
PAKISTAN'S QUEST FOR STRATEGIC AUTONOMY: HEDGING AGAINST US-CHINA-RUSSIA RIVALRIES POST- 2013

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Abstract:

Hedging has emerged as a critical element of Pakistan's foreign policy in navigating the rivalries between the US, China, and Russia post-2013. Faced with a complex geopolitical landscape, Pakistan has sought to balance and diversify its relations with these great powers to secure its economic and security interests while maintaining strategic autonomy. The CPEC symbolizes the deepening Sino-Pakistani ties, bringing substantial infrastructure investment and strategic leverage. Simultaneously, Pakistan has also improved ties with Russia, exemplified by joint military exercises and the procurement of advanced military equipment, thereby diversifying its defense partnerships. Despite fluctuating US aid and complex relations, Pakistan has maintained strategic dialogues with the US, particularly on counterterrorism and Afghanistan issues. Economic engagements and high-level visits emphasize the importance of a working relationship with Washington. The hedging strategy has allowed Pakistan to grab benefits from each great power, enhance its strategic positioning, and navigate regional geopolitical tensions effectively. By balancing these relations, Pakistan has managed to

safeguard its national interests and assert its strategic autonomy in an increasingly competitive global environment. The multifaceted analysis illustrates the adeptness of Pakistan in leveraging its geopolitical position amidst the ongoing great power competition.

Keywords: foreign policy, hedging, US-China-Russia rivalries, geopolitics, geoeconomics, strategic autonomy, regional tensions, great power competition.

Introduction

Hedging is a sophisticated foreign policy strategy employed by middle-power states to effectively navigate complex global environments marked by intense great power competition. This approach involves simultaneously diversifying and balancing economic, diplomatic, and security ties to maximize potential benefits and mitigate risks. States adopting hedging strategies avoid over-reliance on any single power, thereby maintaining strategic flexibility and autonomy in a volatile global landscape (Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019).

For Pakistan, a country strategically located at the intersection of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, hedging has become a crucial strategy in responding to the rivalries between the US, China, and Russia, particularly since 2013. This period has witnessed significant shifts in global power dynamics, necessitating an adaptable and refined foreign policy. The geostrategic location of Pakistan positions it as a pivotal player in regional and global geopolitics. Its proximity to India, Afghanistan, China, and the Persian Gulf highlights its importance in security and economic corridors. Consequently, the foreign policy of Pakistan has carefully balanced relationships with the major powers to safeguard its national interests amidst changing geopolitical and geoeconomic realities.

The intensifying competition between the US, Russia, and China has created a complex environment for Pakistan. The US, historically a significant ally, has adopted a fluctuating approach, characterized by engagement and estrangement in South Asia. Meanwhile, the economic and military rise of China as a great power has seen the deepening of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and broader strategic cooperation between both countries. The resurgence of Russia in the premiership of Vladimir Putin has led to renewed energy and defense collaborations, offering Pakistan an opportunity to diversify its partnerships.

In response to these changing dynamics, the hedging strategy of Pakistan involves maintaining vigorous ties with all three powers. Hedging enables Pakistan to draw economic benefits from CPEC, leverage economic and military support from the US, and enhance its defense capabilities through engagements with Russia. By diversifying its alliances and avoiding exclusive dependence on any single power, Pakistan enhances its strategic autonomy by mitigating the risks associated with great power competition (Boni, 2021).

As the global landscape has become increasingly characterized by great power rivalries, Pakistan has navigated this complex geopolitical environment by adopting a hedging strategy in its foreign policy. Against this backdrop, this research work seeks to address research questions

such as: What drives Pakistan's hedging strategy in response to US-China-Russia rivalries post-2013? How has the hedging strategy impacted Pakistan's regional and global positioning? How successful has Pakistan's hedging strategy been in maintaining strategic autonomy and achieving national interests? This study also employs a qualitative research method to explore the foreign policy responses of Pakistan to US-China-Russia rivalries post-2013. The research relies on a comprehensive review of secondary sources, including books, academic articles, and research papers, to gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Thematic analysis technique is used to analyze the qualitative data while quantitative data have been used to support the argument of the study.

Conceptual Framework

Hedging is a set of strategies, that allows states to avoid exclusive alignments with a single power while leveraging multiple relationships for economic and security benefits. Rooted in liberalism and realism, hedging explains the efforts of the states to engage in economic and diplomatic cooperation (liberalism) and balance against powerful adversaries (realism) (Chan, 2020). Evelyn Goh's formative work on Asia-Pacific security introduced the concept, highlighting how smaller and middle-power regional states navigate between the growing influence of China and the established presence of the US through balancing and engagement (Goh, 2016). Kuik Cheng-Chwee further emphasized the flexibility of hedging strategy, enabling Southeast Asian nations to maintain autonomy amid major power rivalries (Kuik, 2016). Scholars like Darren Lim and Kai He also expanded the concept to include middle powers and smaller states striving to preserve independence and security (Lim, 2016).

For a middle power like Pakistan, hedging has been vital since 2013 due to US-China-Russia rivalries. The involvement of Pakistan in the CPEC, a flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), exemplifies this strategy. CPEC has brought significant Chinese investment in energy, infrastructure, and transportation, notably the Gwadar Port development, transforming Gwadar into a regional trade hub. By 2021, over \$45 billion had been invested in CPEC projects, boosting the economy of Pakistan and solidifying its strategic partnership with China. However, to avoid over-dependence on China, Pakistan has also strengthened its ties with the US, receiving over \$5 billion in economic support and \$3.5 billion in security assistance from 2013 to 2018. This aid has been crucial for the economic and defense stability of Pakistan, showcasing its balancing act. Additionally, Pakistan has also diversified its strategic partnerships by engaging with Russia, particularly in defense cooperation. The important developments in this context include their first military cooperation pact in 2014 and joint military exercises "Druzhba" (Friendship) in 2016, along with agreements on energy and defense projects like the \$2 billion North-South Gas Pipeline (Baqai, 2022).

A significant aspect of the hedging strategy of Pakistan involves its response to the US favoritism towards India characterized by Indo-US strategic partnership. Pakistan's response to this strategic partnership involves deepening strategic ties with Russia and China. For instance, the US-India nuclear deal and defense cooperation spurred Pakistan to enhance its nuclear and

military collaboration with China, resulting in projects like the co-production of JF-17 Thunder fighter jets and seeking assistance in missile and nuclear programs. Naval collaboration with Russia, including acquiring Mi-35M helicopters, and SU-35 jet fighters and conducting joint naval drills, also highlights the strategy of Pakistan to counterbalance the growing influence of India. Economically, Pakistan has diversified its investment and trade beyond the US and China, seeking investments from Turkey, Gulf countries, and other Asian nations to reduce economic dependency. This diversification is part of the broader hedging approach of Pakistan to ensure economic resilience and avoid over-reliance on any single nation (Farooq et al., 2020). This study employed a hedging strategy as a lens to decode Pakistan's foreign policy amidst great power competition.

Pakistan's Foreign Policy Post-2013: Quest for Strategic Autonomy

Since 2013, the foreign policy of Pakistan has been shaped by economic needs, regional security dynamics, and the evolving global order leading to a strategic approach in its relations with Russia, China, and the US. The important factors influencing this policy include the enduring rivalry with India, the situation in Afghanistan, and the rise of terrorism (Waheed, 2021). The incessant rivalry with India remains a cornerstone of the foreign policy of Pakistan, dictating its defense strategy. Incidents like the Balakot airstrike and Pulwama attack in 2019, which escalated into an aerial confrontation, highlight the volatile nature of the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir (Abbasi and Uzzaman, 2023). This persistent threat has driven Pakistan to seek strategic alliances and military enhancements, notably with China through the JF-17 Thunder fighter jet program and advanced missile technology acquisitions, and with Russia through the purchase of Mi-35M helicopters and joint military exercises like Druzhba (Azam, 2022).

The Afghan situation also significantly impacts the security environment of Pakistan (Waqar et. al, 2021). The US withdrawal and the resurgence of the Taliban in 2021 have created complex security challenges for Pakistan (Boni, 2022). Pakistan has engaged in various diplomatic efforts to stabilize Afghanistan, hosting multiple rounds of peace talks and supporting political solutions, while cooperating with Russia and China to counter terrorism and manage potential instability in the region. Its role in the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) underscores its commitment to the Afghan peace process. Nevertheless, terrorism within its borders further shapes the foreign policy of Pakistan. Multiple operations including Zarb-e-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasaad have been crucial in combating terrorist groups such as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). These counterterrorism operations require significant financial resources and international cooperation, particularly with China and the US for counterterrorism support and intelligence sharing (Afridi & Ali, 2020).

Additionally, to curb cross-border terrorism and smuggling, border management including the fencing of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border remains a critical aspect of the defense strategy of Pakistan. Thus, regional security dynamics, including the Afghan situation, relations with India, and cross-border terrorism, profoundly influence the foreign policy of Pakistan. Economic imperatives have also driven Pakistan to seek diversified partnerships to foster growth and development, with the CPEC as a cornerstone of its strategy. This multi-billion-dollar initiative,

part of China's BRI, aims to enhance energy, infrastructure, and industrial development in Pakistan. Launched in 2015, CPEC represents a \$62 billion investment plan, the largest in the history of Pakistan. It aims to connect Gwadar Port to China's Xinjiang region, creating a network of railways, highways, and pipelines to improve infrastructure, boost economic growth, address energy shortages, and foster industrial development (Parveen et al., 2020).

CPEC has significantly impacted the energy sector of Pakistan, alleviating severe energy crises. Projects like the Sahiwal coal-fired power plants and Port Qasim, each with a capacity of 1,320 megawatts, have added over 5,000 megawatts to the national grid, enhancing industrial productivity and reducing power outages. Infrastructure development under CPEC, such as the M-4 Motorway and Gwadar Port, has improved connectivity, facilitated trade, reduced travel time, and increased the strategic significance of Pakistan in regional trade networks (Iqbal et al., 2019).

However, reliance on Chinese investments raises several concerns about debt sustainability. Pakistan's debt to China and Chinese banks skyrocketed to around \$100 billion, 30% of its external debt. Much of that debt has come under CPEC (Khaliq, 2023). High debt levels could also lead to a debt trap, straining financial resources and limiting economic sovereignty. Ensuring sustainable development under CPEC poses challenges, such as environmental concerns over coal-fired power plants and issues of land acquisition and displacement affecting local communities. To mitigate attached risks and enhance growth prospects, Pakistan has diversified its economic partnerships. Engagements with Gulf countries, Turkey, and other Asian nations aim to attract investments and reduce dependency on China. For example, Saudi Arabia has pledged investments in the energy and infrastructure sectors of Pakistan, including a proposed \$10 billion oil refinery in Gwadar. These diversified partnerships are essential for the political stability and sustainable economic growth of the country (Duan et al., 2022).

The evolving global order has also complicated the foreign policy landscape of Pakistan, influenced by the rise of China, Russia's resurgence, and shifting US priorities. The rise of China has deepened Sino-Pakistani ties, particularly through the \$62 billion CPEC project, which enhances the infrastructure and connectivity of Pakistan, notably with Gwadar Port (Ali, 2020). Militarily, China has bolstered the defense capabilities of Pakistan with advanced hardware like JF-17 Thunder jets, conducting joint exercises, and technical assistance in missile and nuclear programs (Maqsood, 2021). Politically, China supports Pakistan in international forums, counterbalancing regional isolation and Indian influence. Thus, military and economic ties with China have fortified the strategic position of Pakistan.

The resurgence of Russia has opened new energy and defense avenues for Pakistan. To diversify defense procurement, Pakistan is in the process of acquiring weaponry from Russia, including Mi-35M helicopters, SU-35 fighter jets, T-90 tanks, etc and additionally, conducting joint military exercises like the Druzhba series further strengthen defense ties (Kurita, 2019). In the energy sector, Russia committed \$14 billion in 2021 to projects like the Pakistan Stream Gas Pipeline, addressing shortages and enhancing the energy infrastructure of the country (Korybko, and Morozov, 2020).

The US shifting priorities proves a double-edged sword by posing both challenges and opportunities. The US focus on the Indo-Pacific strategy and fluctuating engagement levels have necessitated a reassessment of bilateral relations. While counterterrorism and security cooperation persist, economic ties are inconsistent (Salman et al., 2024). The US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban resurgence have complicated the security environment, prompting Pakistan to balance its strategic interests. The US-India partnership also necessitates the recalibration of US-Pakistan bilateral relations. Despite conditional military aid, Pakistan seeks to maintain a working relationship with the US while deepening ties with Russia and China.

The hedging approach of Pakistan balances relationships with major powers to avoid over-reliance on any single entity. This multifaceted strategy helps Pakistan navigate regional and global complexities, ensuring its economic growth, security, and strategic autonomy. By maintaining diversified partnerships and leveraging its geostrategic location, Pakistan aims to enhance its standing and influence in a multipolar world (Jahangir & Ahmed, 2023).

US-Pakistan Relations Oscillatory Ties

Post-2013, US-Pakistan relations have oscillated between tensions and cooperation, influenced by counterterrorism cooperation, US withdrawal from Afghanistan, and fluctuating economic aid. The important issues include the role of Pakistan in facilitating peace talks and intelligence sharing, despite mutual mistrust. The 2018 military aid cuts by President Trump's administration highlighted these tensions. Pakistan has pursued closer ties with other global powers, balancing US influence and navigating the complex international environment to safeguard its national interests (Youhana, 2023).

Military aid and security cooperation have been central to US-Pakistan relations post-2013, characterized by a complex relationship of strategic calculations, mutual interests, and evolving geopolitical dynamics. This relationship has been marked by periods of conditional cooperation and substantial military aid, primarily centered on counterterrorism efforts. From 2002, the US cumulatively provided \$33.4bn aid to Pakistan in which approximately \$7.96 billion was spent in line with security-related issues, primarily for counterterrorism operations, purchasing military hardware, and training programs. This aid included funds under the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program for advanced military equipment like F-16 fighter jets, crucial for counterterrorism efforts in tribal areas. The International Military Education and Training (IMET) program also facilitated the training of Pakistani military officers in US institutions, enhancing interoperability and professional military education. These educational exchanges improved strategic and technical capabilities, strengthening US-Pakistan military relations (Rashid et al., 2020).

The US aid was conditional on the cooperation of Pakistan in counterterrorism, particularly against the Taliban and the Haqqani network. Nevertheless, Washington time and again coerced Pakistan to do more as efforts of Islamabad to counterterrorism were considered insufficient and indecisive, ultimately creating tensions between the two states. For instance, in 2018, the US suspended \$300 million in Coalition Support Funds (CSF) over perceived inaction against terrorist groups (Hathaway, 2019). Despite these challenges, US military aid has significantly bolstered the

defense capabilities of Pakistan, enhancing its ability to address asymmetric and conventional threats, and improving the professionalism of its armed forces (Yousafzai, 2021). The counterterrorism cooperation has been pivotal in US military aid to Pakistan, focusing on combating groups like the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and ISIS.

Nevertheless, the US Operation Neptune Spear launched to kill Osama bin Laden in 2011 was a significant development, which roused many questions regarding the US-Pakistan alliance in the war on terror. Post-2013, the US pressured Pakistan to act against the Haqqani network, leading to operations like Zarb-e-Azb in 2014, targeting militant strongholds. Despite occasional friction over CSF conditionality, such as the 2018 suspension of \$300 million due to perceived inaction, the partnership has significantly enhanced Pakistan's counterterrorism capabilities and disrupted terrorist networks in the country. This cooperation has bolstered regional security and highlighted the strategic importance of Pakistan in global counterterrorism efforts (Zaidi et al., 2022).

The CSF reimbursed Pakistan for counterterrorism operations, contingent on US certification of its efforts. Despite substantial aid, US-Pakistan military relations have faced significant challenges. In 2018, President Trump's administration suspended \$1.3 billion in military aid, citing insufficient action in Islamabad against terrorist groups (Hathaway, 2019). This highlighted the increasing conditionality of US aid, demanding tangible results in counterterrorism. The suspension aimed to pressure Pakistan into taking decisive action against groups like the Taliban and the Haqqani network, seen as destabilizing forces in Afghanistan.

Despite various efforts like Operation Zarb-e-Azb in 2014, which targeted militants in North Waziristan (Javai, 2020), the US criticized Pakistan for selectively targeting terrorists and allegedly supporting groups involved in regional insurgencies. The 2018 aid suspension also strained bilateral relations and prompted Pakistan to opt for hedging strategy by intensifying engagements with China, and advancing projects under the CPEC to mitigate economic impacts. Additionally, Pakistan sought to diversify defense partnerships, engaging more with Russia for military equipment and joint exercises (Malik & Aquil, 2022).

Diplomatically, Pakistan also aimed to reassure the US of its counterterrorism commitment, facilitating peace talks between the Taliban and the US, leading to the US-Taliban peace deal in February 2020 (Ganguly, and Kapur, 2023). The aid suspension highlighted the growing conditionality of US-Pakistan relations, pushing Pakistan to diversify alliances to maintain stability amidst divergent strategic expectations. The diplomatic and economic engagements between the US and Pakistan have seen significant fluctuations post-2013, driven by shifting geopolitical priorities and mutual strategic interests. Despite frequent ups and downs, Pakistan has consistently sought to maintain inclusive diplomatic relations with the US to secure continued economic investment and support (Bhatnagar, 2023).

The US-Pakistan economic relationship has seen significant aid and investment, punctuated by periods of decline due to strategic and political disagreements. From 2002 to 2018, the US provided Pakistan with over \$8 billion in economic aid. After 2013, this aid fluctuated, driven by geopolitical considerations. In FY 2014, the US allocated \$446 million in economic

assistance to Pakistan, funding crucial sectors like education, health, and economic growth. For instance, the USAID-funded "Pakistan Reading Project" aimed to improve literacy by training teachers and providing learning materials to millions of students. This initiative emphasized the US's commitment to Pakistan's educational development (Rasool et al., 2023).

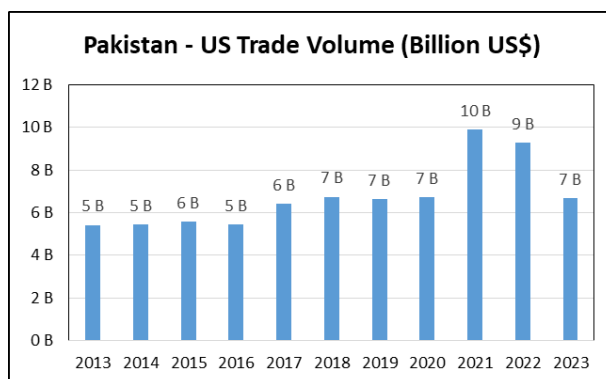
By FY 2018, economic assistance decreased to \$336 million (Syed, 2018), reflecting broader foreign aid cuts and scrutiny of Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts by President Trump's administration. Despite reductions, essential projects continued to receive support, such as the "Maternal and Child Health Program," which aimed to reduce maternal and infant mortality rates by improving healthcare services in rural areas (Malik et. al, 2021). This ongoing assistance demonstrated recognition from the US of the importance of maintaining economic engagement with Pakistan, despite strategic disagreements.

The diplomatic engagements have been crucial in maintaining US-Pakistan economic ties. High-level visits, such as former Pakistani Prime Ministers Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan's visits in 2015 and 2019 respectively to Washington, emphasized economic cooperation and security, highlighting the need for an inclusive bilateral partnership. The Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act of 2009, known as the Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act, authorized \$7.5 billion in non-military aid over five years, focusing on education, economic development, and democratic institutions. This act funded numerous projects, such as the Balochistan Agriculture Project (BAP), which improved agricultural productivity and incomes for local farmers (Holland, 2018).

Despite political frictions, legal frameworks such as the Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act have facilitated ongoing economic collaboration between the two states. High-level diplomatic visits and these frameworks highlight the strategic importance of maintaining economic ties, enabling both countries to work on mutual interests like promoting regional stability and combating extremism. In a nutshell, the diplomatic engagement of Pakistan with the US has been essential in fostering investment and securing economic support, highlighting the significance of sustained economic collaboration despite political challenges.

A significant example of US support for the energy sector of Pakistan is the Diamer-Bhasha Dam project. Although delayed, the project aims to enhance water storage and energy production in Pakistan. In 2018, USAID committed \$200 million to the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Reconstruction Program, including support for this dam, highlighting US interest in the infrastructure and energy development of Pakistan (Sabir, 2018). Another important facet of US-Pakistan economic relations is trade. In 2019, bilateral trade was valued at \$6.6 billion, with the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) program providing Pakistani goods with duty-free access to the US market. This program has boosted the textile and apparel industries of Pakistan, creating jobs and supporting economic growth. These efforts reflect the strategic engagement of the US in the economic development of Pakistan despite broader geopolitical challenges. Similarly, the US-Pakistan trade volume has experienced a rollercoaster ride, peaking at \$10 billion in 2013, followed by a rise to \$10 billion in 2021, and further plummeting to \$7 billion in 2023, indicating a significant downward spiral in bilateral trade between the two nations over the past decade. To

conclude, US-Pakistan had a rollercoaster relationship marked by alternating episodes of tensions and cooperation during that time.



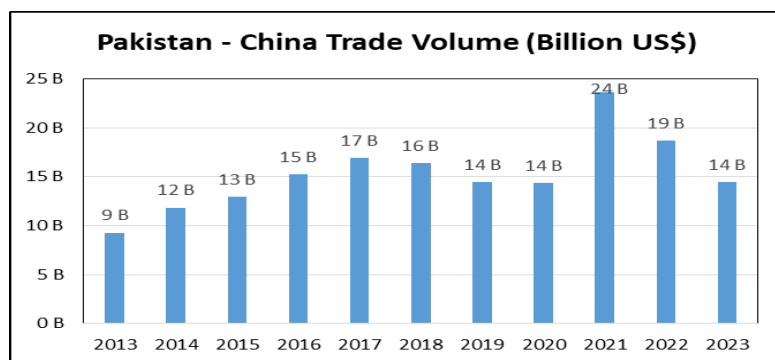
Source: UNcomtrade, 2024

To balance the US influence in post-2013, Pakistan has strengthened ties with Russia and China, particularly due to the perceived US tilt towards India. An important example is the CPEC, a \$62 billion initiative under China's BRI, which enhances the infrastructure, energy, and strategic importance of Pakistan via the Gwadar Port. Militarily, Pakistan has deepened cooperation with China through the JF-17 Thunder fighter jet and joint exercises, and diversified defense procurement with Russia, including Mi-35 helicopters and joint drills. Additionally, economic collaborations with Russia, such as the North-South Gas Pipeline, aim to address energy needs and promote stability (Shamil & Mirza, 2020).

China-Pakistan Expanding Horizons

China has emerged as an important strategic partner for Pakistan, especially through the CPEC, a flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This multifaceted partnership encompasses military, economic, and diplomatic dimensions, significantly influencing the foreign policy and development trajectory of Pakistan post-2013. The CPEC, launched in 2013, has been transformative for Pakistan, involving over \$60 billion in investments aimed at enhancing energy, infrastructure, and transportation. The important projects include the Gwadar Port, which enhances the strategic importance of Pakistan by providing China with direct access to the Arabian Sea, and the Karakoram Highway upgrade, improving trade routes. The energy initiatives of CPEC, such as the Sahiwal Coal Power Project, aim to address chronic power shortages in Pakistan by adding approximately 17,000 MW to the national grid. Additionally, the Lahore Orange Line Metro Train and the Multan-Sukkur Motorway have significantly improved urban mobility and transportation. CPEC has also created over 75,000 jobs and fostered economic growth, particularly in underdeveloped regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan (Malik, 2018).

Moreover, China-Pakistan trade volume has experienced a rollercoaster ride, surging from \$9 billion in 2013 to \$24 billion in 2021, but plummeting to \$14 billion in 2023. This downward spiral in 2023 raises concerns about the sustainability of their economic partnership, despite the impressive growth earlier in the decade.



Source: UNcomtrade, 2024

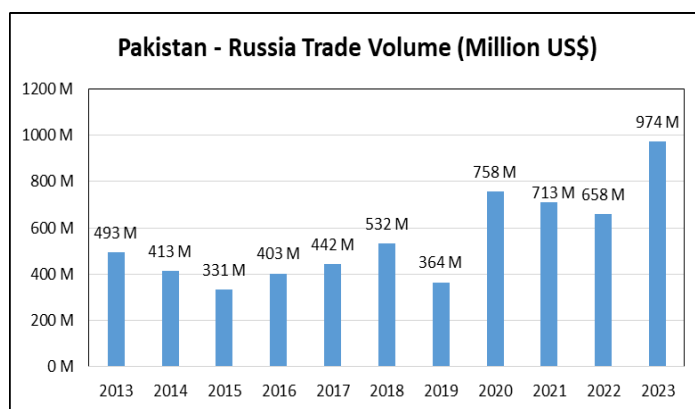
In the military realm, defense cooperation between Pakistan and China has deepened, featuring joint military exercises like the "Shaheen" series and arms joint-production and sales including the JF-17 Thunder and J-10C fighter jets (Matthews, and Anicetti, 2024). These collaborations have modernized military capabilities and improved the strategic stability of Pakistan vis-à-vis India. The JF-17 Thunder, co-produced by Pakistan and China, exemplifies successful technology transfer and has been a cornerstone of Islamabad's air defense. Additionally, the delivery of Type 054A/P frigates and support for drone technology has further strengthened the defense posture of Pakistan (Boon & Ong, 2021).

Despite the inclusive partnership with China, Pakistan seeks to diversify its international relations to avoid over-dependence on a single ally. This diversification includes fostering ties with Russia, the US, and Gulf countries. For instance, Pakistan's engagement in the North-South Gas Pipeline project with Russia addresses energy needs, while strategic visits and economic collaborations with other global players help maintain a balanced foreign policy. Hence, CPEC and deepened military cooperation with China have significantly advanced the economic and defense sectors of Pakistan, while strategic diversification efforts reflect a balanced approach to international relations (Ismail & Hussain, 2022). In a nutshell, China-Pakistan relations have expanded their horizons courtesy of the CPEC project during said period.

Russia-Pakistan Rapprochement

Post-2013, Pakistan-Russia relations have significantly improved through strategic economic collaborations and enhanced defense cooperation, reflecting a shift in the foreign policy

of Pakistan to diversify its international partnerships. In defense cooperation, Pakistan has strengthened ties with Russia by purchasing advanced military equipment and engaging in joint exercises. An important development was the acquisition of Mi-35M attack helicopters in 2017, which has bolstered the counterterrorism and border security capabilities of Pakistan. Additionally, the Druzhba series of joint military exercises, initiated in 2016, has improved interoperability between the two nations' armed forces. These exercises include counterterrorism training and mountain warfare, highlighting growing military trust and collaboration (Khan & Syed, 2021). Similarly, Russia-Pakistan trade volume has witnessed a remarkable upsurge, skyrocketing from a modest \$439 million in 2013 to a substantial \$7.6 billion in 2020, and continuing its upward trajectory to reach \$974 million in 2023. This significant growth underscores the strengthening economic ties between the two nations.



Source: UNcomtrade, 2024

Economic and energy collaborations have also been central to this relationship. The North-South Gas Pipeline project, launched in 2015, aims to transport liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Karachi to Lahore, addressing energy shortages in Pakistan with a planned capacity of 12.4 billion cubic meters annually (Ahmed, 2022). While the project has faced delays, it represents a strategic effort to diversify the energy sources of Pakistan. Additionally, discussions about oil and gas exploration, and potential investments in the energy infrastructure of Pakistan, reflect ongoing economic engagement (Bhutta, 2024).

Furthermore, strategic diversification efforts of Pakistan include exploring new military technology and balancing relations with other major powers. By engaging with Russia for defense cooperation and arms deals, Pakistan reduces its dependence on traditional allies like the US, thus strengthening its strategic autonomy. Concurrently, Pakistan also maintains active partnerships with the US and China through security cooperation and the CPEC, respectively. To summarize, the post-2013 era has seen a notable enhancement in Pakistan-Russia relations through energy

collaborations and defense advancements, demonstrating the strategic approach of Pakistan to diversify its international partnerships and maintain geopolitical balance (Khalid & Munir, 2023).

Balancing the growing influence of Russia has been an important aspect of the foreign policy of Pakistan, aiming to harmonize its growing ties with Russia with established relationships with China and the US. A notable example is the role of Pakistan in the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) for Afghan peace (Faisal, 2016), where it actively collaborates with China and the US despite deepening ties with Russia. In defense, Pakistan has balanced acquiring Russian Mi-35M helicopters with maintaining a significant fleet of US-supplied F-16s, ensuring a diversified military capability. Economically, the North-South Gas Pipeline project with Russia complements rather than overshadows Pakistan's CPEC and US economic engagements. This strategy exemplifies the diplomatic skill of Pakistan in leveraging multiple global powers to enhance its strategic autonomy (Mahmood et al., 2023). To sum up, the Russia-Pakistan rapprochement has significantly improved mutual relations through strategic economic collaborations and enhanced defense cooperation.

Comparative Analysis of Pakistan's Foreign Policy vis-a-vis US-China-Russia Strategic Rivalry

The hedging strategy of Pakistan, which involves a subtle balancing act between the US, China, and Russia, has been instrumental in securing significant economic and security benefits, enhancing strategic autonomy, and navigating complex geopolitical dynamics. Engagement with these three global powers has enabled Pakistan to maximize its economic and security gains. Historically, the US has been a major provider of economic support and military aid to Pakistan. From 2002 to 2018, Pakistan received over \$33 billion in aid, which included advanced military equipment like F-16 fighter jets and substantial economic assistance for development projects. Concurrently, China's BRI flagship project CPEC has brought over \$62 billion in investments, creating jobs, fostering infrastructure development, and addressing energy shortages through transportation networks and new power plants. Additionally, the defense cooperation of Pakistan with Russia, exemplified by the acquisition of Mi-35M helicopters and participation in joint exercises like "Druzhba," has also diversified its military sources and reduced dependency on Western arms. These collaborations have also included the North-South Gas Pipeline project, aimed at improving Pakistan's energy security of Pakistan.

This multifaceted engagement has strengthened the strategic autonomy of Pakistan. By balancing relations with the US, China, and Russia, Pakistan has avoided over-reliance on any single great power. The US continues to be an important partner, providing economic and military support despite occasional tensions. The investments of China through CPEC have bolstered the infrastructure and energy sectors of Pakistan, while Russian military cooperation has diversified the defense procurement of Pakistan. Islamabad's independent foreign policy actions, such as its role in the QCG for Afghan peace and participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), underline its ability to navigate complex regional and global dynamics.

This strategic balancing from Pakistan has allowed it to play a key role in Eurasian and South Asian geopolitics (Anwar, 2020). The CPEC project has enhanced the strategic position of Pakistan in the Indian Ocean region while improving relations with China and Russia through the SCO and has broadened its security and diplomatic engagements. The involvement of Pakistan in the Afghan peace process and continued US military cooperation exemplify its effective management of these relationships to enhance national security and regional stability.

Changing Global Landscape: Challenges and Opportunities for Pakistan's Hedging Strategy

Hedging proves a double-edged sword as it offers Pakistan both significant opportunities and challenges in navigating a complex geopolitical landscape. This multifaceted approach involves balancing relationships with China, the US, and Russia to enhance national interests while managing various internal and external factors. For instance, one of the primary challenges Pakistan faces is domestic political instability. Frequent changes in government and internal strife, such as the political turmoil following the disqualifications of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in 2017 and Prime Minister Imran Khan in 2022, disrupt consistent foreign policy execution and undermine international credibility. Further, economic constraints aggravate problems for Pakistan, as persistent reliance on external aid and structural issues like declining economic growth, low circulation of capital, high inflation and unemployment limit its ability to fully leverage foreign partnerships. The IMF bailout package of \$6 billion in 2019 highlights these economic vulnerabilities, restricting resources for defense and development (Shafqat, 2019).

Regional security threats further complicate the execution of the hedging strategy in Pakistan. For instance, the enduring rivalry with India, marked by incidents like the Pulwama terrorist attack on February 14, 2019, and the subsequent February episode in a nuclearized environment pose significant risks to regional peace and stability (Uzzaman et. al, 2021). Further, Pakistan's low economic integration at the regional and international levels together with strained diplomatic relations with the world adds challenges to ensure its security needs vis-à-vis conventionally superior India. Additionally, the unstable situation in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the US withdrawal and the resurgence of the Taliban in 2021 introduces new security risks and complicates the regional strategy of Pakistan particularly in the shape of an increase in terrorist incidents and the looming Afghan refugee crisis. This is why, hedging seems to be the most appropriate policy option for Pakistan to mitigate the emerging threats and also grab opportunities amidst evolving geoeconomic and geopolitical realities.

Strengthening economic resilience through initiatives like the CPEC is a prime opportunity. CPEC has led to over \$62 billion in investments, including the development of Gwadar Port and various energy projects, which boost economic growth and establish Pakistan as an important player in regional trade networks (Boni, 2021). Diplomatic engagements also offer significant opportunities. High-level diplomatic visits, such as former Prime Minister Imran Khan's trips to China and the US in 2019, and current Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's meetings with China's President Xi Jinping and Russia's President Vladimir Putin exemplify efforts to strengthen bilateral relations and secure military and economic assistance. Additionally, the

participation of Pakistan in multilateral forums such as SCO allows it to collaborate on security and economic issues, enhancing its strategic influence. Leveraging regional and international partnerships also offers avenues for growth. Collaborations with Russia, including arms acquisitions and joint military exercises, diversify the defense capabilities of Pakistan. Furthermore, CPEC's infrastructure projects and the development of Gwadar Port enhance the strategic importance of Pakistan in regional and global trade networks (Hussain & Jamali, 2019).

Future Prospects and Recommendations

Looking ahead, Pakistan's hedging strategy will be shaped by evolving regional challenges and changing global dynamics. The future of foreign policy in Pakistan hinges on three main strategies: (a) enhancing economic and security resilience, (b) diversifying strategic partnerships, and (c) engaging in proactive diplomacy and multilateralism.

An important recommendation for Pakistan is to continue diversifying its strategic partnerships to avoid over-reliance on any single country. Traditionally dependent on the US for economic and military support, Pakistan has recently expanded its alliances with global powers like Russia and China. For example, the CPEC represents a significant shift, with over \$62 billion in Chinese investments aimed at developing energy projects, infrastructure, and special economic zones. This initiative not only addresses the energy deficits of Pakistan but also improves regional connectivity, thereby enhancing economic stability.

Simultaneously, Pakistan has also strengthened its defense ties with Russia, evidenced by the acquisition of Mi-35M helicopters and participation in joint military exercises such as the Druzhba (Friendship) series. These efforts are part of a broader strategy to diversify defense sources beyond traditional Western allies. Furthermore, partnerships with countries like Turkey are also expanding, with agreements on defense projects like the sale of T-129 attack helicopters. Engaging with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, including Saudi Arabia's \$10 billion investment in Gwadar's oil refinery, exemplifies how Pakistan is broadening its economic relationships and reducing dependence on Western financial aid.

To strengthen its position, Pakistan must focus on both security and economic resilience. Economic resilience can be fortified through initiatives like CPEC, which aims to boost industrial and infrastructure development. The development of Gwadar Port and power plants under CPEC is pivotal in promoting industrial growth and reducing energy shortages. On the security front, modernizing the military through diversified defense partnerships is also crucial. The acquisition of advanced military technology from Russia and the deepening of defense ties with China contribute to a more inclusive defense posture. Additionally, internal security improvements from operations such as Zarb-e-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasaad have stabilized regions previously plagued by terrorism, enhancing national security.

Proactive diplomatic engagement is essential for Pakistan to amplify its strategic autonomy and regional-cum-global influence. Pakistan has also played a significant role in peace negotiations in Afghanistan, such as hosting the Murree Talks in 2015 and supporting the 2020 Doha Agreement. This diplomatic role emphasizes the significance of Pakistan in regional stability.

Participation in international forums like the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and the SCO further enhances the strategic position of Pakistan. As a member of the SCO, Pakistan engages in regional economic and security initiatives, while its involvement with the Organization Islamic Conference (OIC) allows it to advocate for global Muslim issues and strengthen ties with member states.

To summarize, the future hedging strategy of Pakistan will rely on diversifying partnerships, enhancing security and economic resilience, and pursuing proactive diplomatic engagement. By building strong relationships with Russia, China, and other partners, and actively participating in multilateral forums, Pakistan can navigate global power dynamics and secure its national interests.

Conclusion

The foreign policy of Pakistan has pragmatically employed hedging as an important strategy to navigate the complex web of rivalries between the US, China, and Russia post-2013. By judiciously balancing and diversifying its relationships with the great powers, Pakistan has successfully enhanced its economic and security interests while maintaining strategic autonomy. The CPEC stands out as a paradigmatic example of this approach, bringing economic investments and significant infrastructure into the country. The Gwadar Port, a critical component of CPEC, has substantially enhanced the maritime capabilities of Pakistan and connected it more closely with global trade routes, thereby showcasing the tangible benefits of this strategic partnership. In addition, Pakistan has also made concerted efforts to diversify its defense strategy by improving ties with Russia. This has led to the procurement of advanced military equipment such as Mi-35M helicopters, joint military exercises, and a broadening of the military capabilities of Pakistan. By reducing its over-reliance on traditional allies, Pakistan has perceptively provided itself with an alternative source of advanced weaponry, highlighting the benefits of a diversified defense strategy. Simultaneously, Pakistan has maintained a working relationship with the US, despite fluctuations in economic assistance and military aid. Cooperation on counterterrorism efforts has remained a significant aspect of this relationship, with the CSF providing substantial financial support for Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts. High-level visits, such as Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan's visit to Washington in 2015 and 2019 respectively, have highlighted the importance of maintaining a working relationship with the US, even amid tensions. Through this hedging strategy, Pakistan has responded to the rivalries between great powers, ensuring its national interests are safeguarded in an increasingly competitive world. By leveraging its bilateral relationships with these great powers, Pakistan has navigated a complex international landscape, maximizing its security and economic benefits while maintaining strategic autonomy. This multifaceted approach has enabled Pakistan to emerge as a significant player in regional geopolitics, capable of navigating the complex web of great power rivalries to its advantage.

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