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HOW BACK-CHANNEL DIPLOMACY SHAPES THE TRIANGULAR RELATIONS OF USA-CHINA AND PAKISTAN

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Abstract
This paper examines the unseen mechanisms of statecraft employed by Pakistan to navigate the intensifying geopolitical rivalry between the United States and the People's Republic of China from 2020 to 2025. Moving beyond conventional analysis of public diplomacy and interstate friction, this research posits that ***strategic stability was primarily achieved through sub-rosa (non-public) communication channels and tacit agreements****, which consistently overruled declared foreign policy positions. Following the 2021 U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan operationalized a* ***'dual-utility' stabilization effort****, simultaneously maintaining Washington's vital security access while providing Beijing sovereign guarantees for its $62 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) investment. The subsequent years (2022–2024) saw increasing systemic stress including financial constraints, CPEC implementation hurdles, and renewed domestic instability which were managed not via multilateral frameworks but through* ***ad hoc, bespoke financial and security assurances*** *negotiated via hidden nodes within the IMF, Chinese lending institutions, and military-to-military contacts. The transactional nature of this governance was acutely demonstrated in 2025: a minor, undeclared U.S.-China tariff accommodation yielded economic relief, immediately preceding the regional crisis triggered by India's "Operation Sindoor" in May. The unprecedented cessation of hostilities within 96 hours is analyzed as the result of* ***simultaneous, targeted pressure*** *applied through high-level backchannels in both Washington and Beijing. The findings conclude that Pakistan's short-term political solvency was secured by prioritizing* ***crisis postponement*** *and leveraging great-power dependence. Rather than achieving genuine strategic autonomy, the state remained locked in a high-stakes, perpetual equilibrium, forced to dynamically adjust its posture based on the leverage afforded by the preferred, immediate backchannel of the day.*

INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Paradox of Loud Crises and Quiet Endings

Between 2020 and 2025, anyone casually following events involving the United States, China, and Pakistan could be forgiven for thinking the three were tumbling from one crisis straight into another. Headlines arrived in a steady drumbeat: new U.S. sanctions on Chinese firms working in Pakistan, angry statements from Beijing accusing Washington of sabotaging the Belt and Road Initiative, and Islamabad fending off IMF demands or FATF scrutiny while trading barbs with New Delhi. Seen from afar, the triangle looked brittle always stressed, always edging toward something worse. Yet the dramatic implosion many analysts confidently predicted never happened. CPEC took hits security scares, financing delays, political noise but held together. The 2021 American withdrawal from Afghanistan, often described beforehand as a guaranteed catastrophe, unfolded without the mass-scale violence observers feared. Even the brief but alarming India–Pakistan spike in May 2025 fizzled out in less than a week. And almost counterintuitively, Pakistan's exports to the United States, especially textiles, surged at a time when the U.S.–China economic friction was supposedly intensifying.

The disconnect is striking: public theatrics on one side, unexpectedly calm resolutions on the other. This is the puzzle at the center of the research. The real action was never in televised statements or official communiqués. It happened quietly through conversations among intelligence chiefs, senior officers, special envoys, and intermediaries moving between Doha, Dubai, Riyadh, Rawalpindi, and the occasional secure link to Tampa. These discreet channels carried the weight of crisis management.

1.2 Pakistan as the Uneasy Pivot

Pakistan has long liked to call itself a "pivotal state," but during these years the label was as uncomfortable as it was accurate. Islamabad found itself squeezed between the clashing expectations of Washington and Beijing. The United States pushed for cooperation on its Afghanistan exit, tighter control over anti-India militant outfits, and caution around sensitive Chinese technologies. China demanded unwavering security for CPEC personnel and sites, reliable repayment guarantees, and political loyalty as strategic competition sharpened.

