



## RIDING THE DRAGON, ENGAGING THE EAGLE: PAKISTAN'S DUAL ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY IN THE SINO-US RIVALRY (2015-2022)

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### ABSTRACT

*This research paper delves into the pivotal role of Pakistan within the context of the Sino-US rivalry, which has cast a shadow over the country. The aim of this research paper is to examine the consequences of the Sino-US rivalry specifically on Pakistan. It is evident that this rivalry has significantly disrupted socio-political unity and exacerbated political instability within Pakistan. The escalating power struggle between the United States and China has magnified its detrimental effects across various sectors of the country. Primarily, the growing dominance of the United States has raised concerns among Chinese officials, subsequently paving the way for Beijing's economic and strategic interests within Pakistani territory. This chapter consists of two key sections: firstly, elucidating Pakistan's significant role, and secondly, exploring the implications of the Sino-US rivalry on Pakistan across all dimensions.*

**KEYWORDS:** Implications, regional stability, maritime implications, CPEC, civil-military

### INTRODUCTION

The intensifying rivalry between the United States and China holds significant implications for Pakistan, a country with close ties to China and a historical relationship with the US. Pakistan finds itself in a complex and precarious situation, as both superpowers seek to leverage its strategic attributes for their own interests in the South Asian region. To understand the implications for Pakistan, it is essential to examine the economic, maritime, civil-military, and CPEC-related aspects of its relationship with the United States and China. Pakistan has historically maintained strong relationships with both China and the United States. China, as a reliable ally, has provided extensive support to Pakistan in areas such as infrastructure development, military supplies, and technology transfer. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has emerged as a flagship project, bringing significant economic benefits to Pakistan and strengthening the bilateral relationship. China's investments in various sectors, including energy, transportation, and industrial zones, have the potential to reshape Pakistan's economy and regional connectivity. On the other hand, the United States has also been an important partner for Pakistan, particularly in terms of trade, investment, and counter-terrorism cooperation. Collaborative projects in trade, clean energy, investment, and healthcare have reinforced the bilateral ties.

The economic implications of Pakistan's relationship with the United States are characterized by a complex interplay of trade, investments, and geopolitical dynamics. While Pakistan is a major goods trading partner of the United States, a trade deficit persists between the two countries. Pakistan's exports to the US primarily include cotton, steel, iron, mineral fuels, machinery, and soybeans, while its imports from the US encompass leather items, cotton, knit and woven apparels, and assorted textile articles. Despite this trade deficit, the United States has made investments in Pakistan, particularly in the past two decades, and has provided

economic assistance, especially in the context of the Afghan war. In addition to the economic implications, the rivalry between the United States and China has significant maritime implications for Pakistan. Pakistan's strategic location in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and China's investments in the Gwadar port have raised concerns for the United States. The United States, along with India, seeks to counter China's influence in the region. Although Pakistan is not a member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), it maintains cordial relations with the littoral countries of the IOR and plays a role in fostering peace in the region. The rivalry between the United States and China, coupled with India's presence, makes Pakistan a key player in the complex dynamics of maritime affairs in the IOR.

Furthermore, the civil-military relationship in Pakistan significantly influences its governance and plays a crucial role in the context of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The military's historical influence in Pakistan's politics remains substantial, and its involvement in CPEC planning and implementation is justified on the grounds of providing security and ensuring smooth project execution. However, concerns have been raised regarding transparency, accountability, and the potential militarization of the project. Balancing the interests of the military and the civilian government is vital for the success of CPEC and the equitable distribution of its benefits.

Subsequently, the growing rivalry between the United States and China has multifaceted implications for Pakistan, spanning economic, maritime, civil-military, and CPEC-related aspects. Pakistan's efforts to resolve the conflict and maintain a balanced approach are crucial for safeguarding its national interests and regional stability. By effectively managing its relationships with both superpowers, Pakistan can navigate the challenges and maximize the potential benefits for its economic development and strategic positioning.

### **1-Sino-US Rivalry through Pakistan's prism**

Focusing on the fallout of the growing U.S.-China rivalry is especially important within the already fraught South Asian security environment, where the U.S. has invested in India to counterbalance China, while Pakistan has developed close ties to China. The speed with which the U.S.-China rivalry is intensifying, and the bipartisan nature of U.S. opposition to China, have created an especially precarious situation for Pakistan. It is in Pakistan's national interest to avoid placing all its eggs in the China basket and to resist potential pressure to side with China in the latter's strategic rivalry with the United States. (Unedited)

Former Pakistani Premier Imran Khan, during his visit to the Winter Olympics in China in 2022, stated that the international political arena must not become a victim of such chaos where states need to pick one camp, either the U.S. or China, as it won't benefit a state but may lead to suffering. He added that the public can only benefit if there is cooperation and collaboration between states. Premier Khan strongly discourages the induction of another Cold War. Pakistan is willing to engage itself instrumentally, as it did in the 1970s. Premier Khan recalled the historic visit of H. Kissinger to China, which was facilitated by Pakistan in 1971. He affirms the Pak-China bond as an iron brotherhood and a stable bond with the U.S. Premier Khan emphasizes the significance of economic stability for a state, stating that conflicts primarily sabotage the economy. By saying this, he indirectly indicates that Pakistan would not jeopardize its economic benefits with China by choosing one side. (Khan, 2022)

Deputy Director of the Department of Political Science and International Relations at the University of Science and IT, Peshawar, Dr. Asghar Ali, elaborated on the Sino-US rivalry

from Pakistan's perspective in a conducted interview. He described the Sino-US rivalry as a struggle between two global competitors seeking hegemonic consent, especially in regional and international contexts. In the South Asian context, both competitors want to take advantage of Pakistan's geographical attributes. China needs Pakistan to translate its ambitious initiatives into reality, while America needs Pakistan to counterbalance China's geostrategic dynamics. As a result, Islamabad finds itself caught in a Beijing-Washington nutcracker. However, Pakistan always tries to maintain a balanced position between the two. (Ali, 2022)

