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BETWEEN GREAT POWERS: PAKISTAN'S STRATEGIC BALANCING IN AN ERA OF INTENSIFYING GLOBAL RIVALRY

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Abstract

This study examined Pakistan's strategic balancing behaviour in an era of intensifying global rivalry between major powers, particularly the United States and China. The research employed a qualitative research design based on thematic analysis of 120 purposively selected documents, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and academic publications from 2019–2026. The study identified five major themes: strategic relations with China, relations with the United States, strategic autonomy and foreign policy, economic and security considerations, and challenges of great-power rivalry. The findings indicated that strategic relations with China represented 28.3% of the total thematic distribution, followed by relations with the United States at 21.7%. Strategic autonomy and foreign policy accounted for 20.0%, economic and security considerations 17.5%, and challenges of great-power rivalry 12.5%. The results demonstrated that Pakistan pursued a multidimensional balancing strategy to manage competing pressures from major powers while maximizing economic and strategic benefits. China emerged as a dominant economic and infrastructural partner, while the United States remained essential in security and diplomatic engagement. The study further revealed that economic development and national security significantly influenced foreign policy decisions, while geopolitical pressure and strategic uncertainty constrained policy flexibility. The findings highlighted that Pakistan's strategic balancing functioned as an adaptive mechanism for maintaining foreign policy autonomy in a multipolar international system.

Keywords: China, Economic Diplomacy, Foreign Policy, Pakistan, Strategic Autonomy, Strategic Balancing

1. Introduction

In the aftermath of a time of extreme change, the international system experienced significant transformations as a result of strategic rivalry between major powers in the political, economic, technological and security sectors. A new "USA vs China" competition redefined global coalitions and brought about a rethinking of foreign policy strategies of some middle powers. Importantly, Pakistan became one of the most geo-politically relevant countries in this developing region owing to its geographical position, nuclear power, regional influence, economy and economic linkages. Pakistan adopted a policy of balancing to avoid leaning towards either side while safeguarding the country's interests, as other power centres in Asia struggled to assert their dominance over each other as well as other areas in the world (Ali et al., 2024; Maqsood, 2024).

Pakistan's foreign policy has been pragmatic to meet ever-changing international realities in the past. In the Cold War era, the country was closely allied with the United States with various security accords. Since the Cold War era, however, Pakistan's foreign policy has become more diversified and it has been scaling up

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its strategic interaction with China. The launch of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) gave a brilliant impetus to bilateral relations and Pakistan played an important role in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Rafiq-uz-Zaman, 2023). At the same time, there was diplomatic and economic interaction between Pakistan and the USA, albeit with some tensions about security and regional policy issues, from time to time (Ikram et al., 2024; Larik et al., 2023;).

Pakistan's diplomacy was made even more complicated by the birth of the multipolar world order. A complex external environment was formed due to the growing competition between the U.S. and China, the regional security situation in Afghanistan, India-China cooperation under the framework of the Indo-Pacific region and the dynamics of the China-Russia relationship. It's for this reason that Pakistan began practicing some hedging and strategic balancing to maximize economic gains and to retain policy autonomy. This strategy helped Pakistan to pursue several powers but not any one particular geopolitical camp (Adil et al., 2024; Iqbal et al., 2025).

The study focused on the strategic balancing in Pakistan's foreign policy in the context of the growing rivalry in the global arena and analysed the opportunities and limitations of this approach. The significance of comprehending Pakistan's position and its role in the South Asian landscape, while navigating tension between competing great powers, endures, as the country's decisions impact regional stability, economic growth and development, security cooperation, and overall geopolitical dynamics in South Asia and beyond (Ali et al., 2024; Jalal et al., 2025).

Background of the Study

However, the 21st century marked a gradual shift in the shift from unipolar to multipolar international system with competing centres of power. The rapid economic development, technological advancement and military modernisation of China posited a threat to the world domination of the United States and created new forms of strategic competition. It wrought this revolution not only in Asia, but in Asia's states, including those that hold geopolitical leverage. There was a gradual rise in the importance of Pakistan as a region lies at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia and Middle East as noted by Jalal et al., 2025.

