

### 5. Prioritize Energy Security

Pakistan needs to keep on discussing legal and internationally agreeable ways of improving energy collaboration with the neighboring nations without breaching the international obligations.

### 6. Enhance Regional Dialogue

Islamabad must also be proactive in regional diplomatic talks with Iran, Saudi Arabia, China, Türkiye, and Gulf states that will help in de-escalating tensions in the Middle East and facilitate collective security.

### 7. Invest in Economic Resilience

Diplomatic independence of Pakistan will be enhanced by reducing its external economic vulnerability by fiscal reforms, diversifying exports, industrialization, and foreign direct investment.

## 13. CONCLUSION

The foreign policy of Pakistan is an example that demonstrates the challenges facing middle powers in a world that is becoming more and more fragmented. Sandwiched between the two opposing geopolitical forces, Islamabad has aimed at ensuring that it has good working relationships with the United States and Iran at the same time trying to build stronger relations with China and the Gulf states. Instead of committing to alliances, Pakistan has implemented a flexible, diversified, and national interest approach to strategy. This strategy has helped Islamabad to stay out of the conflict in the region without compromising on its diplomatic relations with various players. This paper has shown that the balancing approach of Pakistan is affected by a number of interconnected factors such as geostrategic position, economic weaknesses, domestic politics, security issues in the region and changing great power rivalry. Despite the changes in the strategic environment in the region due to the Axis of Resistance by Iran, Pakistan has never been willing to join any regional military alliance. Rather, it has promoted dialogue, respect of sovereignty and peaceful resolution of conflicts. On the same note,

although the United States still remains a key diplomatic and security partner, Pakistan has become more diversified in its foreign policy by becoming more engaged with China, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and its neighbors. This diversification is an indication of the wider global trends of multipolarity and strategic independence of middle powers. Although these have been successful, the balancing strategy of Pakistan is still susceptible to the growing regional conflicts, border insecurity, economic dependence and growing U.S. competition with China. Maintaining strategic neutrality will thus necessitate wise diplomacy, greater economic strength, better management of the borders and continued interaction with regional and international partners. Finally, the future foreign policy of Pakistan will most probably be pragmatic, but not ideological. With geopolitical rivalry still defining the politics of the region, the capacity of Islamabad to balance between the rival powers will be one of the challenges that will define its foreign policy in the twenty-first century.

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