Despite predictions that Pakistan would eventually be forced to choose sides, Islamabad resisted that binary. Instead, it walked a narrow, carefully calibrated tightrope keeping separate, compartmentalized channels open with both major powers. That didn't erase distrust, but it kept crises from spiraling into blows. In the end, Pakistan found just enough maneuvering room to survive, even as the walls around it narrowed.

1.3 Clarifying the Core Concepts

Backdoor diplomacy or backchannel, or quiet diplomacy refers to the informal conversations governments would rather leave off the record. From 2020 to 2025, these exchanges tended to share a few consistent traits:

- **Deniability:** Officials could dismiss or downplay the talks if needed.
- **Speed:** Decisions moved through small groups, avoiding bureaucratic traffic jams.
- **Flexibility:** Understandings were often oral, provisional, or buried in confidential notes.
- **Elite Control:** Intelligence agencies, senior military officers, and handpicked envoys not diplomats handled the workload.
- **Outside Facilitation:** Countries like Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia frequently hosted or smoothed these interactions.

Hedging, in this study, describes Pakistan's effort to avoid becoming overly dependent on either the U.S. or China while steering clear of direct confrontation with both. Unlike states that hedge through broad economic diversification, Pakistan's approach leaned heavily on its security establishment and on quiet, high-trust networks rather than visible, public diplomacy.

1.4 Research Questions

This project revolves around one overarching question and several more focused ones.

Primary Question

To what extent did backdoor diplomacy genuinely stabilize the U.S.–China–Pakistan relationship between 2020 and 2025, rather than simply delaying inevitable conflicts?

Secondary Questions

- How did Pakistan keep parallel channels with both Washington and Beijing without surrendering its own autonomy?

- Why were short-term crises resolved swiftly while deeper structural tensions remained?
- Which specific tools, personal ties, habits of intelligence sharing, trusted third-country venues, made rapid de-escalation possible?
- What does the rise of this "dark-pool diplomacy" mean for regional politics and for international relations scholarship?

1.5 Thesis Statement

From 2020 to 2025, backdoor diplomacy acted as a pressure-release valve within the U.S.-China-Pakistan triangle. Quiet channels helped keep the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan orderly, prevented CPEC from collapsing, unexpectedly boosted Pakistan's exports in 2025, and halted the May 2025 India-Pakistan flare-up before it could snowball. These stabilizing outcomes were possible because Pakistan pursued a disciplined hedging strategy and because both Washington and Beijing understood that a breakdown would undermine their own interests.

But these successes were fragile. They eased stress without resolving underlying conflicts: U.S. anxieties about China's rise, Beijing's insistence on defending BRI, Pakistan's struggle for autonomy, and India's ever-present shadow. Backdoor diplomacy soothed daily tensions but never touched the fault lines beneath them.

1.6 Theoretical Framework

Three strands of theory help explain this period:

- **Realist Hedging Theory**

Clarifies why Pakistan avoided choosing sides and instead maintained selective cooperation with each major power.

- **Bureaucratic Politics and the Security Dilemma**

Explains why militaries and intelligence agencies, linked by professional norms and insulated communication lines, often manage crises more smoothly than traditional diplomatic channels.

- **Constructivist Approaches to Secrecy**

Show that secrecy isn't just a tool, it shapes relationships. Shared hidden practices create a peculiar kind of trust among elites who may publicly criticize one another.

Together, these frameworks complement one another: realism outlines the structural incentives, bureaucratic politics explains how actors maneuver within them, and constructivism shows how secrecy becomes its own form of political capital.

1.7 Why 2020–2025 Stands Apart

Several shifts made these years especially reliant on private, off-stage diplomacy:

- The U.S. exit from Afghanistan removed the last major public rationale tying Washington and Islamabad together.
- Intensifying U.S. China rivalry made open trilateral cooperation politically impossible.
- COVID-19 shut down traditional diplomacy and pushed key interactions into virtual or discreet formats.
- CPEC's constant pressure, security threats, financing strains, and domestic sensitivity generated a stream of issues that officials preferred to handle quietly.

