

PAKISTAN'S DILEMMA IN THE SINO-US STRATEGIC COMPETITION

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ABSTRACT

The US role as the unipolar power is on the decline because of its engagement in prolonged conflicts in Afghanistan & Iraq, economic meltdown since economic crisis of 2007-08, the slowdown of markets during covid-19, and the wars in Ukraine and Middle East. On the other side, Beijing is persistently continuing its focus on connectivity and economic prosperity through BRI project. The continued modernisation of the Chinese forces, introduction of Stealth fighter jets, drone technology as well as continued economic prosperity and its presence in vital strategic locations around the world posed a serious challenge for the US hegemony. This begun the new strategic competition between the two power centres for the supremacy. The battle for supremacy intensified with the wars in Ukraine and Middle East as both sides chose their allies for support. The US became a close security partner of Ukraine and Israel, whereas China provided military and economic support to the Russia, and called for the ceasefire in the Middle East. This increased conflict has divided the world into two alliances; one led by the US/west in support of Kiev and Tel Aviv, whereas other bloc is led by Beijing-Kremlin nexus in Ukraine, and Tehran in the Middle East. Despite being far from the centre of the conflict, Pakistan has remained a major state in the region due to its partnership with Beijing and the security alliance with US since the cold war. Islamabad's delicate balance throughout the

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years have benefitted it but could it continue to maintain the balance in this age of strategic competition. The paper attempts to explore Pakistan's policy options in the age of Sino-US strategic competition, as Pakistan remained in troubled waters due to its policy of delicate balance between Beijing and Washington.

Keywords: *Strategic Competition, Nexus, Cold War, Containment.*

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan being an important state of the South Asian region shares its borders with the People's Republic of China (PRC), India, Afghanistan and Iran as well as presence of Indian Ocean to its south situates it at an important strategic location. Pakistani state's position in a volatile region that host world's major issues including the Chinese rise and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), strategic competition with Washington as well as New Delhi nexus with Washington to contain China, the troubles in China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the Afghan crisis since the US withdrawal in 2021, and the Iranian nuclear issue.

The idea of the strategic competition began to take during the cold war years between Soviet Russia and the United States. US policy makers despite the Chinese booming economy in the 1990s suggested engaging China for the development of the economic growth of the world. The 9/11, 2001 events has put US focus on the security issues related to the rise of extremism and threats to its interests by the non-state actors and rogue states. The Bush administration's policy of Axis of Evil, which identified the Iraq, Iran, Libya as well as North Korea a real threat to global security and its dominancy around the globe.

The Obama administration's policy of Asia Pivot in 2011 revealed the US policy direction to set the Beijing a new threat to its interests around the globe. Later on, the president Trump administration further led this encirclement idea into a full-blown war with China extending it to the economic containment of China through trade barriers and imposition of tariffs on Chinese goods and companies.

The 2017 US National Security Strategy (NSS) revealed the China a threat to the US and this led towards the beginning of the strategic competition between two power centres. The trade war and the US perceptions of Beijing a dominating power in the Asia Pacific region as well as controlling the states through its debt trap policy under its Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) marks the age of new beginning of hostility between the two states.

Pakistan's policy makers feared that growing hostility, which will increase in the Trump administration after his coming to power in 2025, would further increase the challenges for Pakistan. In order to understand the complex nature of Pakistan's policy directions and its ties with both the powers, we have employed qualitative method a best way to understand the Pakistan's dilemma to maintain balance of power and why and how it evolved to the current situation. The data from the texts and observations from the different scholars on the subject has provided a great support to analyse the events surrounding the complex nature of Islamabad's ties and its policy directions set to maintain delicate balance with Beijing and Washington. Thematic analysis becomes an important tool to understand the patterns related to the study matter. The themes like the threat, competition and the hegemony dominated the international politics since the Chinese arrival on international stage as an economic power, who is flexing its muscles to control the global markets as well as increasing its military power through modernization of its armed forces and introducing the latest weapons. The US policy makers since the turn of the millennium have identified the China a potential threat and this theme dominated the US security policy since then which resulted in the formation of policies like Asia Pivot in 2011, Strategic Guidance Programme of 2012.

