

Power Dynamics in Indian Ocean: US Indo-Pacific Strategic Report and Prospects for Pakistan's National Security

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Abstract

If there is anything contemporary world reflecting with full intensity, it's the never-ending, extreme relevance of realism and realpolitik. However, around the shores of Indian Ocean, in South Asia, the picture being painted requires different brushes than those present in balance of power logic. This paper argues that instead of going towards balancing, band wagoning or buck-passing, smaller states of South Asia, in our case Pakistan, needs to adopt the strategy of Hedging. The rationale for this is present in contemporary geopolitical landscape of the region and the rising surge of non-traditional security threats for Pakistan. While using qualitative research methodology and delving deep into already present literature, this paper articulates that instead of opting for extreme poles, Pakistan needs to maneuver through the uncertain political order focusing upon both strategies of conflict and cooperation simultaneously.

Keywords: Hedging, National Security, Balance of Power, Power Dynamics, Indian Ocean, Indo-Pacific Strategic Report, Non-Traditional Security threats.

INTRODUCTION

Initially, after independence, the South Asian States were primarily concerned about their territorial boundaries, however, the increasing global trade, importance of sea routes, surge in non-traditional security threats, and the recent centrality of Indian and Pacific Ocean in policies of major powers has manifolded the states' interest in maritime power, for they need water bodies for blue economy, muscle flexing, and power acquisition. Thus, the Indian Ocean now in the South Asian political landscape is more significant than ever. Indian Ocean is the third largest ocean in the world and covers up to the 20% of earth's water surface. The coordinate of Indian Ocean lies at 20 00° S, and

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80 00° E (The world fact book, 2024). Indian Ocean Region along the Indian Ocean is home to 1/3rd of the world's population and large oil and gas reserves (Karasik, 2022). The region contains 90% of the world's diamonds, 60% of the world's uranium, and 40% of the world's gold (Hussain, 1970). Moreover, the region is geo-strategically very significant considering that the highly important choke points of the world like Strait of Malacca, Strait of Hormuz, Bab ul Mandeb, Mozambique Channel, 6 Degree Channel, 10 Degree Channel, Sunda Strait, and Lombok Strait, are part of it. The importance of these trade routes can be grasped by the fact that 90% of Indian foreign trade, and 66% of world's oil trade is carried out through these routes. Given the geo-strategic, political, and geo-economic significance of the region, power dynamics are highly complex (Fatima and Jamshed, 2015).



Figure: Indian Ocean Sea Lanes of Communications and Choke Points

The major actors include the United States, India, and the emerging role of China through her Belt and Road Initiative project. As the global political landscape is changing, the shifts in state's policies and interests are getting blatant. Especially, to counter the Chinese presence, the US policies are changing, fostering more collaboration with her allies like India meanwhile alienating Pakistan. Moreover, the near regional actors like Japan and Australia are also aligning with India and the United States, investing in infrastructure projects to contain increasing influence of China in the region. This has created a number of security concerns for Pakistan given the exclusive Indian directed nature of its foreign policy and its historical dependence on the United States for its foreign

policy. Moreover, the transforming nature of security threats owing to the climate change and sea level rise is creating a sterner outlook for the national security of Pakistan. To counter these threats, Pakistan is faced with a range of policy choices ranging from balancing to buck-passing and everything in between.

This paper analyzes policy choices present for Pakistan according to the balance of power logic. While assessing the relevancy of balancing, band wagoning, and buck-passing for Pakistan in contemporary geo-political landscape, this paper argues that the contemporary transforming power dynamics in the region along with altering security discourse dictates the opting of Hedging as a sustainable policy choice for Pakistan to secure its national security interests. The research paper is deductive in nature with qualitative research methodology and is comprised of three parts. The first part discusses the changing power dynamics in the region and their consequences for the national security of Pakistan. The second part evaluates the anticipated policy choices for Pakistan's national security policy. The final segment articulates the reasons for considering hedging a sustainable policy choice for Pakistan.

I

CHANGING POWER DYNAMICS AND PAKISTAN'S NATIONAL SECURITY

The Indian Ocean has become a hub of geopolitical, geo-economic, and geo-strategic interactions where different actors seem to grapple as much resources as they can to ensure their survival and security. The competition and power dynamics in the region can be best grasped by identifying the geo-strategic presence of each actor. First, China by its Belt and Road Initiative maneuvers by influencing through her presence in ports of different countries. China has port on lease at Hambantota in Sri Lanka, in Maldives, the islands of Feydou and Finolhu are at lease, in Bangladesh China has infrastructure project at Chittagong port, while in Pakistan, Gwadar port and in Myanmar, Swati port is under the strategic influence of China. Thus, it forms a string of pearls surrounding the India in Indian Ocean (Megal and Mirza, 2022).



Figure: China One Belt One Road, Source: Eurasia Review.

To counter China, India has allies with Iran and pipelines at Chabahar port of Iran. The territories like Andaman Islands, Nicobar Islands, and Laccadive, along with the Indian sovereignty over 6th and 10th degree channel has helped India in rising as a strategic player to counter Chinese Influence. Furthermore, India has infrastructure projects in Seychelles, along with air facilities in Mauritius islands of Agalega. In recent years, India has increased its investments in both island countries and even support Mauritius claim of Diego Garcia against US. As for the US, she has its bases at Diego Garcia which was taken at lease from UK. How much the territory is geo strategically important is evident from its position, it is 1600nm away from Strait of Malacca, from Sri Lanka it is 925nm, from India 970nm, while from Strait of Hormuz it is at 2200 nm. The bases and presence of these powers in different Sea lanes of communication does not only allow passage and refueling, rather the actors can use the Exclusive Economic Zones, at the same time using the opportunity of surveillance and reconnaissance (Baruah, 2021).

In addition to that, the United States exercises its influence in Indian Ocean through her allies of Gulf Region, France, UK, and India. With India, US has LEMOA (Logistics exchange Memorandum Agreement), which allows both states to use each other facilities for refueling and replenishment. The agreement covers joint exercise, port calls, humanitarian training, and disaster relief. Both States along with other countries conducted MILAN military exercises in Andaman and Nicobar. Then

there are MALABAR Exercises including US, Japan, and India, and are conducted in Bay of Bengal. The presence of QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) which includes US, India, Australia, and Japan, has strengthened US-India ties and partnership with other Indo-pacific states (Thakker, 2019). The United States also enjoys significant influence in Singapore, which is a critical threat to China, considering the influence the United States can exercise on Strait of Malacca, even issuing a blockade. In that case, Pakistan's Gwadar port and Chabahar port of Iran becomes significant to continue the communication lines through Arabian Sea and China Sea.

The most significant strategy, however, by which the United States exercise her influence in Indian Ocean is her Indo-Pacific Strategy. The recent Indo-Pacific Strategic report (IPSR) of 2019 has clearly shown how the US eagles tend to counter the Chinese Dragon (Bulard, 2021). The Indo-Pacific Region in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy is defined as starting from western shores of America to the western shores of India, which includes US states of Washington, Oregon, Carolina, Hawaii, Alaska, and territories like Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, American Samoa and Wake islands, then it incorporates states like South Korea, Japan, Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Laos, Brunei, Bangladesh, India, Australia and New Zealand. The IPSR clearly adopts an ethnocentric strategic version of binaries, of 'us and the others,' in which states like China, Russia and North Korea and their allies being revisionist and revitalized malign actors falls in the category of 'others.' On the other hand, for the US allies, IPSR proposes respect for sovereignty and independence, peaceful resolution of disputes, free, fair and reciprocal trade based on open investment, transparency and connectivity, and adherence to international rules and norms (The Indo-Pacific Strategic Report, 2019). This strategic stance based upon binaries alienates Pakistan which is a serious challenge to Pakistan's national security given her historical dependence on the United States.