The result was a period in which the most consequential decisions were made out of sight, and where the quiet conversations mattered far more than the public ones.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The triangular relationship linking the United States, China, and Pakistan from 2020 to 2025 generated a puzzle that much of the existing scholarship never quite managed to explain. Again and again, analysts expected a breaking point, an irrevocable rift, a forced alignment, and a strategic collapse. And yet, each moment of apparent crisis was followed by an oddly quiet reset. Most academic work remained focused on what governments said out loud: the official statements, the sanctions, the diplomatic quarrels. What slipped through the cracks was where the real diplomacy occurred inside encrypted chats, on secure video links, or behind the thick walls of Doha safe houses and Abu Dhabi palaces. This chapter surveys the major scholarly debates, identifies what they collectively overlook, and builds a theoretical framework suited to understanding both the resilience and the brittleness of a system held together largely by backdoor channels.

U.S.–Pakistan Literature: Brilliant on Public Rupture, Quiet on Private Repair

Work on U.S.–Pakistan relations is still shaped by the post-9/11 era, with its deep mistrust and precarious cooperation. The major interpreters Christine Fair, Daniel Markey, Husain Haqqani, and Aparna Pande advance a shared argument: Washington and Islamabad want fundamentally different things. The United States prioritizes counterterrorism and stability in Afghanistan; Pakistan prioritizes leverage over the Taliban and a strategic buffer against India. These studies excel at explaining moments of high drama: the Raymond Davis shooting, the Salala killings, Trump's 2018 aid suspension, or the frosty aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal.

What they largely cannot account for are the quiet rebounds that dominated 2020–2025: how the U.S. exit from Afghanistan proceeded with no American combat deaths despite no public pact; how Washington repeatedly refrained from blocking Chinese loan rollovers during Pakistan's IMF negotiations; or how American officers helped shut down the May 2025 Kashmir crisis before it spread. These episodes challenge the prevailing image of a chronically collapsing partnership.

China–Pakistan Literature: Deep Partnership, Quiet Triangularity

The China–Pakistan relationship has been better studied in its own right. Andrew Small's The China–Pakistan Axis remains the foundational English-language account, charting the evolution from a primarily military partnership to a broad economic–strategic one anchored in CPEC. Chinese scholars write about the relationship in intimate, sometimes familial terms, but also catalog persistent frustrations: stalled projects, attacks on engineers and technicians, perpetual renegotiations of debt.

What rarely appears in this body of work is the American dimension. Why, despite intensifying U.S.–China rivalry, did Washington repeatedly refrain from obstructing Beijing's economic rescue efforts in Pakistan? Small hints at Islamabad's skill in keeping both great powers engaged, but the underlying mechanisms, especially the covert ones, remain unexamined. The missing puzzle piece is the quiet coordination that often kept the triangle from snapping.

U.S.–China Rivalry Scholarship: Pakistan as a Footnote, Not a Strategic Actor

Studies of U.S.–China strategic competition tend to treat Pakistan as peripheral a potential naval outpost, a site of dual-use construction, or an arena where China expands influence at America's expense. Analysts like Doshi, Mastro, Tellis, and Hass argue that Beijing's growing footprint in South Asia puts Pakistan on a path toward inevitable alignment with China. The puzzle is that this never actually happened. Islamabad continued courting both capitals, extracting concessions, and refusing the binary choice most scholarship assumed it would eventually have to make.

This is usually dismissed as a temporary aberration when in fact it was a deliberate, structured policy requiring theoretical explanation.

India–Pakistan Crisis Management Literature: Close, but Not Quite Enough

The closest existing analogue comes from the rich literature on India–Pakistan crisis dynamics. Scholars such as Moeed Yusuf, Dalton and Perkovich, and Christopher Clary have tracked how U.S. mediation has repeatedly prevented escalation since the Kargil era. Yusuf's concept of "mediated crisis management," emphasizing real-time intelligence sharing and shrinking decision windows, captures important dynamics.

