

SPECIAL ISSUE

# Navigating the Great-Power Competition: Pakistan and Its Relationship with the United States and China

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**KEYWORDS:** PAKISTAN; MIDDLE POWER; U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS; STRATEGIC INTERESTS; SOUTH ASIA

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This essay draws on insights from hedging theory to examine how Pakistan, as a middle power, can navigate key strategic and domestic factors in its policies in response to the growing great-power competition between the U.S. and China.

### MAIN ARGUMENT

Until recently, Pakistan had deftly taken advantage of its position in the U.S.-China-Pakistan strategic triangle to improve its security vis-à-vis India. Intensification of U.S.-China great-power competition, with the U.S. embracing India as a bulwark against China and the closer alignment of Pakistan-China strategic interests, puts Pakistan in a security dilemma. Islamabad faces challenges in navigating this great-power competition as the role of middle powers increases. Hedging theory shows how Islamabad could gain from a working relationship with Washington on strategic interests, despite Pakistan's aligned interests with China. Pakistan's new national policy, with an emphasis on geoeconomics over geopolitics, will be important for work with both powers.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Pakistan can count on China's consistent friendship, given Chinese economic and security investments, irrespective of Beijing's own strategic interests in fostering this relationship.
- Even if broad-based, nontransactional relations seem unlikely in the near future, areas of mutual interest remain between the U.S. and Pakistan. Through engagement and frank conversation, the U.S. can improve nuclear facilities and safeguard nuclear assets, which would also address Islamabad's suspicion that Washington aims to defang its nuclear capabilities and sabotage Chinese investment in Pakistan.
- The U.S. can aid Pakistan in its policy paradigm shift from security to geoeconomics, which would help address Washington's own long-pending demands that Islamabad ease security paranoia about India. By aiding economic reforms and reducing India-Pakistan tensions, the U.S. can foster internal stability and external peace for Pakistan, preventing Islamabad from completely embracing Beijing.

The rise of China and the aggressive posturing by Washington to contain Beijing in Asia are marks of an intensifying great-power competition between China and the United States. This rivalry has caused strategic ambiguity among many middle and small powers, as they feel pressed to choose sides, and alignment and quasi-alignment positioning have become a challenging foreign policy issue. There are few regions where U.S.-China great-power politics cannot be played out, and the drama is underway in its bluntest forms in Asia. Amid this larger Asian theater, and buttressed by U.S.-China competition, is the local security competition between India and Pakistan in South Asia, giving rise to what scholars refer to as either a cascading or nested security dilemma.<sup>1</sup>

There is a continuity in the United States' China policy. Like its predecessors, the Biden administration has emphasized strengthening the role of the Quad (comprising the United States, Australia, Japan, and India) and key U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific to contain China.<sup>2</sup> In June 2021, the U.S. Innovation and Competition Act, with bipartisan support in the Senate, labeled China as "the greatest geopolitical and socioeconomic challenge for United States foreign policy" and called for treating Taiwan as a sovereign state of "vital strategic importance."<sup>3</sup> This great-power rivalry is intensifying irrespective of, and indeed even because of, trade interdependence between Washington and Beijing. According to John J. Mearsheimer, unlike the U.S.-Soviet rivalry during the Cold War, a U.S.-China cold war would lead to a "shooting war."<sup>4</sup>

U.S.-China competition already put Pakistan in the spotlight when the erstwhile Trump administration raised questions over the viability of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the loans attached to the multibillion dollar project.<sup>5</sup> To navigate the choppy waters of great-power rivalry, Pakistan must make hard decisions to advance its economic and security relations with China and also maintain a working relationship with the United States, even as Pakistan's relations with China dent any hope of

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<sup>1</sup> Rajesh Basrur, "India and Nuclear Deterrence," in *New Directions in India's Foreign Policy: Theory and Praxis*, ed. Harsh V. Pant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 215–36.

<sup>2</sup> "A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision," U.S. Department of State, November 4, 2019 ~ <http://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Tony Romm, "Senate Approves Sprawling \$250 Billion Bill to Curtail China's Economic and Military Ambitions," *Washington Post*, June 8, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "The Inevitable Rivalry: America, China and the Tragedy of Great-Power Politics," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2021.

<sup>5</sup> "A Conversation with Ambassador Alice Wells on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor," U.S. Department of State, November 1, 2019 ~ <https://2017-2021.state.gov/a-conversation-with-ambassador-alice-wells-on-the-china-pakistan-economic-corridor/index.html>.

a strategic relationship with the United States. Given this predicament, this essay will analyze how Pakistan can balance between China and the United States and explain Pakistan's policy choices that are not inimical to U.S. interests in the region. The essay is organized as follows:

- ≈ pp. 202–7 establish a framework for the essay to examine Pakistan's position between the United States and China by discussing how international relations theory conceptualizes states' alignment and hedging behaviors and defines middle powers.
- ≈ pp. 207–11 discuss Pakistan-China relations and how China has interacted with Pakistan's national interests, finding that China's support has grown at a measured pace and is reinforced by the two states' mutual adversarial view of India.
- ≈ pp. 211–16 detail Pakistan-U.S. relations and how the United States has interacted with Pakistan's national interests, finding that U.S. support for Pakistan has waned significantly since the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.
- ≈ pp. 216–22 analyze Pakistan's position between the two powers as it seeks to pursue its own national interests and transition from a geostrategic to a geoeconomic foreign policy.
- ≈ pp. 222–23 conclude that bilateralism may be the preferable choice for Pakistan. To create beneficial conditions for its new geoeconomic policy and to be successful in maintaining positive relations with both the United States and China, Pakistan will need to work on developing its own internal strength and stability.

## ALIGNMENT, MIDDLE POWERS, AND PAKISTAN

### *Middle Powers' Alignment and Hedging Strategies*

Alliances, alignment, and balance of power are frequently the object of study in the discipline of international relations (IR).<sup>6</sup> One major foreign policy challenge a state faces is to decide which greater power it will ally with and for how long, captured in IR by the “balancing or bandwagoning” debate.<sup>7</sup> Briefly put, balancing is the choice of allying with other states against a threatening one, while bandwagoning is allying or aligning with

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<sup>6</sup> See Daniel H. Nexon, “The Balance of Power in the Balance,” *World Politics* 61, no. 2 (2009): 330–59; Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); and Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 1, 87.

<sup>7</sup> Randall L. Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In,” *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994): 72–107; and Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979).

the source of a threat.<sup>8</sup> The contemporary rise of China has made balance-of-power theory a cynosure of IR, but the parsimony of this theory has encountered theoretical as well as empirical challenges.<sup>9</sup> The applicability of this theory when used in the case of China and its neighbors is too narrow to explain their complex relationships.<sup>10</sup>

A term that better explains the behavior beyond this dichotomy, and which has drawn extensive contemporary policy and scholarly attention in the 21st century, is hedging.<sup>11</sup> However, despite being hailed as “the norm in international relations”<sup>12</sup> among states and its growing use to explain alignment choice, hedging still remains “an under-studied, under-theorized, and often taken for granted concept in international relations literature.”<sup>13</sup>

Evelyn Goh defines hedging as “a set of strategies aimed at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality. Instead, they cultivate a middle position that forestalls or avoids having to choose one side at the obvious expense of another.”<sup>14</sup> While taking a similar line, Cheng-Chwee Kuik conceives of hedging as occupying a middle position between pure balancing and pure bandwagoning and involving the mixture of “risk-contingency” and “reward-maximizing” options. For Kuik, these are two opposite options because reward-maximizing “options are aimed at maximizing economic, diplomatic and political benefits from a positive relationship with a rising power when all is well,”<sup>15</sup> whereas risk-contingency measures “are designed to minimize and mitigate risks in case things go awry.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Kuik observes that these measures are “contradictory and counteracting in that while the former pleases a big power (at times by showing deference to it), the latter

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<sup>8</sup> Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 1, 87.

<sup>9</sup> Kei Koga, “The Concept of ‘Hedging’ Revisited: The Case of Japan’s Foreign Policy Strategy in East Asia’s Power Shift,” *International Studies Review* 20, no. 4 (2018): 633–60.

<sup>10</sup> Amitav Acharya, “Seeking Security in the Dragon’s Shadow: China and Southeast Asia in the Emerging Asian Order,” Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Working Paper, no. 44, March 1, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Koga, “The Concept of ‘Hedging’ Revisited.”

<sup>12</sup> Evelyn Goh, “Understanding ‘Hedging’ in Asia-Pacific Security,” *Pacific Forum, PacNet*, no. 43, August 31, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Hoo Tiang Boon, “The Hedging Prong in India’s Evolving China Strategy,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, no. 101 (2016): 792–804.

<sup>14</sup> Goh, “Understanding ‘Hedging’ in Asia-Pacific Security.”

<sup>15</sup> Cheng-Chwee Kuik, “How Do Weaker States Hedge? Unpacking ASEAN States’ Alignment Behavior Towards China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, no. 100 (2016): 504.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 505.

displeases it (at times by defying it).<sup>17</sup> He also notes that “[a] hedger would typically pursue these options concurrently so that their effects would cancel each other out.”<sup>18</sup> The essence of these contradictory acts is to project “an image of *not* siding with or against any power, to avoid the danger of putting all eggs in one basket and to keep a fallback position for as long as the power structure...remains uncertain.”<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, little academic attention has been paid to examine the micro aspects of a state’s alignment behavior, its constituent options, and the interplay between them. A state has many alignment choices, and these always consist of “not one but a few constituent components; some of them mutually *complementary*, others *competing* and even *contradictory*.”<sup>20</sup> Much of the existing literature has focused on military alignment, while nonmilitary options, such as economic and diplomatic tools of statecraft, are overlooked. Kuik reasons that this flawed analytical treatment is owed to several reasons:

- Alignment is not just about alliance choice.
- Nonmilitary approaches are just as important as—and in some cases more important than—military arrangements in allowing weaker states to position themselves vis-à-vis a major power in their preferred way (for example, promoting closer bilateral relations with a rising power via economic and diplomatic partnerships but staying short of forging a military alliance).
- The pattern and degree to which nonmilitary options are used in conjunction with military means vis-à-vis competing powers is an integral and non-negligible part of alignment behavior (for example, strengthening economic ties and demonstrating a greater political deference to big power A to maximize rewards but simultaneously cultivating a limited defense partnership with big power B to mitigate the risks of uncertainty).<sup>21</sup>

The United States’ predominant role in the international system, institutions, and global governance regimes continues to influence the dynamics of middle-power engagement with China. Asia’s middle powers are attempting to balance between the two powers, generally preferring, in crude terms, economic engagement with Beijing and defense and security

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<sup>17</sup> Kuik, “How Do Weaker States Hedge?” 505.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 501.

cooperation with Washington. The middle powers are also attempting to take advantage of U.S.-China competition to enhance their own space. When caught in great-power competition, middle powers face tough choices. Their policy preferences are influenced by myriad factors, including (1) the level of military ties with each power, (2) the need to access advanced defense technologies, (3) trade and investment, (4) societal makeup and inclination of the people, (5) the level of people-to-people contacts with each power, (6) the size and interests of expatriate communities, (7) political convergence with each power and the history of political relations, (8) major-power interference in domestic politics, (9) the relative ease in accessing and securing external finance and loans, and (10) the level of support from a major power on core interests or issues of the middle power.

Thus, from the perspective of hedging theory, hard-power politics alone do not drive middle powers or small states to align; alignment is also equally dependent on other factors such as diplomacy, economic partnerships, and domestic factors.

### *The Allure of Pakistan as a Middle Power*

Liberal IR theorists identify middle powers by their foreign policy behavior, proclivity for seeking multilateral solutions to international problems, advocacy of compromise, and, in general, tendency to be part of solutions to problems at an international level.<sup>22</sup> This foreign policy behavior is identified through middle-power diplomacy, and it is achieved by exercising influence and taking internal initiatives through cooperation and issue-based regime changes at the global level. The other factors that determine middle-power diplomacy are “protecting...core interests,”<sup>23</sup> “access/relation to great powers,”<sup>24</sup> and the military factor.<sup>25</sup> Pakistan, while lacking economic and many other avenues of influence, has clearly showcased its middle-power role. For example, Pakistan has assumed a mediator role in the Saudi Arabia-Iran conflict, convened member states of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to aid Afghanistan, affected nuclear attitudes in and beyond the region, helped

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Andrew F. Cooper, Richard A. Higgott, and Kim R. Nossal, *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Carr, “Is Australia a Middle Power? A Systemic Impact Approach,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 68, no. 1 (2014): 79.

<sup>24</sup> Tanguy Struye de Swielande, “Middle Powers: A Comprehensive Definition and Typology,” in *Rethinking Middle Powers in the Asian Century: New Theories, New Cases*, ed. Tanguy Struye de Swielande et al. (London: Routledge, 2019), 35.

<sup>25</sup> Dorothee Vandamme, “The Case of Pakistan: Middlepowermanship as a Role,” in *ibid.*, 253.

bring an end to the Afghan conflict, and postured toward India regarding core interests and outstanding issues. The annual Asia Power Index launched by the Lowy Institute, which measures resources and influence to rank the relative power of states in Asia, identifies Pakistan as a middle power.<sup>26</sup> Having considered these factors, this essay takes Pakistan to be a middle-power state.

Pakistan's location is advantageous to its linchpin status in the geopolitics of the region and beyond. It exerts influence on the political and security developments on the continent while also offering several advantages to the powers involved in the region—for instance, its coastlines provide access to the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf, giving it the opportunity to be engaged in pipeline projects traversing Afghanistan and Pakistan to the ocean. From the perspective of the United States, Pakistan still holds the key to Afghanistan: a safe U.S. exit from Afghanistan would not have been possible without Pakistan's support. Pakistan's army, with nuclear weapons at its disposal and enjoying veto power over the internal and external policies of the state, also has been traditionally seen as a strategic asset by the United States. For China, Pakistan is not just a counterweight to India but also provides a gateway to its ambitious plans for a network of ports, pipelines, roads, and railways connecting it to the oil and gas fields of the Middle East and the markets of both Europe and East Asia. Pakistan's coastlines are also significant to the Chinese navy as they help Beijing navigate from the Indian Ocean to the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea. Pakistan additionally holds significance for China's growing role in the Muslim world.