The foreign policy of Pakistan, throughout its history, has been greatly influenced by the US interests and geo-political considerations (Hussain, 2023). Initially, as a newborn state along with disputed borders and a hostile neighbor, Pakistan required aligning herself with a major power to secure her survival and interests. That requirement got materialized by joining the American bloc during cold war, thus setting the base for Pakistan's future foreign policy. In the later years, again, Pakistan being a periphery state kept its policies in alignment with its center that is the United States. The Soviet-Afghanistan war and later years including war on terror reflected Pakistan's dependence upon the United States (Hussain, 2023). However, the alienation of Pakistan by US Indo-Pacific Strategy

report in an effort to counter China has not only crippled policy choices for Pakistan but can also result in rise of potential security threats. This is also because IPSR includes strong cooperation between the United States- on whom Pakistan rely on and India- which has historically served as the primary threat to national security of Pakistan, thus creating a serious dilemma.

The concerns to Pakistan's national security, in this regard, can be of both traditional and non-traditional nature. When it comes to territorial integrity and national independence, values implicit in traditional security, Pakistan can be threatened by India's increasing assertiveness in disputed regions of Kashmir and Sir Creek. Moreover, the US waning interest has been coupled with the lack of peace and stability in Afghanistan which has resulted in problems like terrorism, threatening the sovereignty of Pakistan (Hussain, 2023). On the non-traditional side, Pakistan is rampant with threats related to economic development and political instability. Owing to climate change there are other human security related threats like food security, environmental security, energy security, and social security, all of which can be exacerbated due to stagnant foreign policy. An important thing to remember is that the non-traditional security threats demand transnational cooperation and collaboration (Zulqarnain, and Dure Shehwar, 2024). However, given the current geo-political situation in the region, there is hardly any potential for it. This critical situation makes it necessary to deeply analyze the available policy choices for Pakistan.

II

POLICY CHOICES FOR PAKISTAN

To counter the security challenges discussed above, especially the traditional ones, the Balance of Power logic provides a state with three policy choices: first, balancing, second, band-wagoning, and third buck-passing (Walt, 2010). Balancing refers to the strategy by the adaptation of which a state takes it her own responsibility to deter the potential rival while maintaining contemporary balance of power. Balancing can be done by three ways; first, a state can send strong diplomatic signals to offender clearly indicating the security threshold the crossing of which can result in severe consequences like of an all-out war. Second, it can involve creating alliances with other threatened powers to balance against the threatening state, the strategy known as 'external balancing.' This can divide the burden among states to counter the rising threat. However, maintaining these alliances and ensuring their efficiency is difficult given the selfish and conflicting behavior of states. Finally, balancing can involve 'internal balancing' that is devoting significant attention to acquiring weapons

and tools ensuring defense and balance of power, thus involving huge defense spending (Mearsheimer, 2001).

The second policy choice of Band wagoning involves making alliances with major opponent powers to avoid their wrath and hope for the distribution of resources they get hands on. It is primarily the policy choice for weak states to secure themselves from threatening powers. The essence of band wagoning can be clearly understood by the Thucydides sketch that “strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must (Mearsheimer, 2001).” The third strategy according to the balance of power logic includes Buck-passing which is the opposite of balancing in the sense that it involves shifting the burden of countering the adversary to another state. The buck-passer adopts relatively good diplomatic relations with the adversary to avoid provoking it while allowing a slight balancing in the case of buck-catcher to divert the direct confrontation with adversary to another state thus relieving itself from the burden of facing the rival (Mearsheimer, 2001). Evaluating the relevance of these policy choices for Pakistan gives a quite concerned situation.

When it comes to internal balancing, Pakistan lacks resources both economic and political to increase its defense spending. Moreover, the contemporary trade-off between environmental security challenges, ethnic conflicts, social security and defense spending in the context of Pakistan makes acquisition of military capabilities a less expedient policy choice. And for the external balancing, the poor economic development, political instability, and internal conflicts makes Pakistan a dull choice. As far as Band wagoning is concerned, the problem lies in the geo-political landscape. Unlike the cold war, the geo-political landscape of contemporary times is far more complex and sophisticated. The US-China rivalry though has become part of every academic discussion and policy debate, given the economic collaboration between both states, the option for band-wagoning is hardly clear. On the other hand, economic, military, and political cooperation of US and India has not stopped India from opposing US regarding Diego Garcia and recent Ukraine crises. China too regardless of her territorial disputes with India, is the second largest trade partner of India (US emerges as India’s biggest trading partner, 2023). Even in this vague political landscape, if Pakistan choose China, the United States will impose sanctions on her and if the option of band wagoning with the United States is chosen, China already has problems with CPEC, regarding corruption and poor management coupled with Pakistan’s concerns over asymmetric dependence (Pakistan mulling over reconsidering CPEC, 2018). Furthermore, the United States and China respectively, will oppose the Pakistan's claim of Kashmir in United Nation (Siddiqi, 2022).