But the 2020–2025 environment stretched that framework beyond its limits. In the May 2025 crisis, the United States and China both intervened within hours and through their own private military–intelligence channels without formally coordinating with each other. That dual intervention, invisible to the public and largely unknown to scholars, falls outside the traditional model of a single, visible mediator.

Backdoor Diplomacy: The Literature That Doesn't Yet Exist

Surprisingly little research directly analyzes the kind of quiet diplomacy that dominated these five years. Historical works such as Steve Coll's Directorate S or Calder Walton's studies of

Cold War secret diplomacy are invaluable but stop short of the present. Accounts of the Qatar-led U.S.–Taliban negotiations touch the edges of these dynamics, but Pakistan's simultaneous management of U.S., Chinese, and Taliban expectations has received only fleeting attention. Chinese writings on "quiet diplomacy" are growing but remain vague and sanitized; details of MSS–ISI cooperation are conspicuously absent from public sources.

The result is a scholarly landscape that explains public breakdowns with great confidence but is consistently blindsided by private recoveries.

A Composite Framework: Three Traditions, One Explanatory Model

To address this gap, the study brings together three theoretical traditions that, when combined, illuminate the otherwise hidden architecture of the 2020–2025 order.

1. Realist Hedging Theory

Developed largely for Southeast Asian contexts, hedging explains how states avoid choosing sides by selectively cooperating with competing powers. Kuik's typology economic pragmatism, limited bandwagoning, fallback options, and ambiguous signals maps well onto Pakistan's behavior. Yet Pakistan's approach was unusual. It was almost entirely run through security institutions and deeply compartmentalized, with separate backchannels handling identical issues with Washington and Beijing. The study therefore introduces a refined idea: **"compartmentalized backchannel hedging."** It describes a strategy in which a state maintains distinct, insulated conversations with each patron to prevent either from fully deciphering the other's involvement.

2. Bureaucratic Politics and Security-Dilemma Logic

Allison's organizational-process model and Jervis's work on misperception help explain why militaries and intelligence services consistently outpaced diplomats. Pakistan's army and ISI held institutional memory, maintained long-standing ties with CIA, MSS, CENTCOM, and the PLA, and enjoyed domestic dominance that allowed them to make credible commitments. These channels operated with speed, technical precision, and shared professional norms, enabling rapid crisis management when formal diplomacy could not keep up.

3. The Practice Turn and the Politics of Secrecy

Recent practice-oriented scholarship shows how secrecy itself builds relationships. Adler-Nissen, Pouliot, and Sending argue that private coordination generates a form of trust distinct from public diplomacy. This helps explain how U.S. and Pakistani officials publicly criticized each other while privately exchanging satellite imagery, or how Chinese and Pakistani agencies cooperated intensely on security matters despite constant frustrations. Secrecy created an alternative diplomatic arena, an off-stage world with its own rules and expectations.

What This Combination Reveals

Viewed together, these lenses explain a pattern that otherwise looks contradictory. Hedging created the incentives; security agencies supplied the operational machinery; secrecy built the minimal trust needed to keep the machinery running. None of this resolved the underlying conflicts, U.S. containment instincts, China's determination to protect BRI, Pakistan's quest for autonomy, or the perpetual India factor. But it did produce a series of temporary stabilizations that kept any single crisis from exploding the triangle.

Contributions of This Study

This research advances four main contributions:

1. **An empirical examination of backchannel-heavy hedging in a nuclearized environment,** a combination rarely analyzed in the literature.

2. **Evidence that backdoor diplomacy can regularly outperform public diplomacy**, even between major powers openly at odds.

3. **Documentation of a dual-mediator model** in India Pakistan crisis management, in which the United States and China both intervene through separate covert channels.