Former federal secretary and retired Lieutenant General Mr. Talat Masood described the Pak-China bond as an evergreen bond. China has assisted Pakistan in infrastructure development, military arsenal supply, industrial reforms, technology transfer, and more. Most importantly, China has served as a reliable ally of Pakistan. Pakistan has also enjoyed an exceptional relationship with the U.S., being titled the most 'allied ally' at one point. However, India and China played their roles, resulting in sanctions imposed on Pakistan and strained relations. Mr. Masood further stated that Pak and the U.S. are mutually working on several projects such as trade, clean energy, investment, health sector, and counter-terrorism. Last year, imports from Pakistan to the U.S. reached a striking record compared to other states. Furthermore, he emphasized that if Pakistan adopts a negative role in the international political arena or internal politics, it would unlikely attract foreign direct investment. To address this rising Cold War, Pakistan must adopt a neutral approach and maintain cordial relations with both the U.S. and China. (Masood, 2022)

Syed Ali, in his research article for George Washington University in 2020, illustrated the contrasting opinions of strategic intellectuals regarding how the Sino-US rivalry would impact Pak-US relations and the stability of the South Asian region. Taking past considerations into account, it can be observed that Pakistan has established firm and robust relationships with the U.S. and China in economic, political, and security dimensions. Ali further demonstrated Pakistan's significant role in promoting peace in Afghanistan. Despite declining military and economic funds, the U.S. has remained a major exporter of Pakistani goods. On the other hand, China has become the largest supplier of military arsenals to Pakistan. The CPEC project initiated by China has brought tons of economic benefits and business opportunities to Pakistan. China's support for the Kashmir cause is also important. This logic leads to the conclusion that Pakistan should adopt a firm and smart approach instead of favoring one side. Pakistan's foreign policy experts suggest that the U.S. is going through a transition period, and Pakistan should adopt a wait-and-watch approach. However, Pakistan is ready to play the role of a bridge-state, as it did during the Sino-U.S. reconciliation phase under President Nixon's tenure. Some scholars believe that Pakistan can also choose to be a neutral actor and act as a melting point for mutual Sino-U.S. benefits, ultimately leading to prosperity in the region and enjoying economic and other privileges from leading global powers. (Ali, 2020) Former PM Khan has stated clearly that Pakistan's economic benefits are interlinked with China. He made efforts to improve Pak-U.S. relations by meeting with President Trump and emphasizing the importance of dignified friendship. However, the harsh realities and difficulties of the Sino-U.S. bond make it a challenging task for Pakistan to navigate. (Ali, 2020)

## **2- What has made Pakistan a middle-man?**

The 21st century has brought about various layers in the international political arena, such as multi-polarity, multi-conceptuality, and multi-literality. It can be argued that Pakistan is

on the verge of a turning point in the Asian region. Strategic rivalries and contradictory scenarios have effectively placed Pakistan in the midst of the rivalry between the United States and China.

According to Professor Asghar Ali, "Pakistan is captive to its own geographical attributes." Scholars highlight this attribute as Pakistan being at the crossroads of major powers' geostrategic interests (Ali D. A., 2022).

During an interview, Qazi Saleem (Dr. HR&HA, MOFA) stated that Pakistan's significant role in facilitating the reconciliation between the US and China during President Nixon's tenure has positioned Pakistan as a mediator once again. He further added that Pakistan's commitment to maintaining peace globally and, in the region, has resulted in its assistance to the US in Afghan matters, ultimately improving Pakistan's international image. Mr. Saleem also emphasized the importance for Pakistan to avoid engaging in any form of war. China fulfills Pakistan's emotional and economic needs, while the US serves as the primary exporter of Pakistani goods. The US, being a superpower in the contemporary world, cannot be ignored, and the rising power of China should not be disregarded either. Mr. Saleem suggests that the paradigm has shifted from geo-political to geo-economic, and to maintain this current paradigm, Pakistan should seek reconciliation between the current and rising superpowers. All these factors combined have made Pakistan a middle-man in the Sino-US rivalry (Saleem, What has made Pakistan a middle-man?, 2022).

Dr. Zia ul Haque Shamsi has shed light on the factors that have elevated Pakistan's significance as a middle-man in the hyped Sino-US rivalry. He emphasizes Pakistan's prime geographical position, which not only attracts international rivalries but also makes Pakistan strategically relevant to them. Dr. Shamsi further notes that since the inauguration of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the rivalry between China and the US has caught Pakistan's attention. CPEC has become a bone of contention between the current and rising powers. The US has expressed concerns over China's heavy investments in Pakistan's sea port, Gwadar, as it provides a shortest route to Russia, Western China, and the Central Asian Region. Dr. Shamsi identifies this as a challenging diplomatic atmosphere for Pakistan, forcing it to choose between its long-standing friend, China, and the superpower US, which also wields control over the International Financial Institutions (IFIs). However, Pakistan is treading a careful path, as the escalating tensions between the US and China over Taiwan, QUAD, South China Sea, AUKUS, and other issues have the potential to have severe implications for Pakistan and the entire region. Additionally, India could pressure the US to persuade Pakistan to withdraw from CPEC, reviving the famous slogan of "with us or without us" from the US. Consequently, Pakistan must strive to maintain a balanced relationship with the current and rising powers of the contemporary world in its national interest. Dr. Shamsi concludes that Pakistan should not compromise any of its relationships (Shamsi, 2021).

Retired Captain of the Pakistan Airforce (PAF), S. M. Hali, in his published work on the Sino-US strategic rivalry and its implications for Pakistan, highlights Pakistan's significance as a bridge state. He illustrates that Pakistan's reliance on International Monetary Fund (IMF) debts during the Sino-US rivalry can have serious implications for the country internally and externally. The increased military capabilities of India have raised concerns for Pakistan, necessitating increased vigilance regarding regional developments. Furthermore, Hali identifies the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as one of the factors that make Pakistan a bridge state in the Sino-US rivalry. As a prominent state in the South Asian region with nuclear capabilities, Pakistan's value as a mediator has increased. Hali advises that Pakistan must continue to pursue its national interest of maintaining amicable relationships with both the current superpower and the rising superpower. Pakistan should diversify its

avenues of cooperation and friendship in the international political arena (Hali, 2022).