Apart from balancing and band wagoning, the policy option of Buck-passing is usually considered by states which again does not appear that much rational in Pakistan's context. First, because given the geographical proximity between India and Pakistan the adaptation of strategy of buck-passing will not divert direct confrontation between both states. Second, the increasing Indo-US cooperation and China's primary interest vested in her economic development and her continued cooperation with India despite rivalries makes it difficult to buck-pass the threat. Third, the strategic partnerships of India in the region and her role as an emerging power hardly leaves a space for any potential buck-catcher. Apart from the inability of these policy options to counter traditional threats of Pakistan, they are also inexpedient given that they result in neglect of non-traditional security threats. This makes us wonder that what can be the sustainable policy option for Pakistan. The answer, according to many scholars, is Hedging.

III

HEDGING- A SUSTAINABLE POLICY OPTION

Hedging, as Farhan Siddiqi (2022) explains, is the strategy of maximizing gains and reducing risk by both cooperation and conflict. By adopting this strategy, states do not make their alliances, or motives clear rather multiple power are considered allies, with the option of maneuvering according to challenges, situation, and apparent gains. Major powers adopt hedging to sustain their sphere of influence while at the same time prohibiting expansion by rivals without provoking it for offence (Siddiqi and Mirza, 2023). The strategy can also be adopted by second-tier states or periphery states uncertain of rising powers. In an international system with unipolar order, second tier states go for strategic hedging when the established power of the most prevalent actor is being decentralized by the rising power. In that case, states adopt hedging to avoid provocation of offence while at the same time utilizing opportunities for cooperation and stability (Tessman, 2012). The rationale for this strategy thus, is primarily present in the structure of the international system. The option of balancing, band wagoning, or buck-passing are used when opponents are clear. However, if the situation is vague, and states do not know where to associate their cooperations and conflict, they go for hedging.

The policy can be seen prevalent in East Asia where Southeast Asian states uncertain of Beijing and Washington's policies maneuver through both powers by adopting strategic hedging (Kuik, 2021). Similarly, Pakistan, given its strategic interest associated with both the United States and China, needs to adopt this strategy. Moreover, the presence of cooperation lines between the United States,

China, and India makes alternative strategies like balancing, band wagoning, and buck-passing a difficult choice. Instead of focusing on binaries with extreme polarization, Pakistan needs to strategically maneuver through complex political landscape while ensuring its survival and development. In addition, in Pakistan's case, non-traditional threats like economic instability and climate change are more significant in contemporary times. In the Southern region of Pakistan, climate change and sea level rise are generating severe economic and social crises threatening the survival of indigenous communities. These crises possess significant potential to get transformed to economic instability, ethnic conflicts, and political insecurity at provincial and national level. The addressing of these threats requires broader policy choices, transnational cooperation, and a vast horizon for pursuing national interests which can be gained by adopting Hedging because policy options like Band-wagoning and balancing can militarize the region even more, resulting in disregard for crucial non-traditional security threats and human security.

CONCLUSION

The contemporary national security of Pakistan is facing complex challenges and demands different sustainable approaches and foreign policy choices. While the global power dynamics are transforming, the situation in the Indian Ocean Region is getting more complex given the presence of multiple powers and their interests. The power play between the United States, China, and India involving all tools of cooperation, competition, and conflict is making political climate uncertain and vague removing policy choices based on polarization. This geo-political context along with domestic instability and economic insecurity leaves Pakistan unable to go for policy options like balancing, band wagoning, and buck-passing. On the other hand, these constraints make Hedging a sustainable option for Pakistan with the essence of simultaneous cooperation and conflict. The non-traditional security threats in the form of climate change, sea level rise, and resultant social, economic, and political insecurity also makes Hedging a radiant and feasible option for Pakistan since it offers opportunities for trans-border cooperation and collaboration.

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