Mearsheimer's (2001) Offensive neorealism theory in which he believes that the states interact in an anarchic environment due to absence of higher authority becomes a key theory to understand the Pakistan's approach. Mearsheimer believes that states pay great

attention to the balance of power. In this complex security environment where Beijing and Washington are involved in a competition to extend and maintain their influence on global affairs respectively, Pakistan seeks to maintain a delicate balance in order to survive the global competition. China and the US are involved in maximising power in order to make balance of power difficult for other states. This maximisation of power by the states will lead towards a security dilemma for the weaker states like Pakistan who are dependent on the global players, and shared strategic ties with China and US since cold war years. The strategic competition between two of its security partners made policy makers in Islamabad puzzled due to the dilemma it faced in maintaining balance between two centres.

Despite Pakistan's success in maintenance of delicate balance with Beijing and Washington, so far it now creates issues for the Pakistan's economic development and pursuit of its strategic interests in the region. Pakistan's geo strategic importance further leads it towards a turmoil as the Trump's election as President in 2024 US Presidential elections will further intensify the US pressure and economic war with China and the states who have strategic ties with Beijing will further remain in crisis. Pakistan seems to be the perfect example due to its strategic nature of ties with Beijing and Washington and cannot afford to deteriorate ties with any of them. The delicate balance with both the powers is left with very few options for Islamabad to continue its economic stability and improvement in its defence as both powers are involved in economic and military defence of Pakistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Sino-US strategic competition is not a new phenomenon as the declining powers always tried to contain the emerging superpower, and the history is full of examples. During the 20th century, the German and Japanese have initiated War of global conflict not only to acquire the territories but also to impose their global hegemony

over the declining powers like Great Britain. At the end of the world war two in 1945, rather new forces emerged United States of America (USA) and Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) became the global powers. The race for the supremacy initiated the cold war between two power centres that resulted the breakup of Soviet Union. The US was the lone superpower since then until its power begun to diminish at the turn of the new millennium due to the economic crises as well the long and fruitless wars of aggression in Afghanistan 2001-2021, and the Covid-pandemic-2019 has further slowed down the economic progress. The rise of China at the turn of the century due to its economic development and non-interface in the affairs of other states has become a reason for success, which led towards a new emerging conflict between two powers vying for the top spot (Noonari, Raza & Magsi, 2020).

The US contest with China is a full scale, full-spectrum strategic great-power competition for wealth and power and influence, both within East Asia and globally. It features competing models for political governance and economic development, as well as competing views on the structure and rules of the international order (Heer, 2020). This led to the strategic competition for the supremacy in global affairs, particularly, with the initiation of Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. The BRI is a mega economic project to connect the economies of the Europe, Africa and Asia with the Chinese markets, and secure the global sea routes from the threats posed to the Chinese maritime trade through the development of Gwadar, Hambantota, Chittagong, and the investments in Chabhar in a recent strategic agreement with Iran in 2021. The US role as a major power in the region of Asia, particularly in East Asia has reduced since the end of the cold war years due to its focus towards the oil rich Middle East. This created a vacuum for Chinese and the economic crisis of 1997-98 and 2007-08 has further diverted East Asian nations towards Beijing due to lack of commitment of the Washington towards its own allies, and its own issues of national interest has bound it to its future commitments towards the region.

The discussion of cold war between Beijing and Washington has increased since the pandemic-2019 (Zhang & Xu, 2021) due to the President Trump's policies towards Beijing of launching a trade war, and calling the Coronavirus a Chinese virus. The US seemed to confront Beijing in regional and global politics. Its policies of the Asia Pivot strategy of 2011, US Strategic Guidance Programme of 2012 aimed to contain the Beijing's influence in the region (Noonari, 2017). China condemned the US continued support to the Taiwan and called it an interference in the domestic issues of Beijing. However, Washington remained a top weapons supplier to Taipei since the establishment of the relations with Taiwan under the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979. The US has sold over US\$ 50 billion weapons to Taiwan since 1950 including a deal of F-16 fighter jets in 2019. The 2022 US Congress Bill further enabled US administration to provide economic and military aid to Taiwan (Masters & Merrow, 2024). As Washington views Taiwan a partner in the Indo-Pacific region to contain the growing power of China. The recent US- Taiwan US\$ 2 billion arms deal has raised concerns in Beijing and it pledged to take necessary measures against the increased US cooperation with Taiwan.