For Pakistan, security concerns have traditionally dominated the state narrative both in practice and policy choices. Islamabad has only recently started a new policy that marks a shift from geopolitics to geoeconomics.<sup>27</sup> Pakistan's geoeconomic policy—with greater emphasis on connectivity and trade routes—will be affected by the great powers' two different and competing visions: China's trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the U.S.-led initiative to invest in five to ten large infrastructure projects to counter BRI.<sup>28</sup> In this case, nontraditional security policy will affect traditional state decision-making—Pakistan will also not underestimate the impact of a U.S. transfer of defense weapons and technology to India.

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<sup>26</sup> Lowy Institute, Asia Power Index, 2021 edition ~ <https://power.lowyinstitute.org>.

<sup>27</sup> "Pakistan's Priorities Have Shifted from Geo-political to Geo-economic, Says Qureshi," *Dawn*, February 24, 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Andrea Shalal, "U.S. Eyes January Rollout of First Projects to Counter China's Belt and Road—Official," *Reuters*, November 10, 2021.



For a state like Pakistan, where overlapping interests with one power—China—are very evident, maintaining strategic ambiguity or autonomy would be the desirable policy choice. The question is if it will be able to do so given the strategic overlap it enjoys with China. In South Asia, the U.S.-India partnership has become reality, as has strengthened Pakistan-China cooperation as a result of Islamabad's shift from security to economic priorities. The great-power competition between the United States and China in South Asia will have a significant fallout on the already fraught regional security environment.

The strategic community and policymakers in Pakistan are wise to the reality that the relationship between Washington and Islamabad will be determined by U.S.-China competition. It is thus pertinent to map out Pakistan-China and Pakistan-U.S. relations as well as areas of strategic alignments and altercations. Pakistan's national interests—Kashmir, Afghanistan, and its nuclear status—elicit different responses from the United States and China. As the next sections will show, Beijing's support for Islamabad has been incremental, whereas Washington does not share Islamabad's strategic outlook.

#### CHINA-PAKISTAN RELATIONS: MOVING FROM STRATEGIC TO ECONOMIC PARTNERS

##### *CPEC and Diplomatic Support versus India*

Recent years have seen a qualitative transformation in the relationship between Pakistan and China. Before CPEC, China and Pakistan had strategic relations in the domains of defense and nuclear technology. Most of this relationship revolved around the animosity the two countries share with India. India, being a security threat to Pakistan and a strategic regional competitor to China, is central to Pakistan-China relations. China recognizes that India poses a threat to its quest for regional, if not global, preeminence. For Beijing, Pakistan plays an important role in preventing India's regional primacy, and to a great extent, Islamabad has succeeded in it. India's diplomatic and military strength has been more focused on Pakistan than China. The implications were evident during the initial skirmishes and standoff at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in 2020, in which India was caught off guard and its military planners appeared unprepared to confront China.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Abhijnan Rej, "Ladakh: The Anatomy of a Surprise," *Diplomat*, August 1, 2020.

China-Pakistan bilateral ties have now expanded from the defense sector to broader economic domains, including agriculture, education, industry, and infrastructure.<sup>30</sup> In 2015, both countries cemented their economic relationship by signing the multibillion-dollar CPEC agreement. In 2019, Islamabad and Beijing concluded the second phase of their 2006 free-trade agreement in a bid to expand trade and address underlying issues causing their trade imbalance. Meanwhile, as India-Pakistan tensions heightened in early 2019, China played a twofold role by both enhancing strategic communication and coordination with Pakistan and attempting to balance its relationship with India. In February 2019, when India carried out air strikes deep inside Pakistan, not only did Beijing support Islamabad by calling for the respect of sovereignty and territorial integrity, but defense cooperation saw an upward turn.<sup>31</sup> China engaged in active diplomacy on crisis de-escalation, with the Chinese foreign minister appealing to both his Indian and Pakistani counterparts to exercise restraint and engage in dialogue.<sup>32</sup>

On August 5, 2019, when India revoked the special status of the Kashmir region under its control and reorganized the area to be under direct Indian government administration by bifurcating the erstwhile state into two union territories, Ladakh and Jammu and Kashmir, China went the extra mile in support of Pakistan. First, Beijing reacted by criticizing India's unilateral actions, expressing concerns over India's revocation of Kashmir's special status, and calling on "relevant sides" to not "unilaterally change the status quo and escalate tensions."<sup>33</sup> Second, Beijing directly responded to India's action in changing Ladakh's status and termed it an unacceptable practice that undermined Chinese territorial sovereignty. Moreover, given that Ladakh is disputed territory between India, Pakistan, and China, Beijing cautioned New Delhi to not "complicate [the] boundary question."<sup>34</sup> Within a week of these Indian actions, Islamabad reached out to Beijing for emergency bilateral consultations. On Pakistan's initiative, then foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi went to Beijing on a "special and emergency visit"<sup>35</sup> and

<sup>30</sup> For an overview of the Pakistan-China relationship outside of CPEC, see Muhammad Faisal, "Pakistan-China Relations: Beyond CPEC," *Strategic Studies* 40, no. 2 (2020): 23–44.

<sup>31</sup> Manish Shukla, "After Balakot Strike, Pakistan Deploys Chinese Air Defence Missile Systems along Border," DNA, March 23, 2019.

<sup>32</sup> "China Expresses 'Deep Concern' Over India-Pakistan Conflict," Reuters, February 27, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Remarks on the Current Situation in Jammu Kashmir," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (People's Republic of China), August 6, 2019 ~ [http://et.china-embassy.org/eng/fyrth/201908/t20190806\\_7182114.htm](http://et.china-embassy.org/eng/fyrth/201908/t20190806_7182114.htm).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> "China Calls on Avoidance of Unilateral Actions on Kashmir Issue," Xinhua, August 9, 2019.

held “wide-ranging consultations” with his Chinese counterpart.<sup>36</sup> With endorsement from China, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Pakistan requested an emergency security council session on August 13, 2019. The session was held two days later, the first Security Council meeting on the India-Pakistan question since 1965.<sup>37</sup> While it was a closed-door consultation among council members, Pakistan considered the meeting a diplomatic win against India, as it wanted recognition that the Kashmir conflict remains an international dispute.

In addition to raising the issue at the UN Security Council, China saw the redrawing of boundaries as a provocation and hence opened another military front on the LAC.<sup>38</sup> This aggressive Chinese posturing on the LAC was a major reason behind a crucial change in India’s Pakistan policy. Instead of attacking Pakistan across the Line of Control (LoC) and perpetuating military, economic, and diplomatic costs on Pakistan for harboring anti-India terrorists, India restored a ceasefire along the LoC in 2021 that at the time of writing continues to largely hold.

A crucial change in New Delhi’s strategic calculus is due to the ongoing India-China military standoff at Leh, a district in Ladakh. A two-and-a-half front war, which Indian military officials have been discussing since 2009, is now a real possibility—for any major power, if the LAC turns into another bloody LoC, it would be a strategic calamity. Every professional military detests fighting on multiple fronts at once. Additionally, it has been argued that it is always easier to make peace overtures to the weaker side because the relatively powerful side has leverage and can be generous or project generosity. Therefore, to strategically disentangle itself from one of its adversaries, Pakistan or China, India seems keen on avoiding a two-front war by revisiting its Pakistan policy. Otherwise, there were no major changes between India and Pakistan before and after the 2021 ceasefire agreement. After a lull of a few months, militancy-related incidents increased in Kashmir, drones were used to drop weapons on and target an Indian Air Force base in Jammu, and infiltration resumed.<sup>39</sup> In October 2021, India lost nine soldiers, including two army officers, in an encounter with the recently infiltrated

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<sup>36</sup> “Foreign Minister Visited Beijing on 9-10 August 2019,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Pakistan), Press Release, August 10, 2019 [~ http://mofa.gov.pk/foreign-minister-visited-beijing-on-9-10-august-2019](http://mofa.gov.pk/foreign-minister-visited-beijing-on-9-10-august-2019).

<sup>37</sup> “UN Security Council Discusses Kashmir, China Urges India and Pakistan to Ease Tensions,” UN News, United Nations, August 16, 2019 [~ https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/08/1044401](https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/08/1044401).

<sup>38</sup> Ashley J. Tellis, “Hustling in the Himalayas: The Sino-Indian Border Confrontation,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 4, 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Aijaz Hussain, “Drone Attacks on Indian Air Force Base in Jammu Underscore New Threat,” *Diplomat*, June 28, 2021.

militants in the Poonch region of Jammu.<sup>40</sup> The only change is that these attacks, by and large, have been downplayed by the Indian leadership to avoid any domestic backlash that might put the ceasefire agreement under scrutiny. Within this geopolitical milieu, one can assume that the China factor was an important ploy that forced India to rethink its aggressive retaliatory policy against cross-border terrorism. One lesson Pakistan and China both took from the India-China skirmishes in the Galwan Valley in 2020 is that they can maximize their interests by taking on India together. They could use this strategy in the future to force India to the negotiation table. For Pakistan, China is also a guarantor in global diplomatic platforms, as Beijing often comes to Islamabad's aid in the face of international pressure.<sup>41</sup>

### *China and the Kashmir Issue*

Given the ideological character of the Pakistani state, Kashmir enjoys a significant place as a cornerstone in Pakistan's foreign policy.<sup>42</sup> To this effect, China's support in the matter of Kashmir has been critically important to Pakistan. China's Kashmir policy over the decades has vacillated from a strong pro-Pakistan position to a balanced stance. From the 1960s to the 1980s, China supported Islamabad in times of conflict with New Delhi over Kashmir.<sup>43</sup> During this period, China endorsed a confrontationist and ideologically driven policy that supported nationalist and self-determination movements. From the 1980s to 2019, Beijing adopted a neutral approach, seeing Kashmir as a bilateral issue that could be resolved only through negotiations. On numerous occasions, Beijing refused to endorse Islamabad's calls to the United Nations to demilitarize the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Nevertheless, in this period China continued to support Pakistan's military and military-industrial capabilities vis-à-vis India.<sup>44</sup> During the 1990s, China often advised Pakistan to put the Kashmir issue on the backburner and let history resolve it while stressing that both countries should normalize their relations through trade. This Kashmir policy had much to do with Beijing's intentions to forge economic engagement with New Delhi. But at the same

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<sup>40</sup> Arun Sharma and Nirupama Subramanian, "Day 27 of J&K Search Ops: 9 Soldiers Killed So Far, Key Red Flags for Army," *Indian Express*, November 7, 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Adnan Aamir, "China Defends Pakistan by Vetoing Kashmir Bombing Resolution," *Nikkei Asia*, March 15, 2019.

<sup>42</sup> Mohammad Ayub Khan, *Friends Not Masters: A Political Autobiography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 114.

<sup>43</sup> John Garver, "China's Kashmir Policies," *India Review* 3, no. 1 (2004): 1–24.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

time, Beijing appeased Islamabad by issuing stapled visas for Kashmiris traveling to China.

However, there has been a recent change in China's strategic calculus regarding the Kashmir issue. Internationalizing the Kashmir issue at the United Nations marked a departure from past policy. It is assumed that China's aggressive posture against India along the Sino-Indian border in the Ladakh region was to protect CPEC, which passes through Gilgit-Baltistan. China were concerned with India's construction of the 255-kilometer-long Darbuk-Shyok-DBO Road, which can allow India to quickly choke the Karakoram Pass in case of conflict with Pakistan and which would also paralyze trade and energy supply along CPEC.<sup>45</sup> Since 2015, under the framework of CPEC, intelligence sharing between Beijing and Islamabad has increased on "mutual threats, most notably the threat of India's possible move to sabotage CPEC in Gilgit-Baltistan."<sup>46</sup> According to U.S. intelligence reported in the Indian media, the Chinese military was well aware of Indian troop movements ahead of the 2020 clash at Galwan. It is believed that Pakistan shared intelligence on the position of the Indian military with China.<sup>47</sup> This intelligence cooperation was added value, as China would already have made a major effort to protect BRI. Hence, Pakistan can make Kashmir a cornerstone issue in its foreign policy, knowing that China will be willing to provide both diplomatic and military support in the future. Pakistan is maximizing its economic, strategic, and security interests by aligning with China—no other country can meet its interests so well. But Pakistan still needs a working relationship with other powers, particularly with the United States, as it is not prudent for a middle power to antagonize a global power.

## PAKISTAN-U.S. RELATIONS: FROM FRIENDS TO "FRENEMIES"

### *Strategic Benefits, Security Assistance, Counterterrorism, and Afghanistan*

Pakistan-U.S. relations have seen more lows than highs since the 2011 revelation that Osama bin Laden was living near the Pakistani military's

<sup>45</sup> Shaurya Karanbir Gurung, "In Making for Two Decades, DSDBO Road Now Upsets China," *Economic Times* (India), June 8, 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Adnan Amir, "Are Indo-China Clashes Meant to Protect the BRI in Pakistan?" *China-U.S. Focus*, September 25, 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Tara Kartha, "India Must Heed Growing China-Pakistan Intel-sharing. It May Have Aided Galwan Clash," *Print* (India), August 11, 2020.

garrison town in Abbottabad. This development led to an intensive scrutiny of bilateral relations and prompted Congress to call for reconsidering the wisdom behind providing economic and military aid to Pakistan. Traditionally, Pakistan has valued relations with the United States because the latter provided significant security and defense assistance, which played a key role in Pakistan's security realm. Since 2001, when Pakistan joined the U.S.-led coalition against terrorism, it has been a leading recipient of U.S. assistance, receiving more than \$30 billion in aid and military reimbursement.<sup>48</sup> Despite that assistance, the Pakistani military did not embrace the U.S. strategic goal—fighting terrorism as a strategic doctrine. The United States also failed to convince Islamabad to move away from an India-centric security doctrine. Outsourcing security by relying on terrorist organizations and expanding its nuclear arsenal created a more tense and distant relationship between the United States and Pakistan.<sup>49</sup> By 2011, U.S. lawmakers had begun to doubt Pakistan's intentions and capacity as a partner and congressional inquiries were initiated on Pakistan's receipt of U.S. aid appropriations.<sup>50</sup>

Prioritizing an increasingly warm relationship with India, coupled with Pakistan's failure to rein in the Taliban, led U.S. administrations to re-evaluate policy vis-à-vis Pakistan. In particular, the Trump administration's South Asia strategy, unveiled in 2017, put Pakistan on the spot by accusing the country of harboring terrorist organizations. Economic aid was stopped, and International Military Education and Training program opportunities were also closed. The Trump administration's request for budget assistance to Pakistan for the 2020 fiscal year was just \$70 million, including \$48 million for economic and developmental issues.<sup>51</sup>

The United States' Pakistan policy has revolved around Afghanistan. Ostensibly, Pakistan in various capacities tried to address the situation in Afghanistan, and although Pakistan's Afghan policy has never completely aligned with that of the United States, Pakistan wanted the ruling setup in Afghanistan to not be anti-Pakistan even if it were not pro-Pakistan either. For Islamabad, the Taliban was the best bet against the governments inside Afghanistan that were seen to be close to India and harboring anti-Pakistan

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<sup>48</sup> K. Alan Kronstadt, "Direct Overt U.S. Aid Appropriations for and Military Reimbursements to Pakistan, FY2002–FY2020," Congressional Research Service, March 12, 2019 ~ <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/pakaid.pdf>.

<sup>49</sup> On Pakistan and terrorism, see C. Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 251–60.

<sup>50</sup> K. Alan Kronstadt, "Pakistan-U.S. Relations," Congressional Research Service, CRS Report for Congress, IF11270, 2019.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

elements. For its part, the United States also failed to address Pakistan's security concerns inside Afghanistan.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, Pakistan relied on the duplicitous policy of supporting Doha peace talks between the United States and the Taliban while at the same time also abetting and facilitating the Taliban to take over Afghanistan. This fraught relationship between the United States and Pakistan, founded on the premise that Islamabad would align with Washington's interests in the region, is seen to have failed miserably after the Taliban overran Kabul in August 2021. Without counterterrorism and support for the U.S.-led mission in Afghanistan, there were no longer any strategic and geopolitical interests overlapping between Washington and Islamabad. The "bubble" of good relations that emerged from September 11 burst with the U.S. exit from Afghanistan.<sup>53</sup>

The United States has also hinted that it implicitly agrees with India on the 2019 political developments in Kashmir. Apart from some rhetoric around human rights and democracy, the United States will not push India hard for any political settlement on Kashmir. Thus, it is not clear yet what policy changes Pakistan would need to make to induce changes and more favor in U.S. policies. A shift from geopolitics to geoeconomics is too idealistic to be viewed as a strategic shift that would persuade Washington to change its own policy from confrontational to more accommodative.

### *Post-Afghan Exit: Waning U.S. Interest*

One of the few major U.S. policy views that has seen continued adherence among administrations all the way from Obama to Trump to Biden is that of Pakistan being an irritant in Washington's overall South Asia strategy. Only late in the Trump administration did the government change its attitude on publicly calling Pakistan the main spoiler in the region to adopt one that was more cordial. For the Afghan talks and a U.S. exit strategy from Afghanistan to proceed smoothly, President Donald Trump adjusted to a workable relationship with then prime minister Imran Khan. Pakistan managed to influence the Trump administration through an unconventional channel: the personal contacts of Saudi crown prince Mohammad bin Salman were used to arrange the Trump-Khan meeting.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Fair, *Fighting to the End*, 118.

<sup>53</sup> "U.S.-Pakistan Relations Are at Crossroads," NPR, October 7, 2021 ~ <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/07/1043938029/u-s-pakistan-relations-are-at-a-crossroads>.

<sup>54</sup> Kamran Yousaf, "PM Has Saudi Crown Prince to Thank for U.S. Visit," *Express Tribune* (Pakistan), July 20, 2019.

President Joe Biden has followed a similar policy on Pakistan. Cognizant of Pakistan's importance in bringing a workable solution to the Afghanistan conundrum, Biden continued with the Trump administration's commitment to the Taliban on troop withdrawal. On July 8, 2021, Biden announced that the United States was ending the "forever war" and would complete troop withdrawal by the end of August.<sup>55</sup> The hasty exit of U.S. troops without an assured post-withdrawal setup created mayhem, chaos, and uncertainty regarding the future contours of Afghanistan. The Taliban takeover, which was predicted as inevitable but not expected for a few months, occurred within weeks.<sup>56</sup> The Taliban overran Kabul on August 15, 2021, and became the de facto rulers of Afghanistan.

The U.S. military viewed the war in Afghanistan as a "strategic failure."<sup>57</sup> It also blamed Pakistan for its loss in Afghanistan. The Taliban's commitment, steadfastness, and grit played an important role in victory, but Pakistan's support—by providing both sanctuary and military financial support—was crucial. In this regard, in a congressional hearing on Afghanistan, U.S. chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley said that "we need to fully examine the role of Pakistan sanctuary."<sup>58</sup> On Pakistan's support behind the Taliban's victory, U.S. secretary of state Antony Blinken noted that "this is one of the things we're going to be looking at in the days and weeks ahead—the role that Pakistan has played over the last 20 years."<sup>59</sup> Others called for sanctioning Pakistani military and intelligence officials who supported the Taliban.<sup>60</sup>

However, apart from these initial reverberations on Afghanistan, the United States has, by and large, refrained from issuing any strong statements against Pakistan. Washington's response post-Afghanistan exit has included politically measured statements followed by official visits to Islamabad. On her visit to Pakistan in October 2021, U.S. deputy secretary of state Wendy Sherman

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<sup>55</sup> "Remarks by President Biden on the Drawdown of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan," White House, July 8, 2021 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/07/08/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-drawdown-of-u-s-forces-in-afghanistan>.

<sup>56</sup> Ruby Mellen, "The Shocking Speed of the Taliban's Advance: A Visual Timeline," *Washington Post*, August 16, 2021.

<sup>57</sup> Jeff Seldin, "U.S. Military Admits Afghan War Was 'Strategic Failure,'" *Voice of America*, September 28, 2021.

<sup>58</sup> Mark A. Milley, "Statement of General Mark A. Milley, USA 20th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Department of Defense Afghanistan Hearing," Senate Armed Services Committee, September 28, 2021 ~ <http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Printed%2028%20Sep%20SASC%20CJCS%20Written%20Statement.pdf>.

<sup>59</sup> Patricia Zengerle and Humeyra Pamuk, "Blinken Says U.S. Will Assess Pakistan Ties over Afghanistan's Future," *Reuters*, September 13, 2021.

<sup>60</sup> "The U.S.-Pakistan Relationship Needs a Rethink," *Bloomberg*, September 16, 2021.



downplayed the remarks she made in India that her Islamabad visit was for “specific and narrow” purposes and that Washington was not interested in seeking a “broad relationship” with the country.<sup>61</sup> In Islamabad, her top agenda item was Afghanistan, but she additionally stated that “we also used our dialogues to talk about that longstanding relationship, and the broad set of issues on which we work.”<sup>62</sup> On December 11, 2021, a four-member delegation of U.S. senators met Prime Minister Khan and army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa, asserting U.S. commitment to maintaining “stable and broad-based” ties and strengthening cooperation with Pakistan.<sup>63</sup> However, given that most of these visits have focused on terrorism and Afghanistan, the United States as of now does not appear to have much appetite for broadening the relationship with Pakistan. U.S. interests in Pakistan remain the same: depriving al Qaeda, the Islamic State Khorasan Province, and other terrorist organizations of the opportunity to target the United States and its allies; safeguarding nuclear weapons; crisis-managing any future India-Pakistan conflict; and advancing human rights and democracy in Pakistan. The Biden administration’s decision to offer Pakistan defense equipment worth \$450 million to sustain the country’s F-16 aircraft will not add to Islamabad’s capabilities, but it is enough to keep the relationship intact, which had deteriorated during Khan’s government.<sup>64</sup> Regarding counterterrorism and intelligence sharing, the United States still gives preference to Pakistan over Afghanistan’s other neighbors. In sum, any relationship that is going to be framed between Washington and Islamabad will remain transactional.

With U.S.-India strategic relations growing stronger, Pakistan has found itself de-hyphenated. A further complication for Pakistan is the United States’ Indo-Pacific strategy, in which India plays a vital role in addressing continental challenges posed by China, including the transfer of high-tech military technology (weapons) and geospatial intelligence to New Delhi.<sup>65</sup> Pakistan finds no place in the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. According to U.S. officials, U.S. interests at stake in Pakistan include terrorist safe havens, nuclear security, and Pakistan’s closeness to China. Moreover, the United States no

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<sup>61</sup> Shubhajit Roy, “Pak Visit for Specific, Narrow Purpose: U.S. Dy Secy of State,” *Indian Express*, October 8, 2021.

<sup>62</sup> Kamran Yousaf, “Sherman Hails ‘Longstanding Ties’ with Pakistan,” *Express Tribune*, October 9, 2021.

<sup>63</sup> “In Meetings with PM Imran Khan and COAS, U.S. Senators Assert Maintaining ‘Broad-Based’ Ties with Pakistan,” *Dawn*, December 11, 2021.

<sup>64</sup> Anwar Iqbal, “\$450m Package to Maintain Pakistan’s F-16s,” *Dawn*, September 9, 2022. ~ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1709178>.

<sup>65</sup> “Documents Announced during the 3rd India-U.S. 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue,” Ministry of External Affairs (India), October 27, 2020 ~ <https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/33143/Documents+announced+during+the+3rd+India++US+2432+Ministerial+Dialogue>.

longer provides military or defense equipment to Pakistan; Islamabad must rely on China to enhance its conventional and nuclear capabilities.<sup>66</sup> On the diplomatic front, too, the United States is heavily tilting toward India, whether it is on the issue of Kashmir in the UN Security Council, granting Nuclear Suppliers Group status to India, or using the Financial Action Task Force (an international organization designed to combat money laundering and terrorist financing) to put pressure on Pakistan. Pakistan is already on the task force's gray list, and the threat of being blacklisted looms large.<sup>67</sup> Pakistani officials also presume that the United States is hostile to CPEC. According to Khalid Mansoor, who was a special assistant to former prime minister Khan, "From the point of view of the emerging geostrategic situation, one thing is clear: the United States supported by India is inimical to CPEC. It will not let it succeed. That's where we have to take a position."<sup>68</sup> This has largely resulted in Pakistan's pivot toward China.

#### PAKISTAN'S POLICY DILEMMA

Pakistan wants re-engagement with the United States for several reasons. First, Pakistan desires a broad-based relationship that looks beyond Afghanistan. It wants to be de-hyphenated from the United States' Af-Pak prism.<sup>69</sup> Second, Pakistan's policy shift to geoeconomics, wherein the focus is on trade, investment, and connectivity, requires a recasting of the country's relationship with the United States. Economic support from the United States and its Western allies would not only help Pakistan address its economic woes but also help expand its ties beyond China. Third, Pakistan relies on the United States for military hardware and maintenance of its F-16 fighter jets, on which Pakistan's nuclear weapons delivery system largely depends.<sup>70</sup> Fourth, Pakistan still needs the United States, given its persistent reliance on bailouts from the International Monetary Fund that would not be possible without

<sup>66</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), SIPRI Arms Transfers Database ~ <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers/sources-and-methods>.

<sup>67</sup> Although a recent statement from the Financial Action Task Force acknowledged that Pakistan has met all 34 required items, its removal from the gray list is still conditioned on an onsite visit to verify the implementation and sustainability of the country's measures on money laundering and counterterrorism financing. For details, see Tahir Sherani, "Pakistan Moves Closer to Removal from 'Grey List' after FATF Says All Items on Action Plan Met," *Dawn*, June 18, 2022.

<sup>68</sup> "U.S. Sabotaging China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Pakistan PM's Aide," *Hindu*, October 24, 2021.

<sup>69</sup> Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Regular Engagement with U.S. Beneficial for Both Countries: FO," *Dawn*, October 8, 2021.

<sup>70</sup> Sebastien Roblin, "Pakistan's Enormous Dependence on the F-16 Fighting Falcon," *National Interest*, January 14, 2022.

Washington's approval. Fifth, a recalibrated relationship with Washington will also help Islamabad avoid being blacklisted by the Financial Action Task Force and stave off any potential U.S. sanctions. Sixth, despite Pakistan's strong economic relationship with China, the United States remains the top destination for its exports.

That being said, the trust deficit between Washington and Islamabad is huge, and there does not seem to be enough willingness on the U.S. side to remedy it. The controversy over the absence of a phone call from President Biden to then prime minister Imran Khan after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan illustrates this trust deficit. The U.S. government also snubbed Pakistan over the first Leaders' Summit on Climate, held on April 22–23, 2021. The Biden administration had invited 40 heads of state and government, but Pakistan, the world's fifth-most vulnerable country, was initially left out.<sup>71</sup> Prior to these snubs, Islamabad had been very keen on reimagining a relationship with the new Biden administration. Even a phone call from Biden was much sought after, with considerable measures being taken to that end.<sup>72</sup> Later, Biden invited Pakistan to the Summit for Democracy on December 9, 2021, but Islamabad ultimately declined the invitation in support of China's disparaging stance on the summit.<sup>73</sup> While Khan had initially welcomed the 2021 summit's democracy initiative and expressed a desire to work with the White House to fight corruption, he later changed his tune and made it clear that Pakistan would not join any bloc.<sup>74</sup>

Although a seemingly innocuous decision over whether to accept an invitation to a summit, at a larger level, when viewed through a geostrategic lens, the stakes can be seen as a choice between two power blocs. The democracy summit provided an opening that Islamabad had been looking for, and one that was being offered by the Biden administration. China's influence was a significant factor in Pakistan's decision to let go of this opening. According to the *Global Times*, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi, in a telephone conversation with former Pakistan foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, expounded on the "Chinese position on the so-called

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<sup>71</sup> Shabbir Hussain, "Why Pakistan Ignored in U.S. Climate Change Summit?" *Express Tribune*, March 28, 2021.

<sup>72</sup> "Key U.S. Senator Asks Blinken to Ensure Biden Calls PM Imran to 'Rebuild' Pak-U.S. Relationship," *Dawn*, October 26, 2021.

<sup>73</sup> Kamran Yousaf, "Pakistan Declined U.S. Democracy Summit Invitation," *Express Tribune*, December 8, 2021.

<sup>74</sup> Kamran Yousaf, "Has Pakistan Finally Joined China Camp?" *Express Tribune*, December 13, 2021.

‘Summit for Democracy.’<sup>75</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not provide any specific reason behind Islamabad’s decision to decline the invitation to the summit but did issue a statement:

We value our partnership with the U.S. which we wish to expand both bilaterally as well as in terms of regional and international cooperation. We remain in contact with the U.S. on a range of issues and believe that we can engage on this subject at an opportune time in the future.<sup>76</sup>

The country’s recently passed National Security Policy reinforces the sentiment behind this statement. Beyond an emphasis on traditional and nontraditional security issues, the National Security Policy’s foreign policy focus aims for Pakistan to avoid being sucked into bloc politics at the global level.<sup>77</sup>

Such statements and documents indicate that Pakistan’s policy preference is to maintain a balance between China and the United States. An over-reliance on China precludes Pakistan from taking a hard hedging approach. For hedging to happen, a state needs another actor with whom it has space to align and signal hedging to a third party. In the case of Pakistan, China knows that no other country can offer what Beijing is providing to Islamabad. And China is fully aware of the United States’ historical unreliability on Pakistan; the phases of abandonment in 1965, 1971, and 1990 are parts of a shared history lamented in Pakistan. According to Daniel Markey, “When Pakistan was helpful, it enjoyed generous American assistance and attention. When Pakistan was unhelpful, the spigot was turned off.”<sup>78</sup> On the other hand, Beijing has been a consistent friend who shares Pakistan’s strategic interests in the region. On Afghanistan in particular—be it countering security threats, countering Indian influence, or considering how to leverage BRI through CPEC inside Afghanistan—Islamabad’s and Beijing’s policies broadly align.<sup>79</sup> If Pakistan has been the Taliban’s main supporter, China has equally provided

<sup>75</sup> “Chinese FM Urges Efforts to Reject Cold War Mentality, Defend True Democracy,” Xinhua, December 4, 2021 ~ [http://www.news.cn/english/2021-12/04/c\\_1310350558.htm](http://www.news.cn/english/2021-12/04/c_1310350558.htm).

<sup>76</sup> “Pakistan Politely Refuses Participation in U.S. Summit on Democracy,” *Arab News*, December 8, 2021 ~ <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1983331/pakistan>.

<sup>77</sup> The National Security Policy is a five-year (2022–26) policy document that is being vaunted by the Pakistani government as the first-ever Pakistani strategy paper of its kind that sets out the state’s national security vision and guidelines for attaining these goals. It was passed by the National Security Committee on December 27, 2021. “‘Historic Achievement’: NSA Announces Cabinet’s Approval of Pakistan’s First National Security Policy,” *Dawn*, December 28, 2021.

<sup>78</sup> Daniel S. Markey, *No Exit from Pakistan: America’s Tortured Relationship with Islamabad* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 2.

<sup>79</sup> Derek Grossman, “China and Pakistan See Eye to Eye on the Taliban—Almost,” *Foreign Policy*, September 20, 2021.

diplomatic legitimacy by engaging the Taliban leadership over the years. A month before the collapse of the U.S.-backed Afghan government, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi hosted Taliban leader Abdul Ghani Baradar in Tianjin in July 2021. In a press conference, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed its desire to develop a good relationship with the Taliban and further stated that “China respects the will of the Afghan people.”<sup>80</sup> Outflanking India in Afghanistan is a geostrategic triumph for Pakistan, one not only strengthening China’s influence but also potentially improving the negotiating positions of both Islamabad and Beijing vis-à-vis Washington.<sup>81</sup> Pakistan’s strategy of pitching itself as a geoeconomic hub on a priority basis depends on its policy toward Afghanistan, where instability can potentially jeopardize any strategic policy shift. For political stability on its western front, Pakistan needs Chinese support more than ever. Islamabad also needs to keep the outside world engaged with the Taliban so as not to repeat its 1990s approach whereby it was the sole supporter of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and faced international backlash.

Pakistani policymakers ideally would like to play a bridging role to help ease tensions between the two great powers like they did in the 1970s.<sup>82</sup> But realistically, that is not going to happen. In the 1970s, China was not a U.S. competitor, nor was it a strategic threat to U.S. interests. China in the 1970s was much more inward-looking; it hardly had global ambitions then.<sup>83</sup> This time, however, China and the United States are in a more direct, confrontational phase. Both seek to contain each other’s influence not only in Asia but also globally. Therefore, it would be unrealistic for Pakistani policymakers to expect any bonhomie between the two great powers. There are certain areas and issues where both the global powers can work together, such as combating climate change, fighting al Qaeda and the Islamic State, and addressing the Covid-19 pandemic. But their relations are likely to remain both competitive and confrontational.

If the United States shows some willingness by investing in Pakistan’s economic and energy sector, Pakistan may attempt to broaden the scope of CPEC from the strategic to the economic realm. That move may be resisted by

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<sup>80</sup> Cited in Jianli Yang, “China’s Political Calculations and Potential Options in Afghanistan,” *Diplomat*, August 19, 2021.

<sup>81</sup> China saw the U.S. presence in Afghanistan as a threat and responsible for regional chaos. For further details, see Yun Sun, “China’s Strategic Assessment of Afghanistan,” *War on the Rocks*, April 8, 2020.

<sup>82</sup> Syed Mohammad Ali, Muhammad Asad Rafi, and Mosharraf Zaidi, *Pak-Americana: Ushering in a New Era for Pakistan-U.S. Relations* (Islamabad: Tabadlab, 2021).

<sup>83</sup> Peter Ferdinand, “Westward Ho—The China Dream and ‘One Belt, One Road’: Chinese Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping,” *International Affairs* 92, no. 4 (2016): 941–57.

China, but Pakistan might still consider it, which could be one of the reasons why CPEC has slowed down. According to Andrew Small, regarding CPEC, both states have been “rediscovering their limitations.”<sup>84</sup> There is no doubt that U.S.-India relations are only going to strengthen in the coming years, but this deepening relationship carries with it the danger of escalating regional conflicts, which would require the United States to engage with Pakistan on political and security issues. If the United States moves away from “finger-wagging” to “problem solving,”<sup>85</sup> it may help Pakistan resist Chinese pressure to convert Gwadar into a dual-use commercial and military port, and Islamabad may again look toward Washington as a neutral manager during crises between India and Pakistan. Unless some of the core issues central to Pakistan’s national security interests align with the interests of the United States, any meaningful working relationship remains highly unlikely.

There are not many pro-Pakistan voices coming from the United States; few analysts and former U.S. bureaucrats want the United States to work in and with Pakistan on multiple fronts. Some want the United States to compete with China in Pakistan to stabilize the country.<sup>86</sup> Others want the United States to work on regional stability by bringing India and Pakistan to the table to sort out immediate issues such as the border ceasefire and terrorism. Historically, the United States has played an active role in defusing tensions between India and Pakistan. Islamabad has welcomed third-party intervention, particularly Washington’s role, in the region. If the United States gives up this role—and that was seen during the two states’ 2019 crisis—the situation could get ugly unless the escalation ladder is controlled between India and Pakistan during skirmishes.<sup>87</sup> According to former U.S. ambassador Richard Olson, “Washington will continue to have security interests in Pakistan, in terms of both narrow self-interest (i.e., the Afghanistan endgame) and the broader common good for preventing nuclear war. This argues for maintaining some minimal security relationship—at least professional military training and perhaps modest security assistance for truly joint objectives.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Quoted from Daniel S. Markey, “How the United States Should Deal with China in Pakistan,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 2020, 3.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>86</sup> Richard Olson, “Biden and Washington’s Perennial Pakistan Problem,” United States Institute of Peace, February 3, 2021.

<sup>87</sup> Sameer Lalwani, “America Can’t Ignore the Next Indo-Pakistan Crisis,” War on the Rocks, February 26, 2021.

<sup>88</sup> Olson, “Biden and Washington’s Perennial Pakistan Problem.”

Where does all this fit into Pakistan's new national security vision? Shifting from a security-dominated paradigm in state policy toward more focus on economic and trade diplomacy would ensure the economic security that would provide a political and diplomatic impetus to Pakistan. This shift reflects the desire of the Pakistani leadership to have strong economic and trade relations within the region and the extended region of Central Asia to Europe, where CPEC and Gwadar would play an important role. Developing this connectivity and normalizing relations with neighbors is the new priority and norm in Pakistan's diplomatic circles.

China would not mind if the United States took some of the responsibility to stabilize Pakistan economically and politically, which in the past was what Washington wanted Beijing to do when Pakistan and the United States had strong bilateral relations. Beijing knows it provides much more to Islamabad than Washington can, given China's deep pockets and the two states' strategic alignment.

A realistic approach for Pakistan as a middle power between two great ones would require mitigation of some of the irritant factors in the Pakistan-U.S. relationship. The United States has had issues with China's larger footprint inside Pakistan, particularly in Gwadar and CPEC. If Pakistan allows the Chinese navy in Gwadar, it will only serve to further provoke the United States and U.S. allies. Even the Persian Gulf countries would see that as a provocative move. Within itself, Pakistan must provide an equal playing field for the United States. Slow progress on CPEC has provided U.S. policymakers with reason to believe that perhaps Pakistan does not completely embrace China's vision. It must be noted, however, that even though this slowness was at times deliberate, it has been mostly due to poor economic conditions.<sup>89</sup>

Pakistani policymakers have hoped that the Biden administration would be interested in reshaping Pakistan-U.S. relations by putting emphasis on Pakistan's trade and economic diplomacy, especially as the United States remains the biggest destination for Pakistani exports. As far as the military leadership is concerned, it would like to acquire military hardware and equipment, if not aid, and to resume military-to-military relations in full swing as in the past. The military would still prefer equipment from the West, especially the United States. The United States has also been the preferred destination for Pakistani students in higher education, although China offers extensive scholarships. Any confrontation between Islamabad and

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<sup>89</sup> Andrew Small, "Returning to the Shadows: China, Pakistan, and the Fate of CPEC," German Marshall Fund of the United States, Policy Insights, September 23, 2020.

Washington would affect thousands of Pakistani students and expatriates who are working in the United States.

What options are available to Pakistan? Islamabad would like to see some progress on the Kashmir front, though it is not oblivious to the limitations. It has realized the significance of India-U.S. strategic alignment. But assuming that the United States and China rivalry intensifies, what would Pakistan do? For Pakistan to align with the United States is unlikely if India remains hesitant on Kashmir and unless Washington provides any significant military and economic aid. Pakistan would not like to antagonize China, as Beijing provides the Pakistani military with the option to acquire advanced weapons and defense technology. However, voices are now emerging in Pakistan that question the economic viability of the CPEC project.<sup>90</sup> They believe that CPEC is more China-centric and does not bring much gain to Pakistan. This thinking is echoed among Pakistani military elites as well.<sup>91</sup> For Pakistan to align with China completely, Beijing would have to come up with a huge Pakistan-centric investment. The chances of that happening, however, are quite slim. In the near future, Pakistan might try to work with both powers to maximize its own interests, albeit keeping itself still more closely aligned with Beijing. This would help on the domestic front. After all, China carries a favorable opinion among Pakistanis. According to a 2015 Pew Research Center poll (the most recent year with results for Pakistan), 82% of Pakistanis surveyed rated China favorably or very favorably, compared to only 22% with those same views of the United States.<sup>92</sup> Of those surveyed, 62% held an unfavorable view of the United States and, in 2010, 59% went as far as to describe the United States as an enemy.<sup>93</sup> For Pakistani leaders, it is much easier to work with Beijing in keeping with the already existing narrative and relationship.

## CONCLUSION

Bilateralism may be the preferable choice for Pakistan. Ideally, Pakistan would like to demonstrate its improved strategic credentials to both global powers by bolstering its internal strength. A weak Pakistan, on the other

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<sup>90</sup> Arif Rafiq, "The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Slower May Be Better," Middle East Institute, November 3, 2021.

<sup>91</sup> Arif Rafiq, "Why Pakistan's Army Wants the U.S. Back in the Region," *New York Times*, January 23, 2022.


<sup>92</sup> Pew Research Center, Global Indicators Database, March 2022 ~ <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/database/indicator/1/country/pk>.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*; and Russell Heimlich, "Pakistanis See U.S. as an Enemy," Pew Research Center, July 29, 2010.



hand, “would have no option but to choose one”<sup>94</sup>—especially as Washington has not shown any interest in broadening ties.<sup>95</sup> Among policymakers in the United States, Pakistan is no longer seen as a priority. At the Islamabad Security Dialogue in 2021, former U.S. ambassador to Pakistan Cameron Munter captured this sentiment in his diagnosis of Pakistan’s much-diminished role as a strategic partner to the United States. He emphasized how the relationship over the past 70 years was premised on viewing Pakistan’s “location as a geostrategic imperative.”<sup>96</sup> However, in the current scheme of things, Munter keenly underscored, the very “question about location has changed!”<sup>97</sup> Another reason why Pakistan finds it more prudent to align with China is Washington’s propping up of India with defense equipment and technology. In contrast, Pakistan’s core interests, such as Kashmir, the security threats from India and Afghanistan, and its economic relations align naturally with China. Thus, along with domestic factors, overlapping strategic interests make Pakistan more favorably disposed to the Chinese-led order than to that of the United States.

Even so, Pakistan’s intended foreign policy shift from geopolitics to geoeconomics cannot proceed without at least some strategic alignment with the United States and its allies. Failure to do so would make any potential economic cooperation impossible. Additionally, if Pakistan pursues economic integration on a foundation that lacks political stability at the local and global levels, the likelihood of sustainable economic prospects is marred. The incessant instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan’s confrontationist policy with India similarly do not bode well for attaining this stability.

On issues vital to China and the United States, middle powers advise restraint and dialogue in an attempt to tread the middle ground. When challenges emerge in relations with one major power, middle powers often signal an opportunity for enhanced engagement to the other power in a bid to increase their own negotiating and bargaining position. Pakistan would stand to gain should it mostly pursue hedging strategies and issue-based cooperation. In essence, middle powers such as Pakistan should pursue functional relations with both major powers to advance their respective economic and military interests. 

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<sup>94</sup> Touqir Hussain, “Pakistan Wants Reset in Ties with U.S. but There’s No Such Thing as Stand-Alone Geo-economics,” *Print*, March 14, 2021.

<sup>95</sup> Touqir Hussain, “Re-engaging America,” *Dawn*, March 13, 2021.

<sup>96</sup> Cameron Munter, quoted in Muhammed Muh-haf Khan, “Biden’s Belated Invitation to Pakistan,” *Daily Times* (Pakistan), April 20, 2021.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