4. **A new theoretical framework compartmentalized backchannel** hedging that can be applied to other cases of middle-power

navigation amid great-power rivalry.

Looking Ahead

The chapters that follow put this framework to the test across four pivotal episodes: the endgame of the Afghanistan withdrawal in 2021, the repeated resuscitations of CPEC, the largely invisible U.S.–China tariff détente of 2025, and the extraordinary de-escalation of the May 2025 Kashmir crisis. Only by tracing the hidden circuitry beneath official narratives can we explain how this volatile triangle repeatedly stepped back from the brink during a period when nearly every visible indicator signaled imminent danger.

The 2021 U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan and Pakistan's Initial Hedging

The American withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 is often remembered as a strategic embarrassment for Washington and an unquestioned victory for the Taliban. What is almost entirely missing from mainstream accounts, however, is how unusually smooth the operation was when judged by the narrow metrics of military withdrawal. After 15 February 2020, not a single U.S. soldier was killed in combat. In just two weeks, American forces evacuated 124,000 people, an almost unprecedented logistical feat and no Taliban or Haqqani fighters managed to breach the airport perimeter despite their heavy presence around Kabul. That outcome was not the natural consequence of the public Doha Agreement, nor was it luck. It rested on a dense network of quiet, overlapping arrangements that Pakistan managed behind the scenes, designed to address Washington's immediate security imperatives while simultaneously calming Beijing's concerns about the broader regional spillover and the vulnerability of CPEC's western routes.

3.1 A Tight Corner for All Sides

By early 2021, the new Biden administration walked into a situation that left little room for improvisation. Three red lines were non-negotiable:

1. A final withdrawal with zero American casualties.
2. Evacuation of U.S. nationals and as many Afghan partners as possible. No devastating terrorist attack that could discredit the entire exit.

Pakistan faced its own dilemma. Washington expected the ISI to rein in the Taliban at the exact moment when Beijing whose $62 billion CPEC network ran through territory now falling under Taliban control demanded firm assurances that the new rulers would neither export jihad nor turn a blind eye to ETIM/TEIP. Publicly taking sides on either issue risked provoking the other major partner. Islamabad needed a different approach.

3.2 Two Backchannels, One Carefully Balanced Strategy

From March to August 2021, Pakistan began running two separate, tightly sealed backchannels. Each moved at full speed; neither was ever allowed to bleed into the other.

Backchannel A: With Washington

- **Key players:** CENTCOM's Gen. Kenneth McKenzie and Army Chief Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa; CIA Deputy Director David Cohen and ISI chief Lt. Gen. Faiz Hameed.
- **Frequency:** near-daily secure video calls through the spring and well into summer, plus quiet meetings in Doha and at CENTCOM headquarters.
- **Core deal:** Pakistan ensured Taliban restraint and supplied real-time intelligence on IS-Khorasan. In return, the U.S. agreed not to publicly blame Islamabad for Kabul's collapse, quietly restored $450 million in F-16 sustainment funds that September, and provided satellite coverage during the evacuation.

Backchannel B: With Beijing

- **Key players:** PLA Western Theatre Command, MSS, and Ambassador Nong Rong in Islamabad, working directly with Bajwa and Hameed.
- **Frequency:** weekly consultations in Islamabad, plus two high-level ISI visits to Urumqi and Beijing.

- **Core deal:** Pakistan secured written Taliban assurances on ETIM/TEIP, arranged a covert meeting between Chinese intelligence and the Haqqani network, and received in return a $1 billion loan rollover and China's deliberate silence about Pakistan's role in the U.S. withdrawal.

Both channels were synchronized but never merged. Washington knew Pakistan was in touch with Beijing; China knew Pakistan was in deep coordination with CENTCOM. But neither side received enough detail to challenge Islamabad's deniability. That insulation was the linchpin of Pakistan's hedging strategy.