The fresh wave of conflicts in Ukraine in April 2022, the Tel Aviv's Zionist regime's war against the people of Gaza since the October 2023, and the expansion of the conflict towards the Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Iran have posed a serious threat to the world. Washington's commitment to the Tel Aviv has raised a concern in Kremlin and Beijing due to Zionist desire of control over the Middle East region through the Greater Israel Dream. Ironically, Washington maintained a balance between Arabs and Israelis in the 1950s and the situation changed dramatically during the Kennedy administration when the US commitment towards the Zionist regime strengthened and this led towards becoming a major strategic partner in the region (Mearsheimer, 2007). Since then, the partnership has strengthened and the US emerged a major economic and military provider of the Tel Aviv. The US provides US\$ 3.3 billion in foreign military financing and US\$ 500 million in missile defence shields to Israel (US

Department of State, 2023). The Israeli lobbies in the west including US, works for the favourable policies towards the Zionist regime and promote its interests in the west through providing the funds to the senior politicians around the west. This has resulted the emboldened steps of the Netanyahu in the recent genocide in Gaza and expansion of war in the Middle East despite the UN Resolutions, and the world criticism. The US and western states continued to support the Israel under the self-defence slogan, and could not stop the massacre of over 40 thousand innocent civilians in Gaza. While the China not only condemned the actions of the Tel Aviv but also called for the cessation of hostilities.

Beijing over the years have strengthened its bilateral cooperation with the states of the region, as it remains one of the major oil buyer from the region. Its bilateral trade with Iran and Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) in 2023 stands at US\$ 300 billion (Webster, 2024) marking a significant increase in trade. The escalation of the conflict towards the region may destabilise the trade and bloc the trade routes of Persian Gulf and Red Sea. The Axis of Resistance forces including the *Houthis* have made the Red Sea route a dangerous route due to continued *Houthis* targeting Israeli/western ships in the Red Sea. Beijing's stance on the Gaza War and the Israeli invasion of the Lebanon has strengthened its voice in the Middle Eastern quarters and as a result, it became an emerging power, which benefitted the interests of China in the region.

On the other hand, China being a largest economic and defence partner of Russia seemed to have supported the Russian war machine and its economy in the midst of crisis by providing military equipment as well as much needed economic support to its sanctioned economy. The NATO's collective decision to engage Russia on Ukrainian front seemed to have prolonged the war in the region. US has provided Ukraine military assistance worth US\$ 64.1 billion since 2022 invasion (US Department of State, 2022), which included Patriot air defence systems, National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems (NASAMS), HAWK air defence systems, F-16

fighter jets and other equipment to engage in a war with Russia. On the other hand, China, North Korea and Iran remained a largest arms supplier to Russia and military personnel. As North Korea has sent its 12,000 troops to Russia, and drones from Iran as well as China with dual use goods to run the war machinery to fight the war against Ukraine (McCarthy, 2024).

The formation of the alliances has further intensified the competition as the US continued to strengthen the organizations like NATO, QUAD, Five Eyes, and viewed its strategic partnership with the India as a key partner in the Asia Pacific region to counter the China. Whereas Beijing looked to consolidate its position through economic cooperation with regional states under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and forging close cooperation with Russia, Pakistan and Iran, and promoting the organizations like Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS. The increased regional cooperation under the Chinese umbrella will provide an opportunity for the regional states to promote their own agendas and goals in the region.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Sino-US Strategic Competition

The Sino-US strategic competition is seen as a battle between two powers to dominate the international stage, and this may result in the beginning of the new cold war (Noonari, 2010). The world has already witnessed the Coronavirus (Covid-19) which has already slowed down the economic progress of the world and the shutdown of China during the crisis has reminded the world powers that how much they are dependent on the Chinese industry to meet their requirements.

The concept of the China threat emerged in the 1990s with the growth of the Chinese economy, and the Chinese investments in telecom and oil industry further increased the narrative of the Chinese threat (Liu, 2022). During the Trump administration, the threat was openly discussed and resulted in the imposition of trade war.

The Trump administration began the trade war with China in order to maintain balance of trade with China in 2018, when he imposed tariffs and trade barriers on Chinese goods as well as restrictions on access to the US high tech products (Huang, 2021). Even though Biden administration tried to normalise ties with the Beijing but they always considered Beijing a threat to its power and influence around the world. The US National Security Strategy of 2017 calls the China a threat to the US power. Although the Biden administration refrained from the Trade War but continued to pursue the containment of China policy through building alliances and engaging its security partners against the Chinese designs in the region.

