

The Great Power Chessboard: Navigating the US-China Rivalry and Pakistan's Dilemma



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Abstract: *In the contemporary geopolitical landscape, the rivalry between the United States and China has emerged as a defining feature. This multifaceted competition encompasses historical, economic, military, and strategic dimensions, manifesting itself in diverse arenas worldwide. As a crucial player in South Asia, Pakistan finds itself at a critical juncture, faced with the implications of this geopolitical tug-of-war. Historically, Pakistan has maintained strong ties with the United States, primarily as an ally in the war on terror. However, China's ascendancy as a global economic powerhouse has drawn Pakistan closer to Beijing through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and other strategic partnerships. Amidst this power play, Pakistan faces the challenge of balancing its relations with both superpowers. Striking the right equilibrium between the US and China is essential to safeguard its national interests, promote economic growth, and ensure regional stability. Navigating this delicate balancing act requires astute diplomatic acumen and a judicious assessment of the evolving dynamics in the US-China strategic rivalry. As Pakistan seeks to protect its sovereignty and advance its national agenda, a well-calibrated approach to this complex geopolitical scenario becomes paramount.*

Keywords: Chessboard, China, CPEC, NATO, BRI, Pakistan

Introduction

The strategic rivalry between the United States and China has emerged as one of the defining geopolitical dynamics of the 21st century. As the world's two largest economies and military powers, their competition spans across multiple regions and influences global affairs. One region where this rivalry has significant implications is South Asia, particularly in relation to their approaches toward Pakistan. Pakistan, situated at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, holds immense geostrategic importance. It has historically maintained close ties with both the United States and China, making it a key arena for the manifestation of its strategic competition.

In official US government policy documents, China has been referred to as a "long-term strategic competitor" since 2017. NATO addressed China's influence and foreign policy for the first time in its London Declaration in December 2019 in terms of the difficulties they provide. China's political elite is firmly convinced—and rightfully so—that the United States wants to at least stop any further rise of Chinese power. As two economic and military powerhouses, their interactions and competition shape the geopolitical landscape and have far-reaching implications for countries across the globe (Lippert, 2020).

It is essential to recognize that the United States and China have differing geopolitical interests

and strategic objectives in South Asia. The United States has historically viewed Pakistan as a vital ally in the region, particularly during the Cold War era when Pakistan served as a frontline state against Soviet expansionism in Afghanistan. Given its near geographic proximity to the Soviet Union, Washington viewed Pakistan as a potentially formidable barrier against Soviet expansion into South Asia (Smith, 2011). In addition to this, The United States has been concerned about Pakistan's stability, its role in counterterrorism efforts, and the security of its nuclear arsenal. Moreover, Pakistan's strategic location, including its access to the Arabian Sea, adds to its significance in the U.S. regional calculus.

China, on the other hand, has increasingly deepened its engagement with Pakistan over the past two decades as part of its broader foreign policy objectives. China sees Pakistan as a key partner in its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to enhance connectivity and trade between Asia, Europe, and Africa. Pakistan's strategic location provides China with access to the Arabian Sea and facilitates its maritime trade routes, reducing dependence on the longer and riskier Malacca Strait. In a speech delivered in Islamabad on May 8, 2011, Prime Minister Gilani described China as Pakistan's "best and most trusted friend." (Smith, 2011). Additionally, China has invested heavily in Pakistan's infrastructure projects, including the development of the Gwadar Port, which further strengthens their economic and strategic cooperation.

Understanding the intricate web of relations and dynamics between the United States, China, and Pakistan is crucial for comprehending the broader implications of their strategic rivalry. It is important to shed light on the multifaceted dimensions of this competition, examining how economic, military, and geopolitical factors shape the approaches of the United States and China toward Pakistan.

Literature Review

John Mearsheimer, an International Relations scholar, explores China's rise in his 2010 article "The Gathering Storm." He challenges

optimistic views on China's peaceful ascent, emphasizing the difficulty in discerning its true intentions. Mearsheimer argues that China's commitment to a non-confrontational approach, focusing on defensive military capabilities, may prevent conflicts but underscores the challenge of distinguishing offensive from defensive capabilities. He dismisses using China's past behavior as a predictor of future actions due to leadership changes and external factors. He predicts that China, like the U.S. in the Western Hemisphere, will seek dominance in the Asian-Pacific region, defining acceptable behavior for neighboring countries. Anticipating U.S. efforts to contain China, he sees an inevitable conflict between the two powers, drawing parallels to the Cold War with the USSR. The study relies on Mearsheimer's forecasts about China's rise and the potential U.S. response, but it doesn't delve only into the U.S.-China conflict. Its goal is also to address the implications for Pakistan and suggest ways it can navigate relationships with both major powers to advance its national interests.

In his article "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?" renowned American political scientist Graham Allison explores the potential for conflict between China and the U.S. by drawing on historical patterns of power transitions. He introduces the concept of the "Thucydides Trap," suggesting that the likelihood of conflict increases when a rising power threatens an established one. Allison examines sixteen historical power transitions, with twelve leading to war, emphasizing the inherent tensions and structural factors that contribute to such conflicts. The analysis delves into the complex relationship between China and the U.S., identifying economic, military, and ideological factors shaping their rivalry. While not deeming war inevitable, Allison provides policy recommendations, emphasizing strategic empathy and dialogue to avoid misperceptions. This study, in contrast, expands on Allison's work by focusing on the U.S.-China rivalry's consequences for South Asia, particularly Pakistan, exploring how the region might respond to the dynamics between these major powers.

Zafar Khan's research article, "The effects of US-China competing strategies in Asia-Pacific on India and Pakistan rivalry in the South Asian region," delves into how the intensifying struggle between the U.S. and China in the Asia-Pacific region impacts the rivalry between India and Pakistan. Khan highlights the contrasting strategies employed by the U.S. and China in their alliances with India and Pakistan, creating a complex quadrilateral scenario. While the U.S. and India aim to dissuade China, China and Pakistan seek to counterweight and prevent regional conflicts. The article suggests that the intensity of the U.S.-China conflict directly influences South Asian dynamics, with reduced tension between the giants potentially easing India-Pakistan relations, though this outcome appears unlikely. While Khan's research provides valuable insights into the broader South Asian context, this study focuses specifically on the strategic rivalry between China and the U.S. and its implications for Pakistan.

In his research article, "The U.S.-China Strategic Rivalry and its Implications for Pakistan," Syed Mohammad Ali addresses how Pakistan can navigate its relationships with the conflicting powers, the U.S. and China. The study delves into the complex dynamics of the strategic competition between China and the U.S., emphasizing Pakistan's precarious position caught between the two powers. The author stresses the need for Pakistan to avoid overreliance on China and resist exclusive alignment with either side. Challenges posed by the intensifying U.S.-China rivalry to Pakistan's national interests are explored, including potential strains on diplomatic ties, regional stability risks, and implications for Afghanistan's stabilization goals. The research article provides valuable recommendations for Pakistan, urging a pragmatic approach to proactive risk management, including modifying projects under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and attracting investment from the U.S. and other international actors. This study, while drawing from Ali's insights, aims to offer a more comprehensive analysis of the economic, political, military, and security

dynamics of the U.S.-China rivalry and its specific impact on Pakistan, exploring the country's response to the hostility and strategies to maximize its interests in this strategic competition.

Significance of the study

The study on the conflict between the United States and China holds profound significance for several key reasons. Geopolitically, both nations wield substantial influence globally, and their strategic rivalry has far-reaching implications for countries like Pakistan. Economic considerations are vital as well, given the major economic powers that the U.S. and China are; for a developing nation like Pakistan, understanding how this rivalry may affect economic growth and partnerships is crucial. From a security standpoint, the competition between the U.S. and China impacts military capabilities, particularly in regions like the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, requiring Pakistan to make informed decisions for its national interests. Diplomatically, the study addresses the challenges Pakistan faces in balancing historical ties with the U.S. and expanding relations with China, navigating potential fallout. The broader regional implications of the U.S.-China conflict, including effects on existing conflicts, add another layer of significance. Ultimately, the study provides valuable insights for policymakers and analysts to formulate nuanced strategies for Pakistan to maintain sovereignty and stability amidst the complexities of this rivalry.

Research Questions

1. What are the primary facets of the U.S.-China powerplay dynamics, and how do they manifest in their approaches to Pakistan?
2. What opportunities and challenges does Pakistan face in navigating its relationships with China and the U.S. amid their strategic rivalry?
3. What is Pakistan's way forward for managing its ties with China and the U.S. amid their strategic rivalry, and

how can Pakistan leverage this antagonism to enhance its national interests?

Historical Dimension of US-China Rivalry

To comprehend the contemporary strategic rivalry between the United States and China, it is crucial to examine its historical roots. The origins of this rivalry can be traced back to the Cold War era, when the United States emerged as the dominant global power, while China, under the leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong, sought to establish its influence in Asia and challenge American hegemony. While the Soviet Union was America's major power competitor during this period, the US frequently committed more money and energy to undermine Chinese efforts to gain recognition and influence in Cambodia, Laos, and other countries in the region. However, these programs had few achievements and frequently alienated the very individuals whose allegiances the US nominally sought. (Brazinsky, 2023) However, it was not until the late 20th century that China's rapid economic growth and military modernization made it a formidable competitor to the United States. The rivalry between the United States and China has evolved significantly since the end of the Cold War. While the US and the Soviet Union were engaged in a global power struggle during the Cold War, the rise of China as a major global player has transformed the geopolitical landscape.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, China embarked on economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping, leading to its rapid economic growth. Deng Xiaoping, China's post-Mao supreme leader visited the United States on January 31, 1979. A few weeks prior, diplomatic relations were established between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the United States of America (USA). This was a monumental accomplishment for Deng, as it enabled him to complete a crucial step in his plan to launch China's grand "reform and opening-up" initiative. Deng believed that the United States should play a prominent role in China's drive toward modernization and beyond (Jian, 2019). The US recognized the potential benefits of

engaging with China economically, and this period witnessed a significant increase in bilateral trade and investments.

In 2019, relations between the United States and China, which had been marked by a pattern of ups and downs over the previous quarter century, took a distinct and possibly irreversible turn for the worse. During the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, the relationship between the United States and China was characterized by a mix of cooperation and limited competition. However, rising tensions during the Obama administration paved the way for a seemingly decisive change during Donald Trump's presidency. Remarkably rapidly, an emerging debate in the United States about what was loosely termed engagement morphed into a debate over whether or not China and the United States had already become rivals, or even adversaries, in a new cold war (Goldstein, 2020).

Today, Asia has reemerged as a significant arena for Sino-American competition. It is a natural target for Chinese leader Xi Jinping's efforts to expand Chinese influence and authority due to its close proximity to the Chinese mainland. The United States does not want China to dominate the region, and Washington continues to be a valued partner to a number of its governments. Since 2017, both the Trump and Biden administrations have sought to use Washington's influence in the region to persuade regional governments to reduce their ties with the PRC and demonstrate solidarity against China. However, pressuring Asian nations to choose between the United States and China can have calamitous consequences for the United States today, just as it did sixty years ago. Even more bluntly, regional leaders have stated that they do not wish to be compelled to choose between Beijing and Washington (Brazinsky, 2023).

Focusing on the repercussions of this escalating U.S.-China rivalry is crucial in the already tense South Asian security environment, where the U.S. has invested in India as a counterweight to China and Pakistan has developed close ties to China. The rapid acceleration of the U.S.-China rivalry and the bipartisan nature of U.S. opposition to China has placed Pakistan in a

particularly precarious position. It is in Pakistan's national interest to avoid positioning all of its eggs in China's strategic rivalry with the United States and to resist any pressure to take China's side (Ali, 2020).

Key Dimensions of the US-China Strategic Rivalry

The strategic rivalry between the United States and China is complex and multifaceted, involving various dimensions that span economic, geostrategic, military, and security realms. Here are key dimensions of the U.S.-China strategic rivalry

US-China Economic Competition

One of the central dimensions of the US-China strategic rivalry lies in their economic competition. Both countries have enormous economic clout and seek to secure access to markets, resources, and strategic infrastructure around the world. The United States has traditionally been a dominant economic player, but China's rapid rise as an economic powerhouse has challenged American supremacy. This economic rivalry has led to trade disputes, allegations of unfair trade practices, and the imposition of tariffs, resulting in tensions between the two powers.

China's growing economic and political strength is undeniable. According to the IMF, its GDP per head in 2017 was 14% of that of the United States at market prices and 28% at purchasing power parity, up from 3% and 8%, respectively, in 2000. China's population is more than four times that of the United States, and its GDP in 2017 was 62 percent of that of the United States at market prices and 119 percent at PPP. China obtains a relative GDP per capita of 34% at market prices and 50% at PPP by 2040. This would suggest a severe slowing of the rate when it catches up (a drop of roughly 70% from the rate since 2000 beginning in 2023). At PPP, China's economy would be nearly twice as large as that of the United States, and nearly 30 percent larger at market prices (Wolf, 2018).

The United States and China are economically intertwined. The United States is China's greatest export market, and China is the United

States' top import market. China relies on the United States for around \$580 billion in annual exports, \$124 billion in total foreign direct investment, joint ventures in high-growth industries, and more. The United States relies on China for economic growth in major industries through investments, people flows, idea flows, and commerce. According to estimates, decoupling will cost the American aviation industry up to \$875 billion by 2038; the semiconductor industry up to \$159 billion and 100,000 jobs; the medical services industry more than \$479 billion over the next decade; and other industries more than \$479 billion (Gatten, 2023). It has emerged as a key driver of their strained relationship and has wide-ranging implications for the global economy.

The Trump administration started by placing 25 percent tariffs on goods in July 2018 that covered around \$34 billion of US imports from China and \$16 billion of imports in August after investigating under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974. As a result of China's retaliation, the trade conflict persisted. In September 2018, Trump imposed 10 percent tariffs on an additional \$200 billion in imports, then in June 2019, he raised those rates to 25 percent. Trump imposed 15 percent tariffs on a further \$102 billion in imports in September 2019, which were later lowered to 7.5 percent upon the implementation of the US-China Phase One agreement in February 2020. The majority of the remaining \$160 billion in US imports from China were targeted by the Trump administration, and for these products, tariffs were planned to take effect on December 15, 2019. On December 13, 2019, when the Phase One agreement was first announced, it never imposed those obligations and revoked them (Bown, 2022).

While President Joe Biden and Donald Trump have quite different views on many policy matters their positions on trade policy are strikingly similar. Trump's tariffs have failed miserably, and the costs to the U.S. economy continue to mount. The Biden administration should resume talks with China to address the root of trade tensions rather than supporting Trump's failed China strategy. It should also file

formal trade complaints with the World Trade Organization to exert pressure and produce international judicial decisions that China will take more seriously than unilateral U.S. tariffs.

US-China Powerplay and Multilateral Institutions

The US-China economic competition extends to multilateral institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Both countries have been critical of each other's trade practices and have engaged in disputes within these institutions.

The United States wields enormous power over these institutions as a result of both formal mechanisms (e.g., US financial contributions) and informal norms and traditions that have evolved over time. The informal methods of influence are frequently more powerful than the official ones. In terms of US influence, it would be incorrect to regard the World Bank and the IMF as mere instruments of US power and policy and to believe that their continued credibility and legitimacy are dependent in part on their ability to maintain some political distance from their most powerful state patron. Domestic political factors in the United States are also critical. The division of authority between the Executive and Congress within the country sometimes strengthens and sometimes limits US influence in Multilateral Institutions (Woods, 2003).

Kapur in his book "The World Bank, Its First Half Century" asserts that the United States has consistently been the largest shareholder and the most powerful member nation of the World Bank). The Bank's expansion and the development of its policies, programs, and practices have all been significantly influenced by U.S. funding, pressure, and criticism. Compared to other member nations, the United States receives far greater attention from meetings, consultations, and responses from the Bank's top management. The manner the United States mobilizes other member nations to back its viewpoints has changed significantly over the years, despite the fact that this strong contact hasn't altered much over the years. At first, it dominated to the point that it was difficult to tell

its positions from the board's decision (Toussaint, 2020).

The United States has always been the sole nation with a de facto veto power at the World Bank. The US possessed 35.07% of the voting rights when the Bank was established; following the last change to voting rights, which was enacted in 2013, they now have 15.85%. Since its inception in 1947, when the Bank began operations, a majority of 80% (owned by at least 60% of the member countries) was needed to amend the statutes, which in effect gave the US a veto power (Toussaint, 2020).

China has long voiced its displeasure with several parts of the international development finance system, including its lack of voting rights and the traditional multilateral development banks' lack of attention to infrastructure expenditure. China has used a variety of strategies to resolve these dissatisfactions, from applying pressure inside already-existing institutions to generating pressure from the outside by employing alternative institutions or developing new ones. China has complained about its limited governance authority in Multilateral Institutions. It had already demonstrated tremendous potential to become a future economic superpower but had limited decision-making authority in significant international economic organizations such as the World Bank and IMF (Wang, 2022).

The 2008 global financial crisis altered the Bank's internal power balance between rich and poor countries. After the 2008 financial crisis, Bretton Woods Institutions (IMF and World Bank) needed more funds to increase lending. China and other BRICS countries had to provide financial support. The leaders of poor countries wanted more governance in response to the two institutions' financial support requests. In 2010, the World Bank raised developing and transition countries' voting shares from 42.6 to 47.19%. China gained the most voting share, 1.64%, among developing countries. China continues to criticize the World Bank's governance reform inactivity in subsequent years. The 2010 governance change was enacted in 2016. After the 2016 World Bank governance change, China

became the third largest single-state member by voting share (5.33%), behind the US (15.79%) and Japan (7.44%). Compared to its economy and constituency in the four World Bank groups, its voting power is still limited and minimal. So, China since 2016 has been dissatisfied with World Bank governance reforms (Wang, 2022).

The US-China economic competition has far-reaching implications for the global economy, as it affects trade flows, supply chains, investment patterns, and technological advancements. It creates uncertainty for businesses, disrupts global trade, and poses challenges for countries that have economic ties with both the United States and China. Managing this competition and finding avenues for cooperation remain key challenges for both countries and the international community.

Geopolitical Influence and Strategic Competition

Another critical dimension of the US-China rivalry is their competition for geopolitical influence. Both countries aim to extend their spheres of influence and secure strategic partnerships with other nations. This rivalry is particularly relevant in regions like South Asia, where Pakistan plays a significant role. The United States has long maintained close ties with Pakistan, driven by security concerns, counterterrorism cooperation, and geopolitical considerations. In recent years, China has also increased its engagement with Pakistan through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and other infrastructure development projects, enhancing its strategic footprint in the region.

According to the data collected by the Lowy Institute for the Asia Power Index between 2018 and 2022 applying a new method for the influence each country has in Southeast Asia. In Southeast Asia, China's influence has grown compared to that of the United States over the past five years. In 2018, China had more power in the region than the United States, 52 to 48. This lead got bigger in 2022, when it was 54–46. China has more economic power than the United States when it comes to measures of power. But Washington's defense networks are still much better than China's. Even though China has a lot

of more diplomatic ties to the region than the U.S., which gives it a big advantage in diplomatic influence, Washington's cultural impact is still higher than Beijing's. This is because Washington has a bigger media presence and more connections between people (Patton, 2023).

US-China military and security competition.

The military competition between the United States and China has emerged as one of the most significant strategic dynamics shaping the global security landscape in recent years. As two of the world's largest military powers, the United States and China are engaged in an evolving rivalry that spans various domains, including naval capabilities, space, cyberspace, and emerging technologies. This analysis aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the military competition between the two nations, examining key factors, strategic motivations, and potential implications.

The United States and China's military competition for dominance in the Asia-Pacific area is mostly driven by issues in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, both of which remain volatile sources of confrontation between the two countries. According to Edward Wong, the United States' powerful military presence in the region relies on the United States' ability to have unfettered naval access to the South China Sea and the support of the self-governing island of Taiwan to bolster its standing. Tensions between the United States and China have risen further as a result of military demonstrations by the region's dominant powers (Cardenas, 2020).

A 2019 report from the U.S. Department of Defense reveals that China's military modernization now focuses on infrastructure and investments supporting various operations beyond its borders, risking challenges to U.S. interests in the region. Despite a 2015 pledge against militarizing the Spratly Islands, China has become more assertive, deploying missiles. This raises concerns among ASEAN communities, while the U.S. opposes China's military buildup in the South China Sea to maintain regional safety and security,

supporting Taiwan's independence and the Philippines' claims. (Cardenas, 2020).

Washington views China as its "greatest strategic competitor" and wants to contain Beijing's growing influence. Washington and Beijing must be careful throughout this struggle to avoid escalating regional tensions. One of the most serious regional issues is the nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan. Recent geopolitical trends run the risk of coalescing into opposing blocs, with the strategic alliance between the United States and India on the one hand and cooperation between China and Pakistan on the other. As the forces that temper rivalry have weakened, superpower alliances with its South Asian allies have grown stronger. These intertwined conflicts and perceived threats have potentially disastrous effects on India and Pakistan's nuclear competition. If the United States and China view the region through the prism of great power competition, then, even unintentionally, measures to gain an advantage over the other could exacerbate the strategic rivalry between India and Pakistan. China and the United States should balance their shared interest in maintaining regional security with the significant power benefits that arming Pakistan and India would bring (Naseem, 2023).

Managing Relationships with both major powers and a way forward for Pakistan

Pakistan, situated at the crossroads of South Asia, faces a unique set of challenges and opportunities in managing its relationships with the United States and China amid its strategic rivalry. Both the US and China have substantial influence over Pakistan's economy, security, and regional stability in the China-US struggle for dominance in Asia, Pakistan is one of the frontline nations. As Washington strengthens its strategic alliance with New Delhi, Islamabad is moving more and more in Beijing's direction.

Hina Rabbani Khar, Pakistan's state minister for foreign affairs, reportedly encouraged Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif to avoid "appeasing the West" at the expense of a "real strategic partnership" with China, according to leaked U.S. papers that were made public in April. In the memo, which was headlined "Pakistan's

Difficult Choices," it was claimed that Pakistan can no longer attempt to maintain a "middle ground" between China and the United States. Pakistan leads the list of nations "most exposed" to Chinese influence because China's influence there has continuously grown over the past ten years. U.S. criticism of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Pakistan's relations with China has been brushed off by Islamabad on numerous occasions (Khan, 2023).

Mushahid Hussain Syed, a senator from Pakistan, appeared to speak for many people in his country when he expressed concern about the US role in Pakistan while supporting closer ties with China. He proposed that Washington should distribute some balance between India and Pakistan rather than expecting Pakistan to mediate relations between China and the United States. Pakistan's political leadership, intellectual community, and the general public are becoming more and more persuaded of the necessity of giving relations with China top priority in light of the U.S.'s lack of interest and its expanding cooperation with India. Despite this, there is a reluctance to sever all ties between Pakistan and the United States. Khar recently discussed Pakistan's worries about the potential for a total breakup between China and the United States in an interview, saying that this could compel Pakistan to make an unfavorable binary strategic decision (Khan, 2023).

Challenges for Pakistan amidst US-China Power play

Pakistan, a significant regional player in South Asia, faces complex challenges in managing its relationships with the United States and China.

Focusing on the consequences of this escalating U.S.-China competition is crucial given the already unstable security situation in South Asia, where the U.S. has invested in India to balance China while Pakistan has forged strong connections with China. Pakistan is in a particularly hazardous position as a result of the escalating U.S.-China competition and the bipartisan nature of American resistance to China. It is in Pakistan's best interests to resist pressure to support China in its geopolitical conflict with the United States and to avoid

putting all of its eggs in one basket (Ali, 2020).

Washington views China as its "greatest strategic competitor" and wants to contain Beijing's growing influence. Washington and Beijing must be careful throughout this struggle to avoid escalating regional tensions. Because one of the most serious regional issues is the nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan. Recent geopolitical trends run the risk of coalescing into opposing blocs, with the strategic alliance between the United States and India on the one hand and cooperation between China and Pakistan on the other. As the forces that temper rivalry has weakened, superpower alliances with its South Asian allies have grown stronger. These intertwined conflicts and perceived threats have potentially disastrous effects on India and Pakistan's nuclear competition. If the United States and China view the region through the prism of great power competition, then, even unintentionally, measures to gain an advantage over the other could exacerbate the strategic rivalry between India and Pakistan. China and the United States should balance their shared interest in maintaining regional security with the significant power benefits that arming Pakistan and India would bring (Naseem, 2023).

Pakistan's strategic engagement with China is vital but not enough to solve its financial and security problems. The US, a vital bilateral economic partner and security provider, is also needed by Islamabad. Given Pakistan's limited options, Washington remains relevant. Regardless, an allied America can harm Pakistan directly or through India. Pakistan is a regional security partner and geopolitical spoiler for Washington. Pakistan will not be forced to choose between the US and China if it satisfies Washington's goals without sacrificing its own. However, if China's economic advantage grows too great and the US-China conflict becomes a reality the situation may alter. Pakistan may be asked to be picked by the US or China if it is no longer needed by Washington and is viewed as aiding China to undermine critical US economic or geopolitical interests, such as in Beijing's military usage of Gwadar (Hussain T. , 2023).

Pakistan's economic interests often clash with

the conflicting demands of the US and China. The United States emphasizes market access, intellectual property rights, and transparency in trade relations. Conversely, China's economic engagement with Pakistan focuses on infrastructure development, energy projects, and investments in strategic sectors. Pakistan must carefully balance these competing economic interests to avoid overreliance on any one country and ensure sustainable economic growth.

Pakistan faces the challenge of maintaining its sovereignty and independence while managing its relationships with the US and China. Overreliance on either country could undermine Pakistan's strategic autonomy and limit its policy options. Pakistan must strike a delicate balance, leveraging its relationships with both countries to pursue its national interests without compromising its sovereignty or becoming overly dependent on one power. Managing relationships with the US and China amid their strategic rivalry presents numerous challenges for Pakistan. Navigating geopolitical rivalry, diverging economic interests, counterterrorism cooperation, regional security dynamics, and balancing sovereignty and dependence require astute diplomatic maneuvering. Pakistan must develop a nuanced and balanced approach to ensure its national interests are safeguarded while preserving stability and harmony with its two influential allies. By effectively addressing these challenges, Pakistan can secure its strategic position and contribute to regional stability in South Asia.

Opportunities for Pakistan amidst US-China Power play

Pakistan's geographic location makes it a vital player in regional politics. It shares borders with China, India, Afghanistan, and Iran, making it a crucial hub for trade and connectivity. Given China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Pakistan has an opportunity to enhance its infrastructure and boost its economy by partnering with China. Simultaneously, maintaining a balanced approach and not aligning too strongly with either power allows Pakistan to exert influence and leverage its strategic position.

Due to its extensive coastline along the Arabian Sea, Pakistan has access to many important ports and shipping lanes. It is a significant participant in regional trade and commerce thanks to its advantageous position, particularly in the oil and gas industry. Due to its proximity to the Middle East, Pakistan plays a significant role in regional politics and diplomacy. The nation has actively participated in a number of regional initiatives aimed at fostering peace and stability while maintaining close ties with the Arab states. Pakistan serves as a natural crossing point between Central and South Asia due to its location at the two continents' intersections. Due to its geographic position, Pakistan now plays a large role in regional economic integration and is a crucial partner in projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Furthermore, Pakistan now feels strategic parity with India thanks to its nuclear arsenal, which also enables it to conduct a more assertive foreign policy in the region. Regional security and stability are still threatened by the ongoing tensions between Pakistan and India. Over the years, the two nations have fought in a number of military clashes, and the Kashmir problem continues to be a major source of friction. The situation is still tense despite efforts to end the conflict, and both sides continue to maintain a sizable military presence along the border (Siddiqui, 2023).

Both the US and China have immense economic power and can contribute significantly to Pakistan's economic development. Pakistan enjoys preferential trade agreements with the US under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) program, providing access to the American market. Strengthening economic ties with the US can lead to increased foreign direct investment, technological collaboration, and job creation. Moreover, China's BRI offers substantial investment opportunities in infrastructure projects, energy, and trade corridors, which can stimulate Pakistan's economic growth.

China through CPEC has completed seven infrastructure projects totaling \$6.8 billion. Twelve initiatives totaling \$10.4 billion should be completed between 2023 and 2030. Six projects totaling \$0.9 billion will be completed

in a couple of years. Gwadar will complete three projects worth \$200 million, two projects worth \$230 million, and two projects worth \$150 million. Five Special Economic Zones (SEZs) will advance in 2023 with an investment of \$1 billion. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has completed 27 projects totaling \$19 billion, and 63 more projects totaling \$35.2 billion are scheduled to be completed over the next few years. CSAIL's "Overview of Pakistan's Power Sector and Its Future Outlook" states that by 2025, 27 projects representing an investment of \$7.7 billion will be completed. In 2023, CPEC would increase Pakistani employment. According to Nong Rong, CPEC could generate 700,000 employments by 2030. The CPEC Centre of Excellence of Pakistan's Ministry of Planning, Development, and Reform estimated that its approved initiatives could indirectly generate 1.2 million jobs (Khan, 2023).

Due to its enduring relationships with both countries, China launched a 46-billion-dollar financial project (CPEC) in 2013, which has since grown to approximately 70 billion dollars. In contrast, the United States imports extensively from Pakistan. In 2019-20 (July-March), Pakistan's exports to the United States were 471 billion rupees, while exports to China were 219 billion rupees. Pakistan's imports from the United States were 692.6 billion rupees, while imports from China were 1,344.3 billion rupees. According to Paul D. Miller, trade ties between the United States and Pakistan have increased over the past decade, and Pakistan requires the United States as a trading partner more than the United States does. Pakistan, both nations inked a bilateral Trade and Investment Agreement in 2003, resulting in an increase in bilateral trade from \$2.8 billion in 2001 to \$5.8 billion in 2011. In 2010, the United States was Pakistan's largest export market. In addition, he states that Pakistani laborers in the United States contribute a sizeable portion of the \$8.7 billion in remittances to Pakistan from the United States, and in exchange, American businesses account for \$517 million in foreign direct investment (FDI) in Pakistan or nearly one-quarter of the total. If Pakistan fails to maintain

such enduring ties with the United States, bilateral trade connections between the two nations could be sluggish (Keeryo, 2020).

Pakistan's role in the US-led war on terror, particularly its assistance in combating extremist elements in Afghanistan, has resulted in security cooperation with the US. Pakistan can continue to engage with the US on counterterrorism efforts, intelligence sharing, and military collaboration to address regional security challenges. Continuing bilateral cooperation with a central emphasis on counterterrorism and regional stability, the Commander of U.S. Central Command made two trips to Pakistan in 2022. The U.S. Secretary of Defense hosted Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff at the Pentagon in October 12, 2022 and the U.S.-Pakistan Counterterrorism Dialogue met in March 13, 2023. In September 2022, the Biden Administration announced it would provide a sustainment package for Pakistan's F-16 combat aircraft fleet at a prospective cost of \$450 million to Pakistan. India's government vehemently protested the announcement, prompting the U.S. Secretary of State to state publicly, "These are not new planes, new systems, or new weapons," and to argue that the United States has an obligation to maintain the military equipment it exports and that this effort would enhance Pakistan's "capability to deal with terrorist threats emanating from Pakistan or the region" (Kronstadt, 2023).

In the last 15 years, Pakistan has received armaments worth an estimated \$8,469 million from China. China has been a staunch supporter of Pakistan's conventional arsenal since the 1960s and the nation's most significant defense ally since the conclusion of the Cold War. Since 2015, China has contributed approximately 75% of all imported armaments to Pakistan. Pakistan has been China's largest and most significant arms customer during the past ten years, receiving about 40% of Beijing's military exports, while China has emerged as Pakistan's leading and most significant arms supplier. China has been the PAF's primary supplier of aircraft equipment since the early 1970s in terms of volume. With the recent sale and transfer of the 4.5-generation fighter J-10CP, which is

regarded as being on par with the contemporary US F-16.17, as well as the new production of the fourth-generation JF-17 block III, China has been the primary supplier of fighter aircraft for Pakistan since 1980. General Qamar Javed Bajwa, then-chief of Pakistan's armed forces, in August 2022 described China and Pakistan's militaries as "brothers in arms" who cooperate to protect shared interests. (Lalwani, 2023).

Similarly, China's growing concerns over terrorism and extremism in its Xinjiang region can provide an avenue for closer security cooperation between Pakistan and China. This cooperation can help Pakistan enhance its own security capabilities and strengthen its position as a regional security partner.

In conclusion, Pakistan's unique geopolitical position provides it with numerous challenges and opportunities to manage its relationships with the US and China amid their strategic rivalry. By striking a balance between these powers, Pakistan can harness economic benefits, enhance security cooperation, and leverage its diplomatic ties. By navigating this complex landscape skillfully, Pakistan can position itself as an influential player in regional and global affairs, contributing to its own development and stability while ensuring its national interests are safeguarded.

Way forward for Pakistan

Pakistan finds itself in a crucial position, caught between two major global powers—the United States and China. As a country with significant geopolitical and economic interests, Pakistan must carefully navigate its relationships with both nations to safeguard its national interests. Managing relationships with both the US and China requires diplomatic finesse and a delicate balancing act. Pakistan can capitalize on its historical ties with the US and its growing economic and strategic partnership with China to enhance its leverage in the international arena. By acting as a bridge between the two powers, Pakistan can facilitate dialogue and promote cooperation on critical global issues such as climate change, nuclear non-proliferation, and regional stability. This approach would allow Pakistan to gain international recognition and

potentially mediate conflicts that arise between the US and China.

Managing relationships with the US and China amidst their strategic rivalry presents both challenges and opportunities for Pakistan. By maintaining a delicate balance, diversifying its economic base, and leveraging its geographical location and diplomatic engagement, Pakistan can enhance its national interests. By capitalizing on the antagonism between the US and China, Pakistan can secure economic investments, technology transfers, and diplomatic support, while also contributing to regional stability and playing a constructive role in international affairs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the contemporary global geopolitical landscape is heavily shaped by the profound rivalry between the United States and China, spanning historical, economic, military, and strategic dimensions and extending across diverse arenas worldwide. In this intricate web of power dynamics, Pakistan, positioned as a crucial player in South Asia, stands at a pivotal crossroads, grappling with the profound implications of this geopolitical tug-of-war.

Throughout its history, Pakistan has maintained robust ties with the United States, primarily as a key ally in the global war on terror. However, the rapid ascendancy of China as a global economic powerhouse has ushered in a new chapter, drawing Pakistan into a closer partnership through initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and other strategic collaborations. Navigating this evolving landscape requires Pakistan to carefully balance its relations with these two superpowers.

The essence of this balancing act lies in striking the right equilibrium between the United States and China a task of paramount importance for Pakistan. This equilibrium is not merely a diplomatic nicety; it is essential for safeguarding Pakistan's national interests, fostering economic growth, and ensuring regional stability. The multifaceted nature of this competition demands astute diplomatic acumen and a judicious assessment of the evolving dynamics within the

US-China strategic rivalry.

As Pakistan endeavors to protect its sovereignty and advance its national agenda, adopting a well-calibrated approach to this complex geopolitical scenario becomes imperative. The stakes are high, and Pakistan's ability to navigate this delicate balancing act will significantly shape its trajectory in an era defined by the strategic competition between two global superpowers. In the pursuit of its goals, Pakistan must remain adaptive, responsive, and forward-thinking, recognizing the dynamic nature of international relations and the ever-changing currents in the geopolitical landscape.

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