Pakistan's ties with China began to get transformed into one of the longest lasting strategic partnerships in the modern global politics. CPEC led to an increased and significant collaboration in the sphere of economics and investments, especially in the domains of infrastructural development, energy, transport, and industry. These efforts were an opportunity to boost Pakistan's economy while bolstering China's opens to regional markets and maritime corridors. As such, Pakistan became a more important part of the 'Greater China Strategy in the broader region' (Ikram et al., 2024; Larik et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, there were times when Pakistan and the United States were collaboration partners and others where they were conflicted. However, disputes over Afghanistan, regional security and strategic agendas didn't impede counterterrorism cooperation, security cooperation and regional stabilization. Moreover, the shrinkage of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan and the shift of the U.S. focus to the Indo-Pacific region changed the dynamics of U.S.-Pakistan relations, prompting Pakistan to rethink its diplomatic posture (Adil et al., 2024).

Recent trends revealed Pakistan's increasing trend toward pursuing strategic autonomy that involved being in "strategic embrace" with several big powers. The policy makers wanted to work jointly with China for economic cooperation, to engage with the USA for diplomatic cooperation, to interact with Russia, and to join regional organizations. This challenging approach not only shaped the socioeconomic growth and development of the nation but also aimed at ensuring its security and sovereignty while keeping national strategies flexible in the face of growing international competition (Ali et al., 2024; Iqbal et al., 2025; Maqsood, 2024).

Research Problem

Great power rivalry posed and exacerbated significant problems for countries that lay within strategic areas. Pakistan was subjected to an increasing degree of pressure to meet the expectations of different big powers and at the same time shield its economic, security, and foreign policy goals from their expectations. While strategic balancing presented opportunities for diversified partnerships and enhanced diplomatic sleight of foot, it also presented risks in light of geopolitical competition, pressures, and shifting alliances. Over the

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years, Pakistan's foreign policy gradually has drawn the eyes of scholars and academics who have explored various aspects of the policies, but there was a scarcity of studies to analyse how Pakistan had managed its relations between competing forces of the time with the larger setting of geopolitical changes. Previous work mostly concerned about with bilateral aspect and didn't give attention to the performance of Pakistan's balancing strategy in a new multipolar world.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the evolution of Pakistan's strategic balancing policy in the context of intensifying great-power rivalry.
2. To analyse the political, economic, and security factors influencing Pakistan's balancing strategy.
3. To assess the role of China, the United States, and other major powers in shaping Pakistan's foreign policy choices.

Research Questions

Q1. How did Pakistan pursue strategic balancing amid intensifying great-power rivalry?
Q2. What political, economic, and security factors influenced Pakistan's balancing strategy?
Q3. How did relations with China and the United States shape Pakistan's foreign policy decisions?

2. Literature Review

Strategic Balancing and Hedging in International Relations

Literature on strategic balancing has singled out how middle and secondary powers typically would behave when they face great-power rivalry and the approaches they would take to their foreign policy. States did not unambiguously resonate with one power but often adopted 'hedging' tactics that involved elements of engagement, neutrality and cooperation. Scholars used to claim that a balance of behaviour could allow states to gain the most from their relationships with allies, while limiting the danger inherent in alliance dependence. These approaches gained in significance during the current international political context, which included a growing multipolarity and major power rivalry in international politics (Meijer & Simón, 2021; Jalal et al., 2025).

Hedging was also found to be a rational reaction to uncertainty in the international climate, suggesting this at the international level. Competing pressures from other powers often led states to give up on commitments to rigid military alliances and to adopt a mixed foreign policy approach that emphasized building multiple links in their foreign relations or political and economic partnerships. This strategy not only gave greater strategic independence but also made them less subservient to any outside pressure. In theoretical terms, balancing and hedging have been emphasized, which puts emphasis on flexibility, adaptability, and cooperative approach based on the thematic or functional considerations in foreign policy decision making (Meijer & Simón, 2021; Iqbal et al., 2025).