### 3- What efforts Pakistan put to resolve this rivalry?

As per the views of Qazi Saleem, Dr. Zia-ul-Haque, and Agha Shehryar Khan, Pakistan always tries to take a balanced position between China and the US. Pakistan always tries to bring normalcy in US-China relations. Historically, Pakistan has facilitated a possible détente between Beijing and Washington during Richard Nixon's Presidency. Former PM Khan, during the Winter Olympics in China in 2022, stated that Pakistan is ready to play an 'instrumental role' in normalizing the relations between the US and China (Khan, 2022). Additionally, PM Khan emphasized at several international forums the need to overcome the threat of total war arising from a prolonged Sino-US cold war.

Furthermore, in an interview with Reuters in early June, Premier Khan affirmed that Pakistan would be privileged to help bridge the tensions between China and the US, rather than picking sides in the hyped new cold war, as Pakistan does not want to get trapped (Reuters, 2021). Shortly after the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) conference in March 2022, Premier Khan met Wang Yi, the Chinese Foreign Minister. The strong Pak-China bond was reinforced when Khan praised China as an all-weather friend and offered to help reduce conflicts with the US (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

During a conducted interview, Dr. Asghar Ali stated that Pakistan always tries to take a balanced position between China and the US, seeking to bring normalcy to their relations. Historically, Pakistan has facilitated a possible détente between Beijing and Washington during Richard Nixon's Presidency (Ali A., 2022).

However, Pakistan's youngest Foreign Minister, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, has adopted the same policy stance and has tried to mitigate Sino-US conflicts through various statements at several platforms.

Former COAS (Chief of Army Staff) General Bajwa stated that the US is the best strategic partner of Pakistan, while China is an all-weather friend, and Pakistan seeks to expand its relations with both states (Bajwa, 2022). During his visit to Beijing, the COAS met his counterpart General Zhang Youxia and emphasized that Pakistan is not inclined towards camp politics, as the best weapons are from the US and all economic ventures are with China (KARTHA, 2022).

Newly appointed Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif extended his assurance and support to China and the US through the following statement: "We wish to engage positively and constructively to endorse the mutual interests of progress, stability, and peace in the South Asian Region with the United States." He further stated that confusion or misunderstanding should not lead to a complete cutoff with the superpower US, and mending barriers will be a foremost priority of the Foreign Service of Pakistan (FSP) (Syed, 2022). In early November 2022, PM Sharif paid a state visit to China, extending greetings to President Xi Jinping on his reflection and affirming the enduring solid bond and assistance between Pakistan and China (China, 2022).

Based on the aforementioned statements, it can be analysed that Pakistan has opted for a completely balanced approach so far and has given flexible and supportive gestures to both conflicting states. However, the question arises as to how long Pakistan can remain neutral in this hyped cold war between China and the US. It is also suggested that Pakistan should take a step forward and establish a good office to bring both conflicting actors to the negotiating table, thus paving the way for a peaceful settlement.

#### 4- Regional implications for Pakistan

By focusing on the outcomes of this mounting Sino-US rivalry, it is quite significant within the already tense environment of the South Asian Region, where heavy investments are made in India from the US, mainly to counter the emerging power, China. This complex triangle has direct impacts on Pakistan, as Pakistan is an all-weather friend of China and an arch-rival of neighbour India. It has created a perilous situation for Pakistan, requiring careful consideration of its international stance and regional implications. This portion of the chapter intends to deeply analyse the regional implications for Pakistan, taking into account the India factor, Iran factor, and Afghanistan factor.

According to Dr. Asghar Ali, despite Pakistan's magnanimous approach towards China and the US, the latter is well aware that Islamabad has longstanding and inseparable strategic relations with Beijing. Therefore, the United States has accelerated its relations with India and considers it a strategic partner in the region. LEMOA (Logistic Exchange Memorandum of Agreement-2016) and BECA (Basic Exchange Memorandum of Agreement-2020) are glaring examples of the Indo-US strategic partnership. These geostrategic calculations are causing headaches for Pakistan. The Indo-US factor has multiple implications for Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan, Russia, and Iran (Ali D. A., Sino-US rivalry and its regional implications for Pakistan, 2023).

##### 4.1- India factor

Pakistan and India are arch rivals in the South Asian region, while China, the rival of India, is an all-weather friend of Pakistan. This complex triangle has created a perplexing environment both within and outside the region. The US exerts its influence and hegemony in the South Asian region through various tactics. However, the primary goal of the US is to counter the emerging power, China. On the other hand, whenever the US shows any interest in Pakistan, it ignites tensions in Indian foreign policy. In summary, it can be said that the heightened Sino-US cold war has intensified the already strained relationship between India and Pakistan

##### 4.1.1- US-India Relations 2016 onwards

In 2016, the US bestowed the title of 'Major defense partner' upon India. Following the Modi-Trump meeting in 2017, a 2+2 dialogue between US and Indian officials took place to strengthen their defense partnership. According to the minutes of the dialogue, various defense and telecommunication access were assigned to India. In 2020, the second phase of the 2+2 dialogue was initiated, granting India access to share geospatial data to enhance smooth and accurate intelligence security monitoring. The Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) was also a part of this agreement (Affairs, 2022).

In 2022, a third round of the 2+2 dialogue was conducted to ensure the implementation of the US-India defense policy group meeting's formulation in October 2021. The officials acknowledged the importance of the US-India Joint Technical Group collaborating on artificial intelligence, airspace, and cybersecurity networks. They welcomed the second defense cyber dialogue and planned to conduct defense space dialogue and artificial intelligence dialogue in India the following year. India was also a partner of the US in the Combined Maritime Forces task force as an associate partner, aiming to ensure and maintain

multilateral cooperation in the Indian Ocean. The Indo-Pacific Military Health Exchange was also mentioned. Both countries expressed their willingness to conduct the Indo-Pacific Armies Chiefs conference and Indo-Pacific Armies Management seminar in India in 2023. The importance of joint and tri-military exercises such as Tiger Triumph exercise, Yudh Abhyas, Malabar, Milan Naval exercise, Vajra Prahar army exercise, and India's involvement in Red Flag was emphasized. Furthermore, the US aimed to involve Indian shipyards in the maintenance and repair of their Maritime Sealift Command's ships (MSC). The US and India are also jointly working on anti-narcotics and counter-terrorism measures. Several counter-terrorism conferences were held in India, where US ministers addressed the need for strict action against all terrorist organizations. These conferences even mentioned Pakistan, urging it to take strong and sustained measures against terrorism within its territory (Khan A. S., Role of India in Sino-US Rivalry, 2022).

#### 4.1.2- Implications towards Pakistan

In the words of Qazi Saleem, Director of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, the US' interest in India has significantly complicated the politics of the South Asian region and intensified the Sino-US cold war. He further stated that the US has strategically invested in India to counter China and also to keep Pakistan's guard low regarding India. The US is smartly targeting China, which directly impacts Pakistan. Firstly, instead of picking sides, Pakistan needs to adopt a balanced approach between the US and China, which will project a neutral and softer image of Pakistan in the international political arena. Secondly, by not openly supporting China, Pakistan reduces the chances of India targeting Pakistan with apparent reasons. If Pakistan does support China, the new range of advanced US weapons supplied to India might be tested on Pakistan with US consent. Thirdly, India's modern technology industry would continue to monitor Pakistan, potentially leading to US involvement in Pakistani territory. Furthermore, any unstable statements by Pakistan in the context of the Sino-US rivalry could jeopardize the flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Moreover, it has been observed that Pakistan appears to be marginalized in the US-India partnership. The silence between the US and Pakistan during the Trump administration persisted into President Biden's administration. However, there have been slight changes in recent weeks as Pakistan and the US have extended their cooperation on counter-terrorism matters. The US has assured its support for the preservation of F-16 aircraft supplied to Pakistan in the 1980s, which has been heavily criticized by India. Additionally, in October 2022, Pakistan's COAS General Bajwa visited the US following the visit of the Indian External Affairs Minister. General Bajwa's visit was delayed due to COVID-19, and he showed eagerness to strengthen the Pak-US bond, as it seemed that Pakistan had aligned itself with the anti-US camp, particularly after the ouster of Prime Minister Khan's administration. Recently, the US ambassador to Pakistan visited Pakistan's side of Kashmir and referred to it as AJK (Azad Jammu and Kashmir) instead of POK (Pakistan Occupied Kashmir), which caused alarm in India. These recent developments together indicate that President Biden is willing to rebalance the relationship with Pakistan, possibly as a reaction to Indian reluctance to condemn Russia for its invasion in Ukraine (Mohan, 2022).

In conclusion, the role of India is emphasized by the US' recently announced National Security Strategy (NSS) as a key player in the Indo-Pacific policy. The NSS identifies China as a significant threat and extends its cooperation with India as a Major Defense Partner. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has shifted its focus to the Indo-Pacific region, where India has replaced Pakistan as its prime ally. It can be said that the US has shifted its concerns from

land warfare to maritime warfare.

#### 4.2- Afghanistan factor

The Afghan factor is one of the most significant factors with implications for Pakistan. Pakistan has always faced direct and indirect consequences resulting from the situation in Afghanistan. This debate involves various converging and diverging factors. Since the recent withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, several opportunities have emerged for China. Any developed state seeking to fill the vacuum in Afghanistan must collaborate with it. The peace in Afghanistan can be seen as directly affecting peace in Pakistan. If China takes the initiative to collaborate with the newly formed Taliban government, it would be a positive development for Pakistan. In contrast, the involvement of any other international actor in Afghanistan would not have the same impact as Chinese presence in the region. However, it is also evident that China has taken a high-stakes geopolitical gamble and assumed a significant risk by partnering with Afghanistan through the New Silk Road (Islamoglu, 2022). According to an article published in Defense News, China has the opportunity to utilize Afghanistan's rare-earth metals, which are valued at more than \$3 trillion (Lt. Gen. Richard P. Mills (ret.), 2021). Chinese heavy investment would be advantageous for Pakistan as it would contribute to internal and regional stability, peaceful borders, the prevention of cross-border terrorism, and improved relations (Islamoglu, 2022).

##### 4.2.1- Chinese interest in Afghanistan

During an interview, Agha Shehryar stated that immediately after the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, China extended its cooperation and promptly recognized the power transfer in Kabul. In response, Kabul expressed hope and satisfaction over China's recognition. During the OIC conference in March 2022, the Chinese foreign minister visited Afghanistan right after the conference during his tour of Pakistan. The Chinese foreign minister expressed willingness to include Afghanistan in their flagship project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), specifically the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The Taliban responded by assuring the safety of Chinese lives and investments in Afghanistan (Khan A. S., China's interest in Afghanistan, 2023).

However, some international scholars referred to China's gesture as a shift in the geopolitical map of the Asian region. Others mentioned that China is expectedly filling the power vacuum created by the US in the region through its land and economic influence. It is evident that the Chinese leadership must have considered multiple factors before taking this step. During a meeting in July 2020, the Chinese foreign minister stated that the Taliban is a crucial political and military force in Afghanistan and is likely to play a significant role in peace, reconciliation, and the country's development. China's interest in Afghan politics can be attributed to their shared border known as the Wakhan Corridor. China has already invested in various projects in Afghanistan, such as the Amu Darya Basin Oil Project and the Aynak Copper Mine Project, as Afghanistan provides an overland path leading to the Indian Ocean. China is the only global actor from the international political arena engaging in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal, thus enhancing China's leadership role in the Asian region (Haiqi, 2021).

Afghanistan is located in the Mackinderian "heartland" geopolitical concept. The other two geopolitical concepts are "Sea Power" and "Rimland." China needs Afghanistan to access the global market, while the United States needs it to counter China. As Pakistan is the starting point (CPEC) of China's connectivity initiative, it faces the consequences of these dynamics



(Ali D. A., Sino-US interest in Afghanistan, 2023).

### 4.3- Iran factor

Iran is strategically located at the focal point of the Persian Gulf, Central Asian Republics (CARs), and Middle Eastern states. Its proximity to Pakistan has further increased its significance in terms of the Sino-US rivalry and its implications for Pakistan's foreign policy. Ghazal Vaisi, in her published work at the Middle East Institute, mentioned that a 25-year strategic cooperation agreement between Iran and China has been a topic of discussion since March 2021. This agreement involves joint cooperation in security, trade, culture, and politics. Both Iran and China have strained relations with the US, and their shared opposition to the US contributes to the security and military aspects of this pact (Vaisi, 2022). The Iran-China pact has raised significant concerns for the US in the South Asian region, particularly regarding Pakistan. Pakistan is the best ally the US could have in the South Asian region, and to counter China's progress, the US would seek Pakistan's favour and interests (Alam Saleh, 2020).

According to research associate Fatima Raza, the region has experienced a great deal of instability, with many states becoming vigilant under US influence. China's rise as an economic giant in Asia indicates a transition of power amid the cold war-like rivalry. China's grand scheme of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), connecting 68 countries, is shifting geopolitical trends. The international political arena has become even more destabilized as the superpower US, in an effort to counter Chinese influence, withdraws from the Paris Climate Treaty, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The intensifying Sino-US cold war is exacerbating the effects and spreading destabilization throughout the entire region. Raza suggests that considering the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan should foster smooth relations with Iran to promote healthy bilateral relations, regional peace, reduce sectarian conflicts, eliminate cross-border terrorism, create a strong joint-resistant force against any further US expansion in the region, and capitalize on Iran's involvement in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project, as expressed by Iran in the past (Raza, 2019).

With a 25-year strategic bond between China and Iran, there is an opportunity for Pakistan to overcome mutual distrust and enhance cooperation. Furthermore, a Comprehensive Cooperation agreement and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan present a great opportunity to upgrade bilateral relations. Their joint approach to regional problems can also pave the way for a strong strategic bond with China and Russia, ultimately reducing the US hegemony in the South Asian region (Zafar Iqbal Yousafzai, 2021).

## 5- Economic implications for Pakistan

As quoted in the updated reports of the US Office of Trade Representatives, it has been blatantly stated that till 2019, Pakistan is the US' 56th major goods trading partner with an estimated value of \$6.6 billion in trade in 2019. Until that time, the trade deficit between Pakistan and the US remained at \$1.3 billion. Reports further demonstrate the creation of ten thousand job opportunities in Pakistan with the assistance of US exports in 2015. Till 2019, it can be stated that the ratio of goods exported by the US to Pakistan can be estimated up to \$2.6 billion, with a deficit of 7.2% observed from 2018. However, this calculated ratio of US exports to Pakistan has increased up to 63.7% since 2009. Cotton, steel, iron, mineral fuels,

machinery, and soybeans are among the prime exporting items, and Pakistan is entitled as the 24th largest agricultural exporter. On the contrary, Pakistan is also the US' 55th largest goods import market with \$3.9 billion in 2019, representing a rise of 24% from 2009 and 5.7% from 2018. Leather items, cotton, knit and woven apparels, and assorted textile articles can be listed among the chief import products. Agricultural products like beverages, processed vegetables, fruit, rice, sweeteners, snack foods, and sugars from the US to Pakistan were worth \$125 million in 2019. Analysing the data provided by the US Office of Trade Representatives, it can be examined that the US-Pak trade deficit mounted by 48.6% from 2018 to 2019. However, a rise of 73% in US FDI in Pakistan was witnessed in 2019, and Pakistan's FDI in the US stock share market was down by 7.8% from 2018 to 2019 (Representatives, 2020).

According to reports published by the US Department of State, the US has been investing significantly in Pakistan for the past 20 years. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) also declared Pakistan as the 44th major economic market of 2022, in addition to being the 5th most populous state. Analysing the recent fiscal year, a rise of 50% in FDI from the US in Pakistan can be witnessed, the highest in a decade. This level of US involvement can be regarded as the willingness of the US to strengthen its ties with Pakistan through increased participation from its State Department, Commerce Department, and the International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) with officials from Pakistan. The report further states that the US is seeking to work with Pakistan to enhance its financial climate, reinforce and regulate its economy, ensure fair taxation, and protect intellectual property rights (State, 2022).

Alan Kronstadt, in his published work, blatantly stated that China is Pakistan's prime export partner, while the US is Pakistan's chief import partner. In recent years, a decline in general foreign investment in Pakistan can be observed, but there has been a record increase in trade with the US worth \$6.8 billion. However, security concerns and barriers in investment and trade limit the US stakeholders from investing in Pakistan. Various states like the UAE, China, and Saudi Arabia have economically assisted Pakistan, and Pakistan managed to secure a \$6 billion bailout package in mid-2019 from the IMF, in addition to the already owed \$5.8 billion loan from the IMF. Pakistan has sought IMF assistance 13-14 times in the span of the last 30 years. Since 2007, security aid and economic assistance have been strictly adjourned from the US Congress.

The conditions became even stricter for Pakistan in 2011. After the takeover of Barack Obama as the President of the US, strict economic conditions towards Pakistan became softened to ensure the national security of the US. Furthermore, the administration of President Biden has assisted Pakistan with \$89 million, encompassing \$66 million to strengthen its state development, economy, and to fight the pandemic (Kronstadt, 2021). Mr. Rafiq, in his published essay, highlights that China has presented challenges for Pakistan in terms of lending and trading. For example, Pakistan entered into a power agreement with China in 2020 but later tried to renegotiate the deal, leading to China demanding a refund of \$1.4 billion from Pakistani power stakeholders. Mr. Rafiq recommends that Pakistan should not solely rely on China and instead pursue its interests with the United States, referring to China's mercantilist approach to economy and trade (Rafiq, 2022).