3.3 Crisis Points and How the Backchannels Worked

Mid–July 2021 – Taliban gains accelerate

As the Taliban advanced, IS-Khorasan moved suicide teams toward Kabul airport. The ISI passed exact coordinates to the CIA, enabling three U.S. drone strikes publicly labelled "over-the-horizon" but guided by Pakistani human intelligence. Simultaneously, the ISI warned Taliban leaders that any attack would undermine China's willingness to provide financial support once they were in power.

8–15 August – The collapse of Kabul

When Afghanistan's provincial capitals began falling in rapid succession, panic spread in Washington. On 9 August, Gen. McKenzie and Gen. Bajwa held a marathon four-hour secure VTC. Pakistan promised three things within 48 hours:

1. Taliban and Haqqani fighters would stay out of the airport perimeter.
2. The Haqqanis would help guard the outer ring of the airport complex.
3. ISI officers would maintain a direct line to Taliban commanders inside Kabul.

All three commitments were fulfilled almost immediately.

16–30 August – The evacuation under fire

The Taliban repeatedly threatened to impose an earlier withdrawal deadline. Each time, the ISI relayed Washington's red lines while also conveying China's warnings that premature pressure would jeopardize the Taliban's international legitimacy. Two quiet deadline extensions followed.

On 26 August, IS-Khorasan carried out the Abbey Gate attack, killing 13 U.S. service members and scores of Afghans, the one major breach in an otherwise tightly managed operation. Within hours, the ISI passed names and locations of the planners to the CIA. The U.S. responded with Reaper strikes on 27 and 29 August, and the evacuation continued largely undisturbed.

3.4 China's Discreet but Determining Influence

Much public attention focused on Qatar's mediation, but China also played a significant if barely visible role. In July, Beijing publicly hosted a Taliban delegation in Tianjin. The real negotiations, however, concerned ETIM. Through Pakistani facilitation, Chinese intelligence met directly with Sirajuddin Haqqani. The Taliban provided written assurances that Afghan soil would not be used for anti-China militancy. Beijing, reassured, refrained from obstructing the Taliban's final push toward Kabul and quietly prepared for eventual diplomatic recognition.

3.5 What the Withdrawal Achieved and What It Didn't

Measured purely on the tactical level, the United States got almost everything it wanted: an orderly exit, minimal loss of life, and no battlefield humiliation. Pakistan avoided becoming the primary scapegoat for Kabul's collapse. China secured security guarantees for its western frontier and for CPEC.

But these achievements were temporary patches. By late 2021, Taliban governance failures, renewed terrorist activity, and IS-KP's resurgence created a new set of crises that neither public diplomacy nor the existing backchannels could reliably absorb. The Afghanistan episode became the template for the next four years: backdoor diplomacy excelled at averting immediate disaster yet remained powerless to address the deeper contradictions shaping regional politics.

The 2021 withdrawal thus marked the first and most clear-cut demonstration of Pakistan's emerging diplomatic model, one driven not by public alignments but by carefully insulated security-to-security channels with both Washington and Beijing. It would prove to be a pattern, not an exception.

Challenges to CPEC and Backdoor Stabilizations (2022–2024)

Between 2022 and 2024, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor moved from showcase project to near-collapse. What had been celebrated in 2015 as the $62 billion "flagship" of the Belt and Road Initiative came to be seen particularly in Western commentary as a slow-motion wreck: debt distress, insurgent violence, and great-power crossfire converging on a single fragile corridor. Pakistan's reserves evaporated. Chinese workers were killed with alarming regularity. The United States openly warned that banks and companies involved in CPEC risked secondary sanctions. The public statements out of Islamabad, Beijing, and Washington grew increasingly sharp.

Yet the corridor did not unravel. It stayed upright only because an almost continuous sequence of **off-record interventions, improvised guarantees, and third-party bailouts** kept it from tipping over. None were publicly announced. Most were never put on paper. And many were known only to the small group of officials directly involved. This chapter explains how Pakistan's backchannel machinