



RESEARCH PAPER

US-China Power Contestation: Pakistan's Balancing Paradox

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ABSTRACT

The research aims to analyze and address the repercussions of past missteps and forthcoming challenges in Pakistan's foreign policy in the wake of the US-China power contest and emerging realities. To understand the complex incidents that create stress for Pakistan in meeting foreign policy challenges, multiple secondary sources, including books and journal articles, were analyzed. The world is battling ongoing and complex global issues. The ongoing technological competition between China and the United States has created challenging times for regional stability in South Asia, particularly for Pakistan. Pakistan is struggling to balance its relationships with these superpowers, and this has resulted in a downward spiral for the country. Domestic issues and external pressures are contributing to this crisis, and the increasing polarization in society alters the country's security apparatus. The US and China are vying to control the world through an offense-defense balance. Pakistan is caught in a security dilemma. It is recommended to address and prioritize domestic issues. Either to prepare the nation to bear the challenges of opting for a clear policy or going with the flow rather than trying to control the controversial environment

KEYWORDS: Power Contestation, Sino-US Competition, US-China vis-à-vis Pakistan

Introduction

Looking at the history of Pakistan's relations with the US and China (since 1947), one witnesses events that shaped relations with two contesting countries amid an evolving global reality vis-à-vis Pakistan's balancing paradox. Trade wars and evolving digital wars can have far-reaching negative consequences for global growth and investment, particularly in Pakistan. Pakistan is similarly vulnerable, with a struggling economy facing complexity in balancing its relations with the US and China due to economic compulsions. Nonetheless, US-China power contestation is also a barrier to maintaining a balance between the two competing economies (Muzaffar, et. al, 2017).

As a sovereign state, every nation must make decisions that balance its national and international interests. (Jaffrelot, 2016) Pakistan, in particular, must be mindful of how its pursuit of external support impacts its domestic dynamics. It is crucial to thoroughly assess the implications of such strategies to effectively allocate resources and attain sustainable success. Pakistan's success relies on its ability to navigate its national and international interests with skill and wisdom. Pakistan's shift from "do more" to no more pushed the country into multifaceted challenges in the wake of the prevalent US-China rivalry. As a Pakistani citizen, it's alarming to witness the construction of barriers by both allies and foes. It's imperative to address the events that have caused Pakistan to be at odds while dealing with its allies. Despite China's long-standing friendship and the US being an old ally, both countries have their strategic interests. It's critical that we carefully consider all the factors at play and take a systematic approach to these contests. While challenges may arise, the military and politicians need to work together towards common goals, ensuring that decisions made are strategic and resources allocated efficiently. This collaborative approach will help Pakistan achieve sustainable growth and build trust at home and abroad, particularly in light of concerns surrounding the pursuit

of national interests and the security dilemma arising from the Sino-U.S. quest for offense and defense.

Navigating the complex terrain of international relationships is no easy feat. Throughout the years, numerous significant events have molded the strategic triangle involving China, Pakistan, and the United States. Recent times have posed a lot of intricacies for Pakistan in managing its relationships with these countries, particularly with the challenges encountered, such as former Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to Russia during Ukraine tensions, (Yousaf, 2022) the Raymond Davis (Kux, 2011) shooting, the U.S. Navy SEAL raid in Abbottabad (Smith, 2011), the killing of Chinese citizens, and the presence of Uighurs in Pakistan. (Rakisits, 2012) Despite these challenges, Pakistan continues to navigate this strategic triangle with care and consideration (Yaseen et. al. 2017). Pakistan's approach to its relationships has become mired in complexity, creating uncertainty and hindering its progress toward independence. Withdrawal from certain summits and mounting pressure within the country are also unfortunate outcomes of this situation. Given the aforementioned position, when it comes to Pakistan's foreign policy, it has become a great challenge to balance her relations with two rivals. With historical economic woes, Pakistan is not in a position to select sides or even remain neutral as balancing relations has become a gigantic task in the prevalent situation.

Literature Review

All countries need to stay informed and prepared in today's complex and ever-changing world. The global competition between China and the United States has various areas of concern, including territorial and maritime disputes, conflicts in cyberspace, and challenges related to nuclear weapons in North Korea. (Ali, 2015) Additionally, disagreements over Taiwan and Tibet, human rights violations, and competing initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative and the US's Build America First pose further challenges. The recent trend of de-dollarization among BRICS nations is also having an impact on the global order, leading to a shift that is challenging foreign policies (Muzaffar, et. al. 2018) Pakistan must closely monitor how different nations adjust to this evolving landscape while finding ways to maintain its independence and sovereignty. It is important to remain hopeful and continue to work towards effective solutions, even in the face of challenging circumstances.

Scholars presented their perspectives on great power competition. Paul Kennedy stated his analysis on the rise and fall of the great powers, as he attributed the relative decline and rise of great powers not only to long wars but also to the relative decline and rise of the economy. (KENNEDY, 1988) Martin Jacques provided his analysis on *When China Rules the World: The Rise of the Middle Kingdom and the End of the Western World*, attributing China's rise to two major drivers of the global moment i.e. "China prices" and China's double-digit growth rate. (Jacques, 2012) According to John Mearsheimer's article "The Inevitable Rivalry: America, China, and the Tragedy of Great-Power Politics," China has the potential to challenge the US position in Asia and possibly beyond, and the US's logical option is to "slow China's rise." (MEARSHEIMER, *The Inevitable Rivalry America, China, and the Tragedy of Great-Power Politics*, 2021) This rivalry will turn more aggressive than the original Cold War, as China is exactly following the realism model. The US can avoid an extraordinary rise by slowing the speed and extent of China's rise (Yaseen, et. al. 2023). However, one cannot ignore the new emerging reality of technological advancement, where artificial intelligence is also gaining ground to enhance the race in novel sectors by averting the dynamics of the power matrix. The offense-defense approach of realism in US-China relations created a complex international order for the world in general and Pakistan in particular. Pakistan's balancing turn is perplexing amid the emerging US-China power contest. The power struggle between the United States and China creates a security risk for the world. Jervis argues that a security dilemma creates mutual distrust and suspicion, leading to a self-

sustaining cycle of action and reaction (Farooq, 2016). As we continue to witness technological advancements like artificial intelligence shaping global power dynamics, it is important to consider the serious security implications that arise.

Pakistan faces the immensely challenging task of managing a delicate balance between rival nations vying for influence. We must learn from past experiences and take a fair and unbiased approach toward global powers to ensure our success in this endeavor. John Mearsheimer's paper, "The Inevitable Rivalry: America, China, and the Tragedy of Great-Power Politics," argues that both Republican and Democratic administrations' engagement policies have supported China's progress. The US welcomed investment in China and allowed the country to join the global trading system, believing that China would act as a responsible stakeholder in a US-led international order. However, the current situation indicates that the United States and China are in the midst of a new Cold War. The potential for China to become a rival to the US in Asia and other regions may lead the US to impede China's growth as a strategic move. (Mearsheimer, 2021) A Cold War is looming between China and the United States, which compels Pakistan to take decisive action in its interest. Pakistan must act more effectively to tackle its internal issues and maintain a fair and unbiased approach toward global powers.

During the Cold War, Pakistan's foreign policy was compelled to join America's sponsored security pacts like the South East Asia Treaty Organization and the Central Treaty Organization to secure its borders from its rival India. (Hameed, 2017) The US viewed Pakistan's joining SEATO and CENTO as an alliance against communism. Pakistan sought to strengthen its military capability against India and raise the Kashmir issue. This was the reason Pakistan withdrew from the SEATO alliance after the 1971 war. The US made commitments in the 1959 agreement. In the event of aggression against Pakistan, the United States of America will take appropriate action, including the use of armed forces, as envisaged in the Joint Resolution to promote peace and stability in the Middle East. However, the US did not support Pakistan's position that the dispute remained bilateral or confined to the UN (Farooq, 2016). The US sanctions further created resentment against the Western Alliance.

The relationship between China and Pakistan was enhanced against their common rival, India, after the Sino-Indian War of 1962. China advocates for Pakistan on Kashmir, while Pakistan backs China's stance of "One China." China's cooperation in infrastructure, science, and technology strengthened its trust with its regional neighbor. Thus, China acquired the status of a time-tested friend based on her historical manifestation. Pakistan also played a role in Sino-US reconciliation through President Nixon's National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, and a secret visit to China. During Deng Xiaoping's new economic and diplomatic policies, China opened its foreign policy across the world and adopted a relatively flexible and neutral approach to India during the Kargil crisis. Pakistan's role as a front-line state in the war against communism while facilitating the West's fight in Afghanistan allowed Pakistan to pursue the nuclear program. Pakistan has shown unwavering support in the war effort, yet it is disheartening to see that the treatment received from the US has been unfair. This is evident from the multiple actions taken against Pakistan.

Results and Discussion

Currently, both Pakistan and the United States share a vested interest in promoting peace and stability in Afghanistan by preventing terrorism. (Gallagher, 2021) They acknowledge Afghanistan's importance and are committed to enhancing economic cooperation in various sectors, including energy, agriculture, and the economy, to alleviate Pakistan's economic struggles. The United States is one of Pakistan's primary investors and the largest remittance provider. However, Pakistan is currently grappling

with a technological challenge and a domestic environment that has become increasingly tense, resulting in regional instability. With technological advancements and mounting challenges at home, Pakistan cannot afford to take sides or engage in a technological race. Staying vigilant and committed to creating a secure and stable global environment is the only way forward.

Pakistan and China's relationship has strengthened over the years through agreements such as border demarcation and MFN status. Despite differences in foreign policy, their shared support for "One China" and China's assistance in Pakistan's nuclear program have fortified their relationship. However, changing global dynamics and shifting alliances may affect the future of this relationship. It is imperative to acknowledge that border disputes, civil unrest, and nationalist demands for revolutionary movements violate international relations principles. While China has collaborated with other nations, including Pakistan, on matters of mutual interest, (Ji, 2013) their political-economic model has led to a significant increase in power resources. The UN Charter advocates for equality and peaceful conflict resolution among nations, but China has adopted a different approach to international relations. Nevertheless, China's normalization of relations with the US and participation in various international organizations have increased its power resources. The future will reveal how these dynamics evolve.

It is imperative to recognize that the border disputes, civil unrest in Taiwan, and nationalist demands for revolutionary movements in Southeast Asia are in direct violation of the international relations principles of non-interference and non-use of force. China's political-economic model rejected the Western liberal-capitalist model and led to a significant increase in its power resources in the 1950s. However, China's conception of international society was based on its own experiences, and was not interested in joining any great power club. After establishing diplomatic relations on a global basis, China normalized relations with the US and joined the United Nations and Bretton Woods Institutions. Some view the US as custodial in multilateral institutions, while China's role has developed over time. Some view the US as custodial in multilateral institutions, while China's role has developed over time. China has played a significant role in preventing nuclear confrontation in South Asia and has joined various international treaties and organizations, including the WTO (Nawab, et. al. 2021). As the international order continues to shift and evolve, new challenges will arise for all parties involved. The Bandung conference in 1955 was a significant event that brought together African and Asian countries on common ground. China's approach to international relations was based on its own unique historical and political-economic experiences, and it was not interested in being part of any great power club. However, in the 1970s and beyond, China established diplomatic relations with countries across the globe and normalized relations with the US by joining various international organizations, such as the United Nations and Bretton Woods Institutions. It is interesting to note that after Mao's death and Deng Xiaoping's reform agenda, China began to reject its unique model of international relations and instead worked towards meeting the entry requirements of contemporary international society.

Some view the United States as a custodian of global multilateral institutions. In 1998, President Clinton praised China for stopping a potential nuclear conflict in South Asia. China played a vital role in preventing North Korea from engaging in missile tests and plutonium production and also assisted the country in participating in international treaties and conventions.

Despite criticism from some scholars regarding China's growing power, including its stance on the Taiwan issue and claims in the South China Sea, China's active engagement in international relations has led to its membership in the WTO and participation in various multilateral organizations. It is important to remember that

every nation has its own beliefs and priorities when it comes to sovereignty and the protection of individual rights. While Kofi Annan emphasized in his address to the 54th session of the United Nations General Assembly the importance of individual sovereignty, the Chinese government has traditionally focused on state sovereignty. It is also worth noting that some nations, such as China, have accused the US of violating their sovereignty by interfering in their internal affairs under the guise of human rights. In Obama's first year as president, he aimed to manage America's inevitable decline relative to rising powers in Asia, China in particular. His decisions include extending the timeline of the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq and sending additional troops to Afghanistan to defeat Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Obama's first speech precepts: "My job is to communicate to the American people that the Muslim world is filled with extraordinary people who simply want to live their lives and see their children live better lives." My job is to communicate to the Muslim world that Americans are not enemies. We sometimes make mistakes. We have not been perfect. The American president also apologized for the US's involvement in the 1953 coup to depose Iranian President Muhammad Mosaddeq. (Initiative, 2010) The questioning of the United States' global leadership increased at home and abroad due to counterinsurgency wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the rise of newly emerging economies (BRICS), and the global economic downturn and recession in the United States.

One group of scholars perceives that the relative decline of the US will still leave the US as the more powerful actor in the international system, but the economic rise and spread of nuclear weapons in other nations are likely to pose new challenges to the US's international primacy. The US's adherence to the liberal world order while attaining objectives by following the realism paradigm created perplexity among other nations. As nations relate disparities between rhetoric and actions in drafting and executing US policies. The trade dispute between the US and China also shifted both countries' perceptions, as US government officials referred to China as an adversary seeking to replace global leadership to undermine US power, whereas China's public statements have been limited to criticizing US "bullying". Many within the Chinese system conclude that the US is seeking to contain China's rise. As a consequence, talk of the US decoupling from China is gaining prominence in the US, while China is hedging its reliance on the US. (Meidan, 2019) Trade disputes also escalated technological rivalry as both governments' markets globally grappled with US-China decoupling or an economic iron curtain. During the Trump era, tariffs were imposed on Chinese goods, and China responded with retaliation. This signaled a shift in the US-China relationship. A truce agreed upon between former President Trump and President Xi Jinping at the G-20 meeting in Buenos Aires in December 2018 averted the tariff increase, but the deal collapsed for ambiguous reasons. At the G-20 meeting in Osaka in late June 2019, Trump and Xi had another meeting. As a result, the US agreed not to impose new tariffs on Chinese exports for the time being. China, in return, will purchase a considerable amount of agricultural products over an unspecified period. Trump also lifted the Commerce Department's ban on US technology companies selling to Huawei. The Chinese economy slowed as a weakening external environment compounded the government's efforts to de-risk the financial industry and restrain overloading in heavy industry. China's oil imports from the US are at an all-time low as the country has turned to Middle Eastern suppliers to fill the void, while crude imports from the US have also dropped amid growing concerns that oil will be caught up in the trade war. Another concerning area for China is the oil and gas industry.

