

PAKISTAN'S STRATEGIC BALANCING BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE CHINA-PAKISTAN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates Pakistan's intricate diplomatic maneuvering and strategic balancing act between the United States (US) and China within the framework of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). It delves into the historical evolution of Pakistan's relationships with these global powers, highlighting the geopolitical and economic factors that shape its foreign policy decisions. Through a comprehensive analysis of Pakistan's engagement with the US and China, including economic partnerships, security considerations, and diplomatic efforts, this research uncovers the complexities and challenges inherent in maintaining a strategic equilibrium. The study also explores how CPEC, as a flagship project under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), impacts Pakistan's strategic calculus, examining the opportunities and risks it presents. By delving into the interplay of domestic politics, regional dynamics, and global geopolitics, this paper offers valuable insights into Pakistan's strategic balancing efforts and their implications for regional stability and international relations.

Key Words: Diplomatic maneuvering, Economic partnerships, Foreign policy, Geopolitics, Security considerations, Strategic balancing.

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan's strategic balancing act between the United States and China within the framework of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that encapsulates the intricate dynamics of international relations, economic diplomacy, and strategic imperatives. Situated at the confluence of global power shifts and regional geopolitical complexities, Pakistan's strategic choices and maneuvers carry significant implications not only for its own national interests but also for the broader dynamics of power play in South Asia and beyond. The emergence of CPEC as a flagship project under China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has elevated Pakistan's strategic importance in the eyes of both Beijing and Washington. On one hand, China sees CPEC as a linchpin of its broader economic and strategic

interests, offering unparalleled connectivity, trade routes, and access to key maritime chokepoints such as the Arabian Sea via the Gwadar Port. For Pakistan, CPEC represents a lifeline of economic opportunities, infrastructure development, and energy security, presenting a pathway to address longstanding development challenges and propel economic growth.

However, Pakistan's deepening engagement with China through CPEC has not gone unnoticed by its traditional ally, the United States. The strategic implications of China's expanding influence in the region, coupled with concerns about transparency, debt sustainability, and potential strategic realignments, have led to a nuanced recalibration of Pakistan's foreign policy orientation. Balancing between the economic incentives offered by CPEC

and the strategic imperatives of maintaining a strong relationship with the United States presents Pakistan with a delicate balancing act that requires astute diplomacy, foresight, and agility. This article delves into the intricacies of Pakistan's strategic balancing between the United States and China within the framework of CPEC, examining the economic, political, and security dimensions of this complex equation. By dissecting the motivations, challenges, and implications of Pakistan's strategic choices, this article aims to provide insights into how a middle power like Pakistan navigates the evolving dynamics of global power competition while safeguarding its national interests and sovereignty.

Research Objectives

1. Analyze the historical evolution of Pakistan's strategic relationships with the United States and China, focusing on key milestones and shifts in policy priorities.
2. Evaluate the geopolitical and economic factors that influence Pakistan's strategic balancing between the United States and China, with a particular focus on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).
3. Examine the role of CPEC as a strategic tool for Pakistan to enhance its economic ties with China while managing its relationship with the United States.
4. Investigate the impact of external pressures, such as regional security dynamics and global power competition, on Pakistan's strategic decision-making regarding its relationships with the United States and China.

Theoretical Framework

Pakistan's strategic balancing strategy can be understood through the lens of several relevant theories. Realism provides insights into Pakistan's rational pursuit of its national interests, including security and power considerations, in a world where states are driven by self-interest and power dynamics. The balance of power theory further elucidates Pakistan's approach, highlighting its efforts to counterbalance the influence and capabilities of the United States and China regionally, especially in light of their strategic competition. Geopolitical theories are crucial in analyzing how Pakistan's geographic location and its role as a corridor in the China-Pakistan Economic

Corridor (CPEC) shape its strategic choices, emphasizing the importance of geographical factors in international relations.

Economic interdependence theory adds another layer of understanding, showcasing how Pakistan's deepening economic ties with China through CPEC, as well as its economic relations with the United States, influence its foreign policy decisions. The security dilemma concept becomes pertinent in this context, illustrating the complexities and challenges Pakistan faces in managing its security concerns while pursuing strategic balancing between major powers. Additionally, the theory of soft balancing comes into play, highlighting Pakistan's use of non-military means, such as economic cooperation and diplomacy, to balance against stronger powers without escalating tensions.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the article aims to provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing Pakistan's strategic balancing between the United States and China within the framework of CPEC, taking into account both power dynamics and economic imperatives in shaping Pakistan's foreign policy choices.