In the recent period, the contribution of domestic political factors to the formation of balancing behaviour was analysed, too. According to the Neoclassical realist viewpoints, "elite perceptions" and "strategic cultures" determined state views on the perception of external opportunities and threats and how same were responded to, along with the domestic state institutions which "created" such perceptions. Thus, the decision for strategic balancing was not just as a result of the systemic pressures, but it was also influenced by the internal as well as political environment which affected the preferences for foreign policy and national priorities (Larik et al., 2023; Kakar et al., 2021).

Pakistan lies between China and the United States

There was a significant body of literature that concentrated on Pakistan's policies of managing relationship with China and the USA in an era of intensified give and take geopolitically. Scholars highlighted Pakistan's strategic importance, security issues and economic requirements, which spurred the policymakers to adopt a positive attitude towards both powers. China became Pakistan's main economic and strategic partner with huge chunks of investment in Pakistan's infrastructure while the USA continued to play a diplomatic, economic, and security role. ((Ali et al., 2024; Iqbal et al., 2025).

Research analysis of China-Pakistan Relations highlighted the importance of strategic cooperation and mutual interest of any long-term partnership. The researchers noted that bilateral economic projects increased political trust and added Pakistan's importance in becoming a more important part of the region. Meanwhile,

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academics maintained that enhanced ties with the Chinese did not mean the country was a casualty to America. Rather, Pakistan strategically aimed to have more than one partner, all in the mix (Larik et al., 2023; Ali et al., 2024).

Others noted the difficulties engendered by intensifying the U.S. and China's rivalry. The growing Indo-Pacific initiatives, evolving security dynamics, and growing economic competition added to the complexity of Pakistan's foreign policy landscape. Scholars suggested that the idea of balancing these pressures had been around in Pakistan, wherein a concept of strategic autonomy had been reinforced by means of non-involvement in confrontation of great powers. This was an act of practicality and diplomacy for protecting and keeping national interest in mind (Saboor et al., 2022; Jalal et al., 2025).

Rising nations and Pakistan's Strategic autonomy

Middle powers and strategically significant states began to play the role of key subjects of scholarly attention as the impact of great-power competition became a prominent topic. The growing significance of great-power competition intensified middle powers and strategically important states as subjects of scholarly interest. Across the West, work started to be conducted on the issue of greater competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China as an opportunity and a constraint for nation's negotiating independent foreign policy. Economic ties, technological ties and regional security alliances provided motivations for involvement in competing powers, and geopolitical conflicts had escalated threat in the form of danger from outside pressure and strategic dependency (Merino, 2023; Meijer & Simón, 2021).

A study of South Asian geopolitics showed that Pakistan was in a unique situation in this evolving international setting. Its order of geography, history relationship with various states and its economic connectivity projects added to its increased strategic value to several actors in the Middle East world. Scholars argued that Pakistan's foreign policy was becoming more and more a balancing course with greater inclination towards serving the national interest than aligning with any ideology. This orientation allowed for a more flexible approach in seeking out diverse pathways to the goal of engaging in partnerships, keeping the international option for diplomatic moves (Kakar et al., 2021; Saboor et al., 2022).

The recent studies have ended up in the blaring conclusion that strategic autonomy was still being a major goal of Pakistan's foreign policies. Researchers claimed that adequate relations between the major powers was important for the country's economic development, diplomatic power and security. However, critical weaknesses in sustaining such a strategy emerged from the literature, such as economic fragilities, regional conflicts and geopolitical pressures from outside. In light of these observations, it could be inferred that Pakistan's future foreign policy would significantly remain reliant on its efforts to manoeuvre in a more competitive and multipolar global landscape (Iqbal et al., 2025; Ali et al., 2024).

3. Research Methodology

Research Design

The design of this research was qualitative, and it was used to study strategic balancing of Pakistan during the phase of growing rivalry in today's world. The qualitative method allowed us to gain more of a comprehensive picture regarding the choices, diplomacy and geopolitical factors that shaped the foreign policy of Pakistan with key nations. The research examined politics, economics, and security aspects of Pakistan's relationship with the United States, China and other prominent actors in the so called ‘evolving international system'. The research methodology used was the descriptive and analytical approach to carry out an in-depth analysis of the implications of strategic balancing practices.

Data Collection Method

Only secondary data sources were used as a research method. This data was gathered from the peer-reviewed literature in journals, academic publications, government reports, foreign policy documents, think tank analyses, documents from international organisations and credible media sources between 2019 and 2026. Special focus was paid to topics of Pakistan's foreign policy, great power relations, strategic balancing, countries hedging, US-Pak relations and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Improvements in the comprehensiveness and reliability of the study were achieved through the use of different and authoritative sources.

Sample and Sample Size

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To choose the most relevant and informative documents for analysis, a purposive sampling technique was used. A scholarly selection and policy oriented towards materials which directly addressed Pakistan's position in the present day international political scenario were considered and given priority spotlight in this regard. The total sample of 120 documents was selected for detailed analysis comprising of: 70 peer-reviewed journal articles, 20 policy reports, 15 government publications, 15 academic book chapters, international organisation publications. This sample size was sufficient to give good breadth and depth, reflecting the key scholarship and the key policy dimensions of the research topic.

Data Analysis Technique

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data obtained. Through this approach, it enabled the identification, classification and analysis of common patterns regarding strategic balancing, great power rivalry, foreign policy autonomy, economic diplomacy, security cooperation, and regional geopolitics. The method of analysis used were systematic reading, coding and classification of themes, then comparison of findings was carried out from sources. The emerging trends were categorized into conceptual trends that were based on the main parameters of Pakistan's strategic balancing policy.

4. Results and Analysis

Thematic Findings on Pakistan's Strategic Balancing in an Era of Intensifying Global Rivalry

The thematic analysis of 120 selected documents revealed five dominant themes that shaped Pakistan's strategic balancing strategy amid intensifying global rivalry.

Table 1

Distribution of Major Themes Identified in the Document Analysis (n = 120)

Theme	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strategic Relations with China	34	28.3
Relations with the United States	26	21.7
Strategic Autonomy and Foreign Policy	24	20.0
Economic and Security Considerations	21	17.5
Challenges of Great-Power Rivalry	15	12.5
Total	**120**	**100.0**

The results showed that Strategic Relations with China appeared most prominently as the 28.3% of the overall observations. The literature that has been reviewed consistently highlighted the importance of China as Pakistan's prime strategic and economical ally. A range of studies about the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), infrastructure development, cooperation for energy and regional connectivity. The second most significant theme (21.7% of the documents analysed) consisted of relations with the United States. The results indicated that scholars and policy makers remained highly aware of the U.S. as a key diplomatic, security and economic player despite shifts in bilateral ties. The themes identified Strategic Autonomy and Foreign Policy is the most prominent theme observed, accounting for 20.0% of the total cluster, followed by Economic and Security Considerations at 17.5% of observations. These results showed that Pakistan's foreign policy focus was shifting towards an autonomous and interest-driven approach that depended excessively on no specific power. But there were key factors influencing policy choices: economic growth, national security, investment opportunities and regional stability. Concern over geopolitical pressure, regional competition, strategic uncertainty and the heightened risks from further great-power rivalry, made up 12.5% of the observations, as part of the Challenges of Great-Power Rivalry group.

Strategic Relations with China

Table 2

Key Dimensions of Pakistan's Strategic Relations with China

Dimension	Frequency	Percentage (%)
CPEC and Infrastructure Development	15	44.1
Economic Cooperation and Trade	8	23.5
Security and Defense Cooperation	6	17.7
Regional Connectivity	5	14.7
Total	**34**	**100.0**

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It showed that 'PI' and 'Infrastructure Development' was the top facet of strategic relations between Pakistan and China, representing 44.1% of the observations made in the theme. The analysed documents often refer to the transportation network, energy projects, industrial complexes and investment projects associated with the CPEC. The projects were considered highly important ways to promote economic development, address the shortcomings of tolls of transportation facilities, and better connect and serve the region. Economic cooperation and trade as a second dimension were found with 23.5% of the observations. The examined studies highlighted the importance of enhancing bilateral trade, financial relations, investment and market integration. It was concluded from the results that trade was conducive in enhancing the strategic partnership between the two countries as well as Pakistan's development goals more in general.

Relations with the United States

Table 3

Major Areas of Pakistan–United States Relations

Area	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Security Cooperation	10	38.5
Diplomatic Engagement	7	26.9
Economic Relations	5	19.2
Regional Stability Issues	4	15.4
Total	**26**	**100.0**

The results showed that security cooperation was the predominant theme of Pakistan-US relations and received the highest observation (38.5%). The subject analyses found were related to counterterrorism cooperation and military coordination, intelligence sharing and regional security issues. All of this had an impact on bilateral relations even though the political disagreements were now and then. Diplomatic engagement (26.9%) was observed and continued to be efforts to keep the two countries communicating constructively. Rumseys et al's literature indicated that diplomacy continues to play an important role in addressing conflict and addressing common regional and international interests. Themes on economic relations and regional stability issues also emerged. The results showed that bilateral relations remained impacted by trade, investment, development assistance and regional peace efforts. The following account was often observed: both countries were looking for "pragmatic cooperation" in matters where there was "mutual interest.

Strategic Autonomy and Foreign Policy

Table 4

Elements of Pakistan's Strategic Autonomy

Element	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Balanced Diplomacy	9	37.5
Multi-Vector Foreign Policy	6	25.0
National Interest Prioritization	5	20.8
Independent Decision-Making	4	16.7
Total	**24**	**100.0**

It revealed that Pakistan wanted to have good relations with a number of powers and at the same time would not connect themselves with a particular group of powers. It helped policy makers to take full advantage of opportunities, while avoiding undesirable geopolitical risks. Twenty-five percent of the observations were of the multi-vector foreign policy concept. The documents analysed highlighted the engagements with China, United States, Russia, Gulf countries and regional organisations. This diversification increased diplomatic flexibilities and opened up possibilities for coop-eration. The two key factors that joined together were found to be national interest prioritization and independent decision-making, which together comprised a significant portion of the findings. The literature pointed out that there was a shift in ideology in favour of economic development, security and strategic concerns, rather than ideology in foreign policy decisions in Pakistan.

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Economic and Security Considerations

Table 5

Economic and Security Drivers of Strategic Balancing

Driver	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Economic Development	8	38.1
National Security	6	28.6
Foreign Investment	4	19.0
Regional Stability	3	14.3
Total	**21**	**100.0**

The economic development became the biggest influencing factor on strategic balancing with 38.1% of the observations being in this part of the analysis. Economic growth, infrastructure modernization, industrial expansion and trade diversification were all key policy priorities and were consistently mentioned in reviewed literature. All these factors contributed to Pakistan's relationship of involvement with various foreign partners. Secondly at 28.6% of the observations, national security was considered as the most important driver. The results showed that the initial motives (regional conflicts, border security, counterterrorism and defense preparedness) continued to be the focus in the formulation of foreign policy. Regional stability and foreign investment also were pivotal in influencing strategic behaviour. The literature indicates that the promotion of investment and peace in the neighbourhood has been of great help in achieving Pakistan's development and security goals as a whole.

Challenges of Great-Power Rivalry

Table 6

Major Challenges Associated with Great-Power Competition

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Geopolitical Pressure	6	40.0
Strategic Uncertainty	4	26.7
Regional Security Tensions	3	20.0
Economic Dependence Risks	2	13.3
Total	**15**	**100.0**

The findings indicated that the greatest challenge was geopolitical pressure, accounting for 40.0% of the findings. One theme that was often mentioned in the literature is that of the complexities of Pakistan's foreign policy decision-making, in the presence of other expectations and competing demands emanating from the great powers. Such pressures exacerbated the difficulty of having a balanced relationship. Strategic uncertainty represented 26.7% of observations, relating to uncertainty over the changing international order. Uncertainty arose as a result of the swift geopolitical shifts, changing alliances, and new security threats facing the future of policy and strategy. Another area of concern was the potential for regional security tensions and economic reliance issues. The results indicated that policy makers were cautious about the possible impacts of conflicts, economic vulnerabilities, and too strong appeasement of external actors in the region. The challenges emphasised the need to have strategic flexibility and to be adaptive to ensure the policies operate in the increasingly competitive global environment.

5. Discussion

The conclusions illustrated that Pakistan's strategic balancing policy existed in a complex geopolitical arena, which created a growing competition between the U.S. and China. The comparative study of thematic analysis revealed that theme ‘strategic relation with Pakistan’ was prevalent showing Pakistan's view of China as a vital paradigm of its foreign policy and development perspective. This finding aligned with the research revealing that Pakistan was becoming more involved with China, emphasizing geoeconomic considerations, including investments in infrastructure, connectivity measures, and regional integration initiatives connected to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Jahanzaib & Ahmed, 2024; Ikram et al., 2024). The study also highlighted the significance of economic diplomacy in the area of Pakistan's external relations, with the

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perception that strategic cooperation can be utilized to boost the economic sustainability and elevate Pakistan's profile in the political arena of the region as well as on the international stage. In this context, the rising weight of 'economic statecraft' in the nation's foreign policy agenda resonated with the development of economic statecraft in the foreign policy of other developing states amidst a more competitive international surroundings (Majeed et al., 2023; Larik et al., 2023).

The study also showed that relations with USA continued to play an important role in Pakistan's strategic planning, even amidst the growing cooperation with China. Security cooperation, diplomatic engagement, regional stability issues continued to be prominent in Pakistan's foreign policy priorities, indicating a pragmatic and multidimensional foreign policy approach. The existing scholarship suggested that Pakistan's endeavour was to keep strategic relation with China with a pragmatic co-operation with the United States so as to reap the most economic and security benefits from the package. Overall, this balancing attitude illustrated a policy of hedging to pursue multi-alignment to escape the situation of overreliance on a major power (Ali et al. 2024, Iqbal et al. 2026). The findings thus reinforced the idea that Pakistani foreign policy was pragmatic instead of sticking to any geopolitical bloc and thus enables policy makers to respond flexibly to the changing international scenarios.

The results on strategic autonomy and foreign policy showed a greater focus on the aspect of balanced diplomacy and independent foreign policy decisions. This was in line with the current debates about developing and middle powers' strategic autonomy. Researchers of Pakistan's foreign policy highlighted the fact that the government wanted to be diplomatic, talking to various international players, yet not becoming unduly dependent and relinquishing decision-making Powers. This facilitated the Pakistani stance of developing national interests without becoming complete partners of any particular great power (Adil et al., 2024; Iqbal et al., 2026).

Strategic balancing behaviour was driven by two important considerations – the economic and the security. The analysis and conclusion revealed that economic development was one of the most determinative influences of Pakistan's foreign policy and engagements with the outside world. Previous studies emphasized that Pakistan was becoming more and more geoeconomic in its foreign policy, which showed a renewed interest in promoting trade, investing into foreign economies, modernizing the infrastructure and building geographical connectivity as means of national development. Economic interests were highly prevalent in the study results, backing the arguments that, in developing nations, the interest of economic growth is having more and more influence on the decision-making processes for diplomacy. The findings of this study showed a very high level of salience for economic considerations, which corroborated with the arguments that the economic growth objective is increasingly impacting the process of diplomatic decision making in the developing world (Jahanzaib & Ahmed, 2024; Majeed et al., 2023).

We also found a strong focus on national security aspects. Security themes were incorporated into the content of the project, given the geopolitical context of Pakistan, security problems in the region and the concerns regarding stability and defence preparedness of the country. The literature noted that the perception of regional threat and changing security environment were always driving forces in Pakistan's foreign policy. Some experts have suggested that Pakistan's strategic partnership with key actors could also be for economic and security reasons, so that Pakistan could tackle external threats while also promoting its development agenda. The observations, therefore, indicated that Pakistan's balancing policy constituted a complete scheme that encompassed the war-fare and economic/diplomatic aspects.

The implications of great-power rivalry indicated problems in maintaining/practicing balanced relations between the competing powers. Geopolitical pressure proved to be a significant hurdle as it meant external expectations and strategic rivalries put constraints on foreign policy options. Studies that highlighted the implications of US-China rivalry revealed that countries in key geopolitical zones tend to be carrying greater heavy weapon effects that encourage shifts towards either side position. This pressure undermined the policy of policy independence and strategic neutralism (Maqsood, 2024; Abubaker, 2024). The results reflected the fact that maintaining equilibrium in foreign policy in such a polarized and increasingly competitive international milieu is very complex.

Another challenge in the foreign policy of Pakistan was also "strategic uncertainty". This changing

geopolitical, technological and regional security landscape created conditions of instability and swift change. Research on the policy of balancing in Pakistan pointed out that uncertainty provoked policy maker to be flexible and adaptive in their policies to maintain diplomatic options and reduce strategic risks. Consequently, strategic hedging and diversified involvement were found as significant means of uncertainty management and foreign policy flexibilities (Ali et al., 2024; Iqbal et al., 2026). The results indicated that Pakistan was tackling these issues with 'pragmatic diplomacy' and engaging multiple international partners selectively.

6. Conclusion

The strategic balancing policy was a practical approach to feed the rising rivalry of the great powers around the globe, the study found. The evidence showed that Pakistan had a well-orchestrated foreign policy which focused on economic cooperation, security consideration and diplomacy at the same time to ensure national autonomy. Trade ties with China rapidly came to be the most important strategic and economic partnership, especially in the fields of infrastructure development and regional connectivity projects, while ties with the United States continued to play a key role in security cooperation and diplomatic engagements. The results revealed that Pakistan did not indulge in zero-sum politics based on national interest and adopted a pro-interested foreign policy. An effective decision-making mechanism was strategic autonomy, which guided Pakistan in controlling its response to the changing geopolitical dynamics. Economic development and the needs of national security were all the time important factors in shaping policy, and external constraints from great-power rivalry shaped strategic options. This was an adaptive balancing model that "maximized opportunities, and minimized vulnerabilities" in the context of a rapidly changing international system, a model with which Pakistan approached its problems.

7. Recommendations

Based on the study, Pakistan's economic diplomacy should be given a greater impetus to diversify its international relations with other powers to minimise dependence on any one particular power. Greater trade connections and foreign investment, as well as increased regional connectivity could strengthen economic resilience and geographic flexibility. Policymakers should also focus on strengthening capacity for foreign policy formulation in institutions for better coherence and strategic planning processes. A healthy dose of diplomacy with emerging powers and regional blocs can help Pakistan's bargaining position in global affairs. Moreover, Pakistan must be careful not to polarize against the Chinese and against the U.S. in its relations with them to prevent any unfavourable geopolitical development. Improving the internal economic stability, governance and technological capacity would further help in the effective functioning of autonomous decision making in foreign policy. This would also benefit the effectiveness of strategic balancing through better coordination of economic and security institutions.

8. Future Directions

Future studies should take comparative approach to the scope of analysis and compare the Pakistan balancing strategies with that of other middle powers like Turkey, Iran and Indonesia, to elaborate the comparative analysis of balancing strategies in multipolar system. There is also a potential for quantitative methods based on considerable amounts of data concerning trade flows, defense cooperation and diplomatic exchange between NATO countries and Ukraine, which may support the qualitative findings and deliver measurable results. Future research could also address the influence of new technology on strategic balancing action, along with digital geopolitics and artificial intelligence. A longitudinal study on strategic trajectory of Pakistan to understand continuity and change in behaviour would bring more insights. Primary data, including interviews with policy makers and diplomats, should be collected for further elaboration of policy making process. A thorough study of regional security issues, especially of South Asia and Indo Pacific, would also help to demystify the country's shifting strategic role in the international politics.

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Contribution of Authors

All the authors participated in the ideation, development, and final approval of the manuscript, making significant contributions to the work reported.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Ethical Approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments.

Data Availability

The datasets generated during and analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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