Another concern for China is LNG. Given the strong potential of the US, out of the 70 bcm of LNG China imported in 2018, only 3 bcm came from the US. Therefore, LNG is considered a vital part of the long-term trade deal between the US and China. The trade war also signaled a shift in the paradigm of US-China relations in the aftermath of the US Department of Defense's latest Indo-Pacific Strategy paper, which emphasizes the geopolitical rivalry between free and repressive world order visions, and a senior State

Department official maintained that the US was preparing for a clash of civilizations with China, as many perceived the ban on Chinese telecom giant Huawei would pose a challenge in the technological sector. Even if the iron curtain on technology does not materialize, it is no longer a fantasy, as companies investing in energy technologies could find themselves caught between two competing technological ecosystems. China's energy supply security is a major concern on the policy agenda for China's decision-makers amid US sanctions on Iran and Venezuela, which China imported in 2018. Though China has developed a large Strategic Petroleum Reserve Program, uncertainty still exists. Consequently, China has to rely on the import of LNG. While some critics see the current situation as a traditional great power competition in which political-military power is dominant, today's emerging reality indicates that other indicators such as economic influence, informational influence, the nuclear revolution, and digitization have surpassed control in comparison to previous power indicators. The trio rivalry, particularly Russia's invasion of Ukraine, demonstrates the three countries—China, the United States, and Russia—vying for control of the international order, which has historically been associated with conflict. (Mazarr, 2022) Though the US, European Union, Japan, and South Korea were major players in the previous technological revolution, most analysts perceive China to lead the technological revolution as Chinese firms have a net advantage in winning the 5G race. (Bertolini, 2019) As technology and global power dynamics continue to evolve, it is crucial to maintain a vigilant stance in promoting global stability.

The situation in Pakistan is highly complex and poses numerous challenges. There are serious concerns about the US's strengthening strategic partnership with India, including joint military exercises, technology transfer, and naval collaboration. This renders Pakistan's conventional and nuclear weapons ineffective as a deterrent, which is unacceptable. India's agenda is to delegitimize the legitimate Kashmir freedom struggle and gain approval from the US to strengthen its position in international forums, which poses a significant risk to regional security. Pakistan must not overlook the emerging developments in US-India relations. The public perception in Pakistan has shifted towards growing resentment towards the US due to its disregard and unfair treatment of the country. Despite efforts by the establishment and current administration to restore balance, the populace vehemently condemns the institution and accuses it of actively facilitating suspected regime change efforts. The US-promoted liberal democratic order is wholeheartedly embraced. The establishment is also grappling with economic difficulties amid dynamic great power competition, which further complicates Pakistan's ability to balance its relationship with the two global powers. We must remain vigilant in the face of the US's strengthening ties with India, which could undermine our ability to defend ourselves. India's agenda is concerning, but we cannot let it deter us from our pursuit of freedom and justice for Kashmir. It is important to stay informed of the latest developments and to hold our leaders accountable for their actions. We must work to foster a spirit of unity and cooperation, even as we face economic challenges and great power competition. Pakistan must take the necessary actions to protect its national security interests.

The US-China power contest pushed the world into an uncertain situation and sparked security dilemmas. The Belt and Road Initiative seeks to connect Asia with Africa and Europe through maritime networks to enhance regional integration and trade and stimulate economic growth. The US perceives this project to pose significant risks to U.S. economic interests, whereas China views Quad as disrupting regional peace and stability and trying to contain China's global rise. Russia's invasion of Ukraine posed another challenge to the emerging world order. The BRI, Quad, and Ukraine Wars exacerbated the imbalance and increased competition among great powers, putting third-world countries at risk of extinction. The world is caught in new alliances and splits amid the prevalent world order vis-à-vis emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, inter alia. Where the contending powers seek hegemony in the emerging world order, while third-

world countries are trapped in a trap to choose sides. The planned visit to Russia by Pakistani former Prime Minister Imran Khan during the Russia-Ukraine conflict—Russia's invasion of Ukrainian cities—and the subsequent US approach to dragging Pakistan into the conflict via the alleged regime change in Pakistan debate opened a new Pandora's box in the region. The Pakistani public recently showed great resentment towards the US's dealing with its old ally as the public perceives the US's unjust treatment of the nation as further widening a gap in its relations with the US. In contrast, the US deliberately disregarded Pakistan's provision in the Afghan war against Russia in 1989 and against Al-Qaeda after 9/11 while withdrawing its forces in the previous year by pushing an old ally to deal with the instability and complexity created by the US to dismantle the terrorist networks. Former US Central Command chief General Frank McKenzie (Agency, 2022) bluntly admitted the US's severe shortcomings in Afghanistan. He acknowledged that the Pakistani people had no trust in the US's commitment to the region and that attempts to impose Western-style nation-building were both futile and misguided. This indicates the balancing of Pakistan's relations with the US-China relationship, which demands novel considerations of emerging realities where nations pursue their national interests.

Conclusion

The US pursuit to maintain a unipolar moment vis-à-vis China's quest to create a "sphere of influence" has posed high levels of uncertainty, instability, and complexity in the world (Muzaffar, et. al, 2017). The anti-US narrative that emerged in Pakistan recently as a consequence of the US declaring a liberal-democratic model for the world amid regime change operations in the world in general and the alleged recent regime change in Pakistan, in particular, is also a case in point. The recent technological push, as well as the formation of new alliances and the replacement of old alliances and foes, are fueling a dangerous arms race and technological race. The world is at the crossroads of an emerging reality vis-à-vis technological, nuclear, and climate change threats and the well-known fact that Pakistan's foreign policy is currently confronted with a difficult environment in balancing its relations with the US and China in the aftermath of the US-China power struggle. The shifting geostrategic and geo-economic global interests pose a challenging environment for futuristic policies, and an ensuing "security dilemma" materializing due to the offense-defense paradigm would further disrupt the international system as any aloofness would have disastrous ramifications. The world is caught in a trap in pursuing a liberal democratic order, an offense-defense power race of realism, Marxism, critical approaches, and constructivism, inter alia. One paradigm surpasses all approaches, and that is the "national interests" of the states, so realism seems to be relevant in the emerging scenarios in shaping the emerging world order.

Recommendations

To overcome Pakistan's ambiguous foreign policy towards the US and China, it is imperative to implement the following recommendations;

- a) Pakistan must avoid selecting sides by considering and sensing the pulse of emerging reality to follow the policy that best fits the country's national interests. Pakistan must seek guidance from contesting nations on how the US-China relationship prioritizes and pursues national interests through a policy of engagement and disengagement by sensing circumstances.
- b) Pakistan must express the legitimate concerns of the country's public to both the US and China while emphasizing to the US how and why hateful public sentiments emerged in the country and how these pessimistic sentiments turned public opinion against the US. To pursue a policy of choice, Pakistan needs to engage with competing countries in trade while handling internal domestic issues, et al.,

increasing polarization in society. To dismantle further polarization in society in current situations, Pakistan must make wise decisions by sensing the public mood, creating national cohesion in society, and averting hateful sentiments by addressing legitimate public concerns.

- c) The concerned authorities must address this issue by creating awareness among people rather than advocating for or opposing individuals, highlighting what is best for Pakistan's national interest and what is disrupting the global image of Pakistan. This is only possible to overcome foreign dependence. To follow an independent foreign policy, Pakistan must come out of the IMF trap. China is Pakistan's time-tested friend, and the US is an old ally, so Pakistan must maintain a strategic partnership and relations with China as the US upholds a strategic partnership with India while collaborating with the US in trade relations by clearly indicating her policy of joining hands in trade and other technological advancement fields but decoupling in wars.
- d) The only possible way to fix Pakistan's economic woes is by enhancing the economic and technological capacity of the country. It is the need of the hour to address and prioritize domestic issues. Either to prepare the nation to bear the challenges of opting for a clear policy or going with the flow rather than trying to control the controversial environment.

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