Geopolitical and Economic Factors Shaping Pakistan's Collaboration with China and the United States

Pakistan's strategic location stands as a cornerstone of its foreign policy and geopolitical engagements, particularly in shaping its collaboration with China and the United States. Situated at the confluence of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, Pakistan serves as a crucial bridge linking these regions. This strategic positioning has elevated Pakistan's significance as a pivotal player in regional affairs, offering access to key trade routes, energy corridors, and geopolitical hotspots. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) epitomizes how Pakistan's strategic location drives collaboration, as it provides China with a direct pathway to the Arabian Sea and beyond, bypassing traditional maritime chokepoints. Similarly, Pakistan's role in regional security and stability, especially in neighboring Afghanistan, is of paramount importance to the United States. As such, Pakistan's strategic location not only influences its economic and security partnerships but also shapes broader regional dynamics, making it a linchpin in the geopolitical chessboard of Asia (Hussain & Jamali, 2019).

Pakistan's proximity to key countries is a pivotal geopolitical factor that intricately shapes its collaboration with China and the United States. Bordering Afghanistan, Iran, and India, Pakistan's strategic geography positions it at the crossroads of significant regional players and geopolitical hotspots. This proximity not only influences Pakistan's own security concerns but also impacts the interests and strategies of its allies and partners, particularly China and the United States. For China, Pakistan's proximity offers strategic access to the Arabian Sea and the broader Indian Ocean region through initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Meanwhile, Pakistan's relations with neighboring India and Afghanistan are closely monitored by the United States, affecting its regional policies and security engagements (Nasim, 2022). Thus, Pakistan's geographical proximity to key countries plays a crucial role in shaping its collaboration with global powers, reflecting the intricate interplay of geopolitics in the region.

Pakistan's historical relations, including its role as a Cold War ally of the United States, significantly influence its current geopolitical alignments and collaborations. During the Cold War era, Pakistan emerged as a strategic partner for the United States, particularly in countering Soviet influence in the region. This period of alliance and cooperation left a lasting imprint on Pakistan's foreign policy outlook and strategic calculus. However, the post-Cold War era witnessed shifts in global dynamics, leading Pakistan to diversify its international engagements, including fostering closer ties with China (Surahio & Soomro, 2022). The historical alliance with the United States continues to impact Pakistan's diplomatic engagements and defense partnerships. Despite occasional strains, such as divergent interests in Afghanistan and counterterrorism efforts, historical ties contribute to a level of mutual understanding and cooperation between Pakistan and the United States. Additionally, Pakistan's efforts to maintain a balance between its historical ties with the United States and its growing partnership with China reflect its nuanced approach to navigating complex geopolitical landscapes. Overall, historical relations, especially as a Cold War ally, have a lasting influence on Pakistan's geopolitical alignments, shaping its collaborations with major powers like China and the United States in the contemporary global context (Xinbo, 2016).

Pakistan's regional security concerns stand as a cornerstone in shaping its collaboration with China and the United States, marking a critical geopolitical factor with far-reaching implications. Situated in a region marred by ongoing conflicts, terrorism threats, and geopolitical rivalries, Pakistan's security interests are intricately intertwined with its strategic partnerships. The collaboration with China, epitomized by initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), not only addresses Pakistan's economic development but also bolsters its security by fostering infrastructural advancements and strategic ties. The CPEC, a flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), not only strengthens economic interdependence but also aligns security interests, as a stable and prosperous Pakistan serves China's regional strategic goals (Fazal & Khan, 2023). On the other hand, Pakistan's collaboration with the United States, particularly in counterterrorism efforts and regional stability initiatives, underscores the multifaceted nature of its security engagements. However, the relationship with the United States has also witnessed complexities, notably in divergent interests regarding Afghanistan and nuclear proliferation concerns. Nonetheless, Pakistan's strategic balancing act between China and the United States in the realm of regional security is emblematic of the delicate geopolitical dance it navigates, reflecting the intertwined nature of security concerns and global partnerships in shaping Pakistan's foreign policy landscape (Hussain, 2017).

Pakistan's geostrategic interests play a pivotal role in shaping its collaboration with both China and the United States, marking a crucial geopolitical factor with profound implications. Positioned at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, Pakistan's strategic location confers upon it a unique vantage point in regional affairs. Its interests lie in maintaining a delicate balance of power, ensuring regional stability, and safeguarding its own security. Collaborating with China through initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) aligns with Pakistan's geostrategic objectives by enhancing economic development, infrastructure connectivity, and energy security (Khattak, 2023). Furthermore, Pakistan's engagement with the United States on issues such as counterterrorism and regional stability reflects its geostrategic imperatives, aiming to leverage partnerships that bolster its security posture and

geopolitical influence. However, navigating these collaborations amidst shifting global dynamics and regional complexities underscores the intricate interplay of geostrategic interests in shaping Pakistan's foreign policy engagements with major powers (Smith, 2013).

Pakistan's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) stands as a pivotal economic factor that profoundly shapes its collaboration with both China and the United States, marking a transformative initiative with far-reaching implications. As a flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the CPEC aims to enhance connectivity between China's western regions and Pakistan's Gwadar Port, fostering trade, investment, and economic development. This economic corridor not only strengthens Pakistan's infrastructure but also deepens its economic ties with China, paving the way for enhanced trade, energy cooperation, and industrial development. Moreover, the CPEC's strategic significance extends beyond bilateral economic benefits, as it also influences Pakistan's collaboration with the United States, shaping discussions on regional stability, energy security, and economic partnerships. The CPEC's multidimensional impact underscores its role as a key economic driver that shapes Pakistan's strategic alignments and collaborations with major global players (Fazal & Ali, 2023). Pakistan's investment opportunities represent a crucial economic factor that profoundly shapes its collaboration with both China and the United States, highlighting the importance of economic incentives in driving strategic partnerships. With a growing economy and a strategic location at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, Pakistan offers significant investment prospects in various sectors such as infrastructure, energy, technology, and manufacturing. This attracts interest from China, as evidenced by initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which aims to boost infrastructure development, trade, and investment between the two countries. Similarly, the United States also recognizes Pakistan's potential as an investment destination, especially in sectors aligned with its economic interests and development goals. The availability of investment opportunities not only enhances Pakistan's economic growth but also serves as a catalyst for collaboration with global partners, shaping discussions on economic

cooperation, trade relations, and strategic engagements in the region (Raza, 2020).

Pakistan's energy cooperation serves as a pivotal economic factor that profoundly influences its collaboration with both China and the United States, showcasing the critical role of energy security in shaping strategic partnerships. With a growing energy demand and a focus on diversifying its energy mix, Pakistan seeks to enhance energy production, distribution, and efficiency through collaborations with key allies. China's involvement in energy projects under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), including investments in power generation, transmission infrastructure, and renewable energy initiatives, underscores the economic importance of energy cooperation between the two countries (Gill, 2019). Similarly, the United States' engagement in Pakistan's energy sector, particularly in areas such as shale gas exploration, clean energy technologies, and energy infrastructure development, reflects shared interests in promoting energy security, sustainability, and economic growth. Pakistan's energy cooperation initiatives not only address domestic energy needs but also foster deeper economic ties and strategic collaborations with global partners, shaping discussions on energy security, economic development, and regional stability (Garlick, 2018).

Pakistan's trade relations stand as a vital economic factor that significantly shapes its collaboration with both China and the United States, highlighting the pivotal role of trade dynamics in driving strategic partnerships (Saboor & Bhutto, 2022). As an emerging market with diverse economic sectors, Pakistan offers a range of trade opportunities for its partners. Collaboration with China, exemplified by initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), aims to enhance trade connectivity, facilitate investment flows, and promote economic integration between the two countries. Similarly, trade relations with the United States, governed by bilateral trade agreements and economic cooperation frameworks, contribute to mutual economic benefits and market access. The promotion of trade relations not only fosters economic growth and job creation in Pakistan but also strengthens its diplomatic and strategic ties with key global players, shaping discussions on trade policies, market access, and economic development strategies (Gul & Imran, 2022).

Pakistan's economic stability serves as a fundamental economic factor that profoundly influences its collaboration with both China and the United States, highlighting the significance of a stable economic environment in fostering strategic partnerships (Khalid, 2022). A stable economy not only attracts foreign investments but also enables sustained growth, job creation, and poverty alleviation. Collaborating with China, particularly through initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), contributes to Pakistan's economic stability by fostering infrastructural development, energy projects, and trade opportunities. Similarly, maintaining economic stability enhances Pakistan's credibility as a reliable economic partner for the United States, promoting trade relations, investment flows, and economic cooperation. The pursuit of economic stability not only benefits Pakistan's domestic economy but also strengthens its position in the global economic landscape, shaping discussions on economic policies, financial reforms, and long-term sustainable development strategies (Small, 2015).

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor as Pakistan's Strategic Balancer between China and the United States

CPEC as a geopolitical game-changer

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) stands as a testament to the transformative power of infrastructure projects in shaping geopolitical landscapes. While often portrayed primarily as an economic corridor, CPEC's true significance transcends economic realms, marking a pivotal shift in regional power dynamics. At its core, CPEC represents a strategic partnership between China and Pakistan, strategically positioned to alter the geopolitical calculus of the region. One of the most notable aspects of CPEC is its role in providing China with direct access to the Arabian Sea through the Gwadar Port in Pakistan (Chaziza, 2016). This access is a game-changer for China, offering an alternative route that bypasses the maritime chokepoints of the Malacca Strait. By reducing its dependence on this critical chokepoint and gaining direct access to the Arabian Sea, China enhances its maritime security and strengthens its position as a global economic powerhouse (Khan & Wenhao, 2018).

Furthermore, CPEC serves as a catalyst for regional connectivity and economic integration. The

corridor's infrastructure projects, including roads, railways, and energy pipelines, not only link China and Pakistan but also extend connectivity to other countries in the region. This connectivity opens up new trade routes and markets, fostering economic cooperation and stability across South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. For Pakistan, CPEC brings substantial economic benefits that extend beyond infrastructure development. The corridor generates employment opportunities, facilitates technology transfer, and promotes industrial growth. Additionally, CPEC's energy projects address Pakistan's energy challenges, contributing to its energy security and economic resilience. In essence, CPEC is more than just a corridor for trade and economic cooperation; it is a strategic initiative with far-reaching geopolitical implications. It strengthens China's presence in the Indian Ocean region, reshapes regional power dynamics, and offers Pakistan a pathway to economic prosperity and strategic relevance on the global stage. As CPEC continues to evolve, its impact on the geopolitical landscape of South Asia and beyond will continue to be a topic of significant interest and debate (Hussain & Jamali, 2019).

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) presents a mixed bag of economic benefits and challenges for Pakistan, which in turn significantly influences its foreign policy decisions, particularly in balancing relations between China and the United States. On the economic front, CPEC brings substantial benefits to Pakistan. Infrastructure development under CPEC includes the construction of roads, railways, ports, and energy projects, which not only improve connectivity within Pakistan but also enhance its regional trade potential. These developments boost economic growth, attract foreign investment, and create job opportunities, especially in sectors like construction, transportation, and energy. Additionally, CPEC's energy projects address Pakistan's chronic power shortages, contributing to industrial productivity and economic stability (Qamar, 2018). However, alongside these benefits, Pakistan faces certain challenges related to CPEC. One of the primary concerns is the potential debt burden. The financing of CPEC projects involves loans and investments from China, leading to concerns about Pakistan's ability to manage and repay these debts in the long run. This debt burden can strain Pakistan's economy, impacting its fiscal

policies and limiting its maneuverability in domestic and international affairs (Ahmad, 2017).

These economic factors significantly influence Pakistan's foreign policy decisions, especially regarding its strategic balancing act between China and the United States. On one hand, Pakistan views CPEC as a crucial partnership with China, offering economic growth, infrastructure development, and strategic alignment. The economic benefits from CPEC strengthen Pakistan's ties with China and provide leverage in negotiations with other countries, including the United States. On the other hand, Pakistan maintains a strategic relationship with the United States, particularly in security and defense cooperation. Balancing these relationships requires careful navigation of economic interests, geopolitical alignments, and strategic priorities. Pakistan seeks to maximize the benefits from CPEC while also ensuring a diversified foreign policy that maintains cordial relations with multiple global powers (Lokman & Hoo, 2022).

In essence, CPEC serves as Pakistan's strategic balancer between China and the United States, offering economic opportunities and challenges that shape its foreign policy decisions. Balancing economic gains with debt sustainability, leveraging strategic partnerships, and maintaining autonomy in decision-making are key considerations for Pakistan as it navigates the complexities of CPEC and its broader geopolitical implications.

Security implications of CPEC

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) brings not only economic opportunities but also significant security implications, which are crucial considerations in the context of Pakistan's strategic balancing act between China and the United States. One of the foremost security concerns related to CPEC is terrorism. Pakistan has faced longstanding challenges with terrorism and insurgency, particularly in its western regions bordering Afghanistan. These security threats can potentially disrupt CPEC projects, undermine investor confidence, and hinder economic progress. Therefore, ensuring the security of CPEC infrastructure and personnel is paramount to its success and stability (Hussain, 2019). Additionally, CPEC's route passes through regions with complex geopolitical dynamics, including areas with historical ethnic and sectarian tensions. Ensuring regional stability along the corridor's path is essential

for uninterrupted trade and economic activities. Pakistan's cooperation with China in addressing these security challenges is crucial. China has a vested interest in the security of CPEC, as it is a linchpin of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and a key component of its economic and strategic interests in the region (Rahman & Hussain, 2021).

China-Pakistan cooperation in security matters includes intelligence sharing, joint military exercises, and collaborative efforts to combat terrorism and extremism. The China-Pakistan relationship extends beyond economic ties to encompass strategic cooperation, particularly in defense and security domains. This partnership not only enhances Pakistan's security capabilities but also strengthens regional stability by addressing common security threats. Moreover, CPEC's security implications extend to maritime security in the Arabian Sea, where China's access to the Gwadar Port raises strategic concerns and interests. Ensuring maritime security along the CPEC route is essential for safe and efficient transportation of goods, safeguarding against piracy, and protecting vital maritime infrastructure (Farooq & Khawaja, 2019).

In summary, the security implications of CPEC are multifaceted, encompassing challenges related to terrorism, regional stability, and maritime security. China-Pakistan cooperation plays a pivotal role in addressing these challenges, enhancing security along the corridor, and ensuring the successful implementation of CPEC as Pakistan's strategic balancer between China and the United States.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) serves as a linchpin in shaping Pakistan's diplomatic relations with China and the United States, reflecting the intricate dynamics of balancing economic interests with strategic partnerships. Firstly, CPEC has significantly strengthened Pakistan's ties with China, evolving into a cornerstone of their bilateral relationship. China's substantial investments and infrastructure projects under CPEC have deepened economic interdependence between the two countries. This economic partnership extends beyond trade and investment to encompass strategic cooperation in areas such as defense, technology transfer, and energy security. Pakistan views China as a reliable ally and economic benefactor, with CPEC playing a pivotal role in enhancing bilateral relations and promoting mutual interests (Zaib, 2023).

However, Pakistan's relationship with the United States adds another layer of complexity to its diplomatic calculus. While Pakistan values its longstanding strategic partnership with the United States, particularly in defense and security cooperation, the dynamics are nuanced due to divergent interests and priorities. The United States has raised concerns about CPEC's implications for regional stability, transparency in project financing, and the potential strategic implications of China's growing influence in the region. Balancing these relationships requires Pakistan to navigate a delicate path, where economic benefits from CPEC must be balanced with strategic considerations and diplomatic engagements (Mahmood & Begum 2023). Pakistan seeks to leverage CPEC's economic opportunities while maintaining a diversified foreign policy that accommodates its partnerships with both China and the United States. This balancing act involves continuous dialogue, diplomatic maneuvering, and efforts to address the concerns and interests of all stakeholders.

Furthermore, CPEC's role as Pakistan's strategic balancer between China and the United States influences its diplomatic engagements on broader regional and global issues. Pakistan's alignment with China on initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) reflects its strategic convergence with Chinese interests. At the same time, Pakistan maintains cooperative engagements with the United States on security, counterterrorism efforts, and regional stability, highlighting its diplomatic agility in managing diverse partnerships (Ahmad, 2020).

In conclusion, CPEC shapes Pakistan's diplomatic relations by intertwining economic interests with strategic partnerships, particularly with China and the United States. The corridor serves as a prism through which Pakistan navigates its foreign policy, balancing economic gains with strategic imperatives and maintaining a delicate equilibrium in its international engagements.

Role of multilateral institutions in shaping Pakistan's foreign policy

Multilateral institutions like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) play a significant role in shaping Pakistan's foreign policy orientation and its interactions with major powers, particularly in the context of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as Pakistan's strategic balancer between

China and the United States. For Pakistan, participation in the BRI, of which CPEC is a flagship project, offers a framework for economic cooperation and connectivity on a global scale. The BRI's emphasis on infrastructure development, trade facilitation, and people-to-people exchanges aligns with Pakistan's development priorities, making it an attractive platform for collaboration with China and other participating countries.

The BRI's multilateral nature provides Pakistan with opportunities to engage with a diverse range of actors, including major powers and regional partners. Through BRI initiatives like CPEC, Pakistan strengthens its economic ties with China while also fostering broader regional connectivity and cooperation. This multilateral approach enhances Pakistan's diplomatic outreach and positions it as a key player in regional and global economic dynamics. Furthermore, the BRI serves as a platform for dialogue and cooperation among participating countries, including major powers like China and the United States. Pakistan's involvement in the BRI allows it to navigate its relationships with these powers by leveraging economic opportunities while addressing strategic concerns and maintaining diplomatic flexibility (Aquil & Zaman, 2023).

However, Pakistan's engagement with the BRI also raises certain considerations and challenges. These include issues related to project transparency, debt sustainability, environmental impact, and geopolitical implications. Balancing the benefits of BRI participation with these challenges requires Pakistan to adopt a pragmatic and cautious approach, ensuring that its foreign policy decisions align with its national interests and long-term strategic objectives. In summary, multilateral institutions like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) play a multifaceted role in shaping Pakistan's foreign policy orientation. Through initiatives like CPEC, Pakistan leverages the BRI framework to strengthen economic ties, engage with major powers, and enhance regional connectivity, while also navigating challenges and ensuring alignment with its national interests and strategic goals (Mubarakzeb, 2023).

Public opinion in Pakistan regarding CPEC

Public opinion in Pakistan regarding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is diverse and reflects a range of perspectives on its implications for national sovereignty, economic development, and international relations, especially in the context of

Pakistan's strategic balancing act between China and the United States. On the one hand, there is significant support for CPEC among sections of the Pakistani public. Many view CPEC as a game-changer that promises to boost economic growth, create job opportunities, and address infrastructure deficits in Pakistan. Proponents argue that CPEC enhances connectivity, attracts foreign investment, and strengthens Pakistan's position in regional and global trade networks. They see CPEC as a symbol of close and mutually beneficial cooperation between Pakistan and China, fostering strategic alignment and economic integration. However, there are also voices of concern and skepticism regarding CPEC's implications. Some segments of the Pakistani public raise questions about transparency in project financing, environmental impact, and the potential for debt burdens associated with CPEC-related investments. There are concerns about the extent of Chinese influence and control over CPEC projects, leading to debates about safeguarding national sovereignty and ensuring equitable benefits for Pakistan (Sultan & Imtiaz, 2019).

Moreover, CPEC's geopolitical dimensions spark discussions about Pakistan's international relations and strategic alignments. While CPEC strengthens Pakistan's ties with China and enhances its strategic importance in the region, there are debates about the implications for Pakistan's relations with other major powers, particularly the United States. Some express apprehensions about potential tensions or conflicts arising from Pakistan's role as a strategic balancer between China and the United States, highlighting the complexity of Pakistan's foreign policy challenges. Overall, public opinion in Pakistan regarding CPEC reflects a nuanced understanding of its potential benefits and challenges. While there is enthusiasm about the economic opportunities CPEC brings, there are also calls for transparency, accountability, and strategic foresight to ensure that CPEC contributes positively to Pakistan's national development, preserves its sovereignty, and strengthens its international relations in a multipolar world (Yousaf, 2018).

Analysis

Present day global strategic environment poses main challenges for Pakistan. The development of the CPEC is viewed by the USA and Western Europe as growing Chinese influence in the region and its strategic access to the Arabian Sea. US stand remains

to contain China, but it is cautious on challenging the plan 'to utilize Pakistan as a means by which to expand its global influence.' The US would attempt to rebalancing the Asia-Pacific and South Asia by solidifying old alliances and building new partnerships. Growing US interaction with India is however, new challenge for Pakistan. The US is building India to safeguard its strategic interests in the region. European countries view Asian states as economic competitors for Chinese investments as money flowing to their countries. decrease in the wake of financial crisis in many of the EU states. Gulf States, Iran, India and the US remain connected with the Baloch insurgents of Pakistan. Western media and press highlight unverified reports expressing concerns over the unjust treatment and counterproductive marginalization of Baloch in Pakistan and Uyghur in China.

CPEC has been viewed as a dynamic strategic issue by global and regional players as it develops link between South Asia and Central Asia. It has implications for the Afghan issue and its future solutions, economic proposals like Trans-Afghanistan pipeline and Central Asia and South Asia (CASA) energy corridor. It could be an important step toward reducing Central Asian reliance on Russia by providing alternative markets for the region's energy exports. China has already used its influence in facilitating dialogue between the Afghan Government and the Taliban in order to ensure peace in the region and eschew fallouts of instability in its Eastern Provinces. Regional level political challenges to CPEC include Indian objections on the KKH in Gilgit- Baltistan, which it claimed as disputed territory. At strategic level, India considers the CPEC as Chinese ingress into its domain. On the other hand India is attempting to narrow its differences with China. India also has planned shipping and trade links in the Indian Ocean. It announced 'Project Mausam' in June 2014, to revive ancient maritime routes that connected Europe, Africa, Middle East and Southeast Asia through South Asian ports. Indian attempts have lured Iran, where it developed Chahbahar and Bander Abbas ports. These ports link Russia and Central Asia with Indian Ocean and divert trade from European ports, named as North South Trade Corridor.

India has developed relations with UAE and Saudi Arabia and offered them significant investment proposals in order to seek their support to contain

Pakistan and China. Indian proposals and its developing relations with Gulf Arab States and Iran at the same time would require delicate balancing of acts. It is however, difficult for India to fabricate reasonable stance to oppose the CPEC and offer viable alternatives. Political interests of Iran and Gulf Arab States in particular, the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia in Pakistan and their reactions to the CPEC needs careful examination. While the corridor offers direct and easy links of China and Central Asia with Middle East for their trade; they also have fears of Pakistan becoming their economic rival in the business of offshore trade, ports, shipping, and tourism. Iran and Gulf states have easy access in the internal politics and businesses of Pakistan. CPEC would develop the remotest areas of Pakistan and Iran that lie neglected since centuries due to hostile weather and difficult terrain. India expressed its hostile anti-Muslim stance through Modi's visit to Myanmar which is suppressing the rights of Rohingya Muslims since centuries. On the other hand India is showing its benign face to Iran and Afghanistan with heavy investments, economic and strategic cooperation. Bangladesh is also ruled by a regime that is not friendly to Pakistan. The suppression of minorities in India has hardly been projected by the West. In particular the Indian atrocities unleashed on innocent Kashmiris hardly noticed by Western media. As a result the Western governments confidently turn blind eye towards human rights violations in Indian held Kashmir.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Pakistan's strategic balancing act between the United States and China within the framework of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) represents a nuanced and intricate dance of diplomacy, economics, and security considerations. As Pakistan navigates the complexities of this strategic landscape, it faces a myriad of challenges and opportunities that shape its foreign policy choices and national trajectory. The evolution of CPEC as a transformative initiative has positioned Pakistan at the intersection of global power dynamics, with China's economic prowess and strategic vision intersecting with Pakistan's developmental aspirations and regional positioning. This convergence has not only redefined Pakistan's economic landscape but also reshaped its geopolitical calculus, prompting a recalibration of traditional alliances and strategic alignments.

At the heart of Pakistan's strategic balancing act lies the imperative to harness the economic benefits of CPEC while mitigating potential risks and challenges, such as debt sustainability, geopolitical tensions, and the need for transparent governance. Moreover, navigating the delicate balance between China's growing influence and the United States' enduring strategic partnership requires deft diplomacy, strategic foresight, and a nuanced understanding of regional dynamics. As Pakistan charts its course in the evolving global order, the strategic balancing between China and the United States within the framework of CPEC serves as a microcosm of broader shifts in international relations and power structures. The lessons learned from Pakistan's experience in managing this delicate equilibrium can offer insights into the complexities and opportunities inherent in navigating multipolar dynamics, forging strategic partnerships, and safeguarding national interests in an interconnected world.

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