The US considering Beijing a threat to its global supremacy formed certain policies like:

- 1) The US Asia Pivot strategy, which is unveiled in 2011 by the President Obama which aims to strengthen its ties with its traditional security partners such as Japan, South Korea, Philippines and Australia and reassure its allies about its commitment to bolster their defenses as well as counter Chinese role in the region particularly its economic clout. US in this strategy has incorporated India as a key state to deal with the China threat.
- 2) The US strategic Guidance Programme of 2012, which aims to shift the 60% of the US forces to the area of Indo Pacific in order to deal with the growing threat of China.
- 3) Forging of nexus of alliances aimed to counter China in the region, and New Delhi becomes one of the key states to contain China in the region due to its volatile nature of relations with Beijing.
- 4) Providing military assistance to the Taiwan under the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 to strengthen its defenses against the China in case of the conflict undermining the Beijing's One China Policy (Noonari, 2022).

- 5) Strengthening old partnerships with the Manila, Tokyo and Seoul in order to contain the growing influence of Beijing and bolster the defenses of its allies including Australia and Taiwan to assure its allies about US commitments to the region.
- 6) Framing a new economic organisation, which will counter the Chinese led Belt & Road initiative (BRI). Although the US president has supported the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in the past but due to hastily taken decision of President Trump to withdraw from the TPP in 2017 makes its allies uncertain about the Washington's commitments.
- 7) The governance model of both the power centers is viewed a major cause of the strategic competition as West led by US and European Union (EU) considers human rights issues and democratic values as a major difference between the two powers (Tran, 2021). This difference has led to the US interference in Chinese affairs like Hong Democracy Protests of 2019-20, and in the Xinjiang affairs, which Chinese viewed involvement into its internal affairs and called it a blatant violation of international laws.
- 8) Trump's trade war with China by imposing trade barriers on Chinese goods in US markets as well as calling the Corona Virus as the Chinese Virus showed the growing signs of anxiety in the Washington against the Chinese increased influence in the global politics.

Beijing, on the other hand, continued to counter the US strategy through the three major steps, includes: i) it maintained a non-hostile external environment to focus on domestic priorities; ii) reduce the dependency on external powers including US in order to deal with the future challenges as it did during the Trump administration which imposed trade barriers on China; and iii) increase the world's dependency on China in order to avoid the Chinese isolation (Hass, 2021). These counter strategies became visible during the Ukraine

War and the wars in the Middle East since 2023 where Beijing continued to operate its business with the states involved in the conflict such as Russia and Iran despite the US and western threats of sanctions.

Beijing continued to adopt non-confrontational attitude towards the US policies such as president Trump's hostile attitude towards Beijing was dealt with no hostile attitude in order to avoid the clash between two powers. President Trump's policy of confrontation with Beijing in the past administration is visible as he has called the Covid-19 Coronavirus as China Virus and regarded Beijing a threat to the US power in global affairs. This becomes a quite understanding to the Beijing that Washington in next Trump administration will further intensify the hostile attitude with China.

Many Chinese analysts believe that the US is declining power and it views Chinese rise as a reason of its decline (Hass, 2021), and the further decline and the challenges to its policies in the global politics will lead it to engage Beijing in a military conflict is inevitable. Washington's engagement in the South China Sea (SCS) under the banner of Freedom of Navigation and protecting its allies in the region. US military presence not only in East Asia but also in the Middle East through the US Central Command (CENTCOM) remains a source of concern as Middle East remains one of the major energy provider to the Chinese economic engine, and the continued wars and conflicts suits the US rather than Beijing in the region.

Beijing pursued the Dual Circulation strategy to deal with the US threat. Over the years threats from the western world led by US and its allies have grown over the Chinese government policies on issues like Beijing's response to the pandemic in 2019-20, which caused the loss of half million lives and billions of US \$ loss to the global economy and have slowed down the economic recovery in the years to come. The west on the other end continued to criticize the Chinese government policies on Xinjiang and Hong Kong, which led the unrest in the regions and has provided the support to the Hong Kong riots. The cold war mentality of containment is the driving force in

Washington's policy of achieving its interests and maintaining global hegemony with propaganda and the support to its allies.

Role of Pakistan

Pakistan seems to be in hot waters due to its geostrategic position and its traditional ties with the two powers. Islamabad remained a major security partner of Washington since the 1950s, and frontline state against terrorism, whereas it ties with Beijing remains brotherly since the 1960s, and continued to strengthen through economic and strategic cooperation in various fields. The geo strategic importance of Pakistan for China is very important (Shaikh & Chen, 2021) due to its location in the Indian Ocean and its development of Gwadar Port presents Beijing an easy and secure access to the Middle Eastern region, and provides vital opportunity to secure its trade routes in the future.

Pakistan needs to maintain a delicate balance between both the powers rather than involve in their competition. Pakistan should view it an opportunity to get benefit from both the powers and engage them rather than becoming a part of a single bloc. Pakistan has maintained a good policy of neutrality in the Ukraine War of 2022 despite the western pressure to condemn Russian aggression.

Pakistan proved to be a major economic partner of the China through its bond in the shape of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and its continued economic ventures with China provides stability to the economy of the state, and played a major role in restructuring the infrastructure, which Pakistan needed badly. On the other hand, Islamabad remained a key strategic partner of Washington in the region in dealing with Afghan Taliban threat and facilitated Trump administration of brokering the Doha Deal in 2020 and made sure the smooth withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan despite the Taliban's offensive launched against the US backed coalition government of Ashraf Ghani in 2021.

Pakistan security situation and continued terror attacks on the Chinese workers in Pakistan as well as terrorist activities remained a

major concern for its stability. This provides its neighbour Iran an opportunity to provide Beijing an alternate route of Chabhar port. Iran's Chabhar port remained a major competitor to the Gwadar port and a recent strategic agreement of US\$400 billion between Tehran and Beijing in 2021 is viewed as an effort of China to strengthen its role in the region. The Sino-Iran strategic partnership is viewed mostly as an alternative to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), due to Beijing's perception of Pakistan's security situation and continued political instability in the country a source of concern for them.

The continued wars in the Middle East remains a major hurdle to the Beijing's development plans, and the US sanctions on Iran's nuclear programme as well as its support to Axis of Resistance Forces and direct engagement with Tel Aviv are a source of concern for policy makers in Beijing. With the victory of the Donald Trump in Presidential Elections-2024, his policies towards the region and China will continue to affect the region. As he has withdrawn from the Nuclear Treaty with Iran in 2017, and engaged in a trade war with China and called Beijing responsible for the spread of the Coronavirus. In this situation, Islamabad remained on the front line again but its continued economic and political crisis (Younus, 2021), and its reliance on global financial institutions like World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) it seemed a major challenge for the administration in Pakistan to deal with the new US administration and maintain a credible balance between two power centres. Pakistan needs to continue to pursue alternate options such as its participation in regional organizations like Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), BRICS, and continue to extend its diplomatic ties with newly formed government in Dhaka after the removal of the Hasina Wajid from power through an students uprising against the dictatorial rule known as July Revolution in 2024.

CONCLUSION

The dilemma for the Pakistan remained a major threat to its foreign policy due to increased strategic competition between the two power centres. Sino-US struggle for supremacy is not only limited to the Asia Pacific region but also is stretched towards the Middle East and Africa as well as to the increased Chinese presence in American continents. The US web of alliances aims to contain the Beijing's rise as a potential threat to its role as superpower is viewed a new form of cold war between two states. Beijing on the other hand continued to work on connecting the economies of the states.

Pakistan's main source of concern remains the dilemma of choosing a side in case the relations became volatile, as it cannot afford to lose any of the state due to its historical linkages with both the powers. Islamabad needs to find an alternate way to maintain a delicate balance between two states with diplomatic channels and normalize the situation between them as it played its role in 1970s.

Pakistan's troubled neighbours has become a key challenge for the foreign policy of the state, and throughout the long years of resistance and struggle it faced the Indian aggression, the cold war politics and the war on terror and now the strategic competition where Pakistan remains a major battleground. On the one hand, Pakistan remained a major defence partner of the United States in its war on terror, and on the other hand, it viewed Beijing a major partner in its strengthening of defence through military cooperation and economic progress under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Despite the challenges, Islamabad needs to continue to maintain its delicate balance with both the powers in order to take advantage and develop its economy rather than engaging in external conflicts.

Pakistan can benefit from friendly ties with the Muslim brotherly states and its strengthened defence with the possession of latest weapons including nuclear weapons is the key of its success in the region. Despite the increased terror activities and economic and political turmoil in the country it still provides one of the safest places

for the Chinese investments due to its close bond with the China, and its strategic location in the region holds the key for Beijing's future in the Indian Ocean region. The presence of China at Gwadar holds a key of its alignment with its other friendly neighbours such as Sri Lanka and Bangladeshi ports of Hambantota and Chittagong as well as Bangladesh's new setup after the removal of Sheikh Hasina Wajid from power in 2024 brought Dhaka closer to Islamabad. In this scenario not only Islamabad can pursue its interests in gaining financial and economic benefits but also can strength its regional position through increased cooperation with regional states, and active participation in regional organizations like Shanghai Cooperation Organization which it hosted in October 2024, and BRICS. Pakistan's best policy is to continuation of maintenance of delicate balance between two power centres as long as it can hold on to the way.

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