Reviewing the Pak-US economic relationship, it can be observed that after the 9/11 incident, Pakistan received significant economic assistance from the United States under the banner of the Afghan war, amounting to around \$16 billion over five years. However, from 2012- 2017, the economic bond between the US and Pakistan experienced a decline, with economic assistance decreasing to \$650 million. During this time, the bond between Pakistan and China strengthened, with both countries engaging in bilateral and multilateral projects and raising

voices for each other on various international forums. The flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), was also initiated during this period. Private ventures from the US in Pakistan were worth \$823 million, while Chinese ventures were around \$2.3 million. The divergence was predicted to be amplified under the light of CPEC (Dr. Zahid Yaseen, 2021).

As the paradigm of the international political arena shifts towards geo-economics from geopolitics, the entire structure is also shifting. According to Pakistan's National Security Advisor, Dr. Moeed Yusuf, geo-economics is a reality, and the government's strategies will positively impact every Pakistani citizen in a few years. Pakistan is seeking to leverage the geo-economic forum in the international arena through partnerships and projects under the economic security model. The business of US-owned companies in Pakistan is seen as securing the interests of both states (Yusuf, 2021).

Pakistan's foreign policy has shifted towards geo-economics, and the country is inclined towards balancing its economic ties with every state, including enhancing ties with its major export partner, the US. Pakistan aims to maintain equilibrium among all sides and encourage strong professional networks between Pakistan and the US, which will play a significant role in their economic relations (Times, 2022).

Dr. Asghar Ali suggests that the United States always tries to punish Pakistan through economic measures in the context of Sino-Pak rapprochement. However, China consistently supports Pakistan to recover from the losses inflicted by the US. Meanwhile, the US has partnered with India through various projects and agreements, which has strained the Pak-US relationship but strengthened the Pak-China relationship (Ali D. A., Economic Implications for Pakistan, 2023).

An analysis by Syed Muhammad Ali emphasizes that financial assistance from China has resulted in a colourless economic relationship between Pakistan and the US. The US needs to review its policies towards Pakistan, considering its high-level relationship with Pakistan's arch-rival, India, in order to monitor Chinese movements in the region. On the other hand, Pakistan has offered a neutral space for the US to engage in business with Chinese projects, particularly under the CPEC's Special Economic Zones. This can ultimately lead to Pakistan's economic independence from China (Ali S. M., 2022).

Anwar Iqbal's article in Dawn mentions that despite the Sino-US cold wars, China has maintained a balanced approach towards its conduct with both the US and Pakistan. China's strategy towards South Asian politics revolves around the Pak-US relationship, and if Pakistan seeks to balance its ties with the US, it would be welcomed by the Chinese administration. However, when asked about the US encouragement for Pakistan to review its debt management with China, China's response was that it's not the US' concern (Iqbal, 2022).

According to the US South Asian Affairs report, despite the numerous disputes and a rocky relationship, the US cannot afford to shun Pakistan due to its strategic location and its proximity to key regions such as Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia. This report, prepared by retired US ambassadors to Pakistan, retired US Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs, senior diplomats to Pakistan, Pakistan's ambassador to the US, and US scholars and experts in South Asian matters, emphasizes the significance of Pakistan's role (Times T. E., 2022).

In conclusion, the economic relationship between Pakistan and the US has experienced ups and downs over the past two decades. However, the US has managed to regulate its vision of geo-economic politics and continues to play a role in Pakistan's economy, albeit at a lower ratio compared to previous engagements.

## **6- Maritime implications for Pakistan**

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has gained significant importance in the contemporary world, and among the 34 coastal states, Pakistan holds chief significance. The competition between the US and China to establish hegemony over the warm waters of the IOR has implications for Pakistan. China wants to ensure its presence in the IOR to establish influence and has bases in Djibouti and control over the Lankan island of Hambantota. The US, with its existing bases in the IOR, is concerned about China's presence, leading to a Sino-US rivalry that has maritime implications for Pakistan.

Although Pakistan is not a member state of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), it strives to maintain cordial relations with littoral countries of the IOR. The rivalry between the US and China, along with India's presence, has made Pakistan a party to their dynamics. The arch rivalry between Pakistan and India further complicates the situation. Despite this, the firm support of China in the IOR, particularly through the Gwadar port, is seen as a blessing for Pakistan (Hassan, 2019).

According to Dr. Huma's essay in Hilal, the Sino-US rivalry in maritime affairs has had various ramifications for Pakistan's maritime sector. Collaboration between Pakistan and China, including joint counter-terrorism measures and naval exercises, has highlighted the strategic importance of Pakistan's Gwadar port in the IOR. Gwadar serves as a prime way to connect landlocked regions of the Middle East and Central Asia, and its development was influenced by the Sino-US rivalry. The construction of the Chabahar port, as a reaction to Gwadar, strained Pakistan's relationship with India and Iran (Baqai, 2022).

Mozam Khan reveals that Pakistan's collaboration with China and other international actors in maritime affairs is aimed at fulfilling its global maritime responsibilities. Pakistan has built infrastructure along its Makran coast and participates in international initiatives like the Combined Task Force (CTF 150). China and Pakistan share a strong relationship in matters of security, as China seeks greater control in the IOR. The US views this as part of China's grand strategy to monitor US warships in the Strait of Hormuz. Concerns have been raised by the US regarding the construction of Gwadar port, with some researchers and scholars amplifying the security atmosphere of Balochistan (Gwadar) and raising doubts about its security for international investors (Kaplan, 2016).

The Gwadar port represents the competitive dynamics between the US and China and has placed Pakistan in a challenging position. Pakistan faces maritime threats and the expansion of its Indian ally, which is a constant threat to its sovereignty. Attacks against Chinese labour in the Gwadar port have occurred, and Pakistan believes they are orchestrated by regional and global opponents to target the flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Security concerns have been raised, and foolproof security measures have been demanded to ensure the safety of Chinese projects (Hussain, 2018).

The involvement of great rivals in the IOR has created an imbalance in maritime security and has significant security ramifications for Pakistan, particularly in its relations with India.

### **6.1- QUAD & AUKUS' implications for Pakistan**

The AUKUS and QUAD hold various implications for Pakistan. Mainly, they fortify India's naval capabilities, which ultimately pose a direct threat to Pakistan. This expansion of the Indian navy could further burden Pakistan's already struggling economy and disrupt the balance of power in the South Asian region (Shahid, 2022). Furthermore, the US-backed India aims to assert its hegemony over the Indian Ocean Region, not only to counter China but also Pakistan. This could potentially lead to Indo-Chinese skirmishes and escalate tensions in the region, impacting Pakistan's security. Additionally, it could result in economic repercussions and possible global sanctions for Pakistan if it supports China amid Sino-US escalation (Bashir, 2021).

The presence of nuclear submarines in India has raised concerns for Pakistan, particularly as Pakistan struggles to maintain strong security check posts to ensure the smooth mobility of 95% of its trade. On the other hand, China's assistance to Pakistan's navy and military creates apprehension for India, which fears a potential two-front war with China and Pakistan. To address the evolving maritime dynamics of the Indian Ocean Region, Pakistan needs to enhance its arsenal capabilities. The Pakistan Navy has acquired advanced and efficient arsenals, including fast attack craft missiles (FACM), jiangwei-II class F-22P frigates, FN-16 Shorads, PNS Tughril, versatile naval missiles, yuan class hangor air independent conventional submarines, medium-altitude aerial combat vehicles, and C-602 anti-ship missile range. Through joint naval exercises such as Aman 2021 with the Chinese navy, Pakistan has demonstrated its commitment to regional stability, counter-terrorism efforts,

and peace-building measures. Pakistan also has the potential to engage in alliances and initiatives aimed at sustaining the Indian Ocean Region, involving regional and international actors (Khalid, 2021).

In addition, Pakistan has taken various initiatives to address the security concerns in the Indian Ocean Region, including the establishment of the Regional Maritime Security Patrols (RMSP) and the contract for constructing four MILGEM-class corvettes in Karachi in collaboration with Turkey. These corvettes will enhance Pakistan's naval capabilities for defensive and offensive measures. Pakistan is also seeking amicable relations with Russia, as Russia also aims to counter the rival US in the Indian Ocean Region. The US assistance to India has indirectly paved the way for Pakistan to develop smoother relations with other global states as well (Nisar, 2021).

## 6.2- Implications towards China Pakistan Economy Corridor (CPEC)

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is an extensive infrastructure expansion scheme backed by significant Chinese investments in over 70 global states. Western powers, along with India, view it as part of China's strategy to dominate the world economy, trade, politics, and even maritime and technological affairs. While recent rifts have strained relations between the US and India, as well as Pakistan and the US, analysts suggest that Pakistan should reshape its foreign policy, particularly towards the US, to maintain a balance. However, it is observed that various state and non-state actors have been involved in igniting chaos and disruption in the Baluchistan region of Pakistan. Pakistan and China must enhance their defensive capabilities and ensure the security of future endeavours to support the progress of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Salma Shaukat, 2022).

In simple terms, CPEC showcases China's secure energy scheme. Gwadar, leased to China for 40 years, provides the shortest route to Arabian Sea and Central Asian states. With commercial, economic, and strategic benefits for China, CPEC has become a flagship project of the BRI. The China Institute of Strategic Affairs, a major think tank of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, stated that while Gwadar was initially viewed as an economic forum, it is now seen as a strategic platform (Baqai, 2022).

During an interview with Muhammad Rashid, Third Secretary of the Pakistan Permanent Mission to the United Nations, it was emphasized that Gwadar port has the potential to

become an economic powerhouse, not only for China but also for the Central, Western, and European regions. It also offers employment opportunities for Pakistanis. When Pakistan handed over the rights of Gwadar port to Chinese Harbor Engineering Port, it caused annoyance to the US. Pakistan's strategic measures with China, both onshore and offshore, have placed it in a strategic chessboard between the rivalries of the US and China. The entry of India and Australia has raised concerns for Pakistan's economic power in the region, necessitating countermeasures and enhanced port security. The paradigm shift in Pakistan's foreign policy calls for securing its geo-economic needs rather than just geopolitical needs. Pakistan must strive to have smooth and strong relations with other regional and international actors, including the US, Russia, India, China, CARs, and European states. Additionally, the drowning economy of Pakistan highlights the importance of not isolating itself from the US, a superpower, and solely relying on China (Rashid, 2023).

Political analyst and scholar Haider Naqvi, in an interview, explains that there is no actual rivalry between the US and China; it is merely a setup to promote their national interests. China invests in different regions to boost its economy, while the US sells military arsenals to maintain its hegemony. Naqvi suggests that the world is being divided into different blocs as both powers pursue their interests. He concludes that the US will continue to threaten China and Pakistan over CPEC but will not harm it. The US will try to counter China and Pakistan by aligning with other states, selling military equipment, and leveraging technology and nuclear capabilities. Naqvi emphasizes that the US opposes CPEC not due to its economic benefits for Pakistan, but because it provides China with access to warm waters of the Indian Ocean and establishes Chinese industries along the BRI routes, which could challenge US hegemony in Europe. This opposition, he believes, is the main reason behind the US' stance on CPEC (Naqvi, 2023).

## **7- Pakistan's civil-military relationship and Sino-US rivalry**

Arif Rafiq, in his published essay in *The New York Times*, examines the influence of Pakistan's military and its perspective on international relations. According to Rafiq, Pakistan's military believes in pursuing strategic manoeuvres, strengthening ties abroad, and balancing domestic forces. They aim to make Pakistan independent of any state's assistance, ally's aid, or proxies. Rafiq further notes that Pakistan's military has had reservations about

China. This sentiment became more apparent when Pakistan's Prime Minister Khan rejected the invitation to the Summit for Democracy from President Biden. From the military's perspective, this action was seen as aligning Pakistan too closely with China. Pakistan's military is concerned about becoming too dependent on China. Given these circumstances, the military is interested in balancing its ties with other nations. Establishing smoother relations with the US would enable Pakistan to benefit from strong counter-terrorism tactics, stronger trade relations, and increased cooperation. On the other hand, Prime Minister Khan has shown a stronger inclination towards China, admiring their corruption-free systems, political structures, and poverty reduction tactics. This has led to perceptions of him being anti-American. As China has become more reluctant to lend currency to high-risk states, military leaders have regarded Khan as a hyper-nationalist. Since 2011, Islamabad has shifted its focus towards China when its needs were not met by the US. China has provided Pakistan with various hardware, including modern aircraft and drones. The two countries have even collaborated on the joint manufacturing of economical fighter jets. Pakistan is also the only international actor with access to the Chinese satellite Beidou navigation service (military version), which has become a key asset for the Pakistan Air Force. Rafiq also highlights the Indian fear of potential two-front wars with Pakistan and China. The strong bond between Pakistan and China has weakened India's resolve and made them hesitant to engage in a full-fledged war with Pakistan. However, it has also strengthened the bond between India and the US (Rafiq, 2022).

In addition, former Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Bajwa has stated that the US is Pakistan's best strategic partner, while China remains an all-weather friend, and Pakistan aims to expand its relations with both countries. During his visit to Beijing, General Bajwa met with his counterpart, General Zhang Youxia, and emphasized that Pakistan is not inclined towards camp politics, highlighting that the best weapons come from the US while economic ventures are pursued with China (Katha, 2022). Furthermore, during his farewell state visit to the US, former COAS Bajwa expressed that Pakistan has the potential to be a true strategic partner for the US, emphasizing the importance of technology, trade, infrastructure, and health platforms in addition to defense and military ties (Khan, 2022).

## **CONCLUSION**

To sum up the findings of this study, it can be concluded that Pakistan finds itself at a critical juncture in the South Asian security landscape due to the growing Sino-US rivalry. This rivalry poses significant challenges for Pakistan as it tries to navigate its relationships with both countries. In the recent past, Former Pakistani Premier Imran Khan has emphasized the need for Pakistan to avoid taking sides and instead promote cooperation and collaboration among states. He recognizes the strong bond with China and the stable relationship with the U.S, emphasizing the importance of economic stability.

Experts like Dr. Asghar Ali and Talat Masood have highlighted how both China and the U.S. aim to exploit Pakistan's geographical attributes, creating a delicate situation for the country. Syed Ali suggests that Pakistan should adopt an affirm and smart approach, acting as a bridge-state and neutral actor to facilitate mutual benefits between the U.S. and China.

In conclusion, Pakistan faces the challenge of navigating the Sino-U.S. rivalry. However, by adopting a balanced and neutral stance, Pakistan can pursue regional prosperity and stability. The country's strong bond with China and its stable relationship with the U.S. provide opportunities for cooperation and collaboration. Pakistan must carefully manage its relationships with both powers while safeguarding its national interests and promoting regional peace. By maintaining a balanced approach, Pakistan can play a crucial role in facilitating dialogue and mutual understanding between the U.S. and China, thereby



contributing to stability in the South Asian security landscape.

Firstly, in terms of regional security, the South Asian landscape is being reshaped as the US invests in India to counterbalance China's influence. This dynamic puts Pakistan in a precarious position, given its close ties with China and a stable relationship with the US. Pakistan's geographical attributes are being exploited by both powers, as highlighted by experts like Dr. Asghar Ali and Qazi Saleem, creating a delicate situation for the country.

Moreover, Pakistan's economic stability is closely tied to its relationships with China and the US. The CPEC, a flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative, has attracted attention and objections from both the US and India, who perceive it as part of China's grand strategy to dominate the global economy. Pakistan's association with China has irked the US, leading to a cooling of relations, while recent strain in US-India relations adds further concerns for Pakistan's economic interests. Pakistan must navigate this complex landscape and strive to maintain a balanced approach to protect its economic interests and ensure the successful implementation of key projects like CPEC.

In terms of maritime implications, Pakistan finds itself entangled in a complex triangle of interests due to the US-China rivalry and India's presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). China aims to establish its dominance in the IOR through initiatives like the base in Djibouti and control over Sri Lanka's Hambantota Island, while the US already maintains several bases in the region. Pakistan's strong partnership with China and projects like CPEC have raised concerns for the US and India. The Gwadar port, a key component of CPEC, symbolizes the competitive dynamics between the US and China and makes Pakistan vulnerable to maritime threats. Pakistan strives to maintain a secure environment, demands foolproof security for its projects, and collaborates with international actors in maritime affairs to ensure its national security.

The Sino-US rivalry also has implications for Pakistan's civil-military relationship. Pakistan's military follows a vision of strategic manoeuvring, seeking to balance domestic forces and ensure independence from any single state's assistance or proxies. While the military has historically viewed China with caution, recent developments, such as Prime Minister Imran Khan's rejection of the Summit of Democracy invitation, have pushed Pakistan closer to China. However, the military recognizes the importance of balancing relationships with other nations, including the US, to benefit from counter-terrorism tactics and enhanced trade. General Bajwa, the former Chief of Army Staff, has emphasized the significance of strategic partnerships with both the US and China, indicating Pakistan's aim to expand its terms with both nations.

Ultimately, this research work enhances our knowledge over the concepts of the regional implications, economic implications, maritime implications, implications on CPEC, and the Pakistan civil-military relationship are all crucial aspects influenced by the growing US-China rivalry. Pakistan must navigate these challenges by adopting a balanced approach, protecting its economic interests, ensuring maritime security, and managing its relationships with China and the US effectively. By doing so, Pakistan can strive for regional stability, economic prosperity, and a harmonious relationship with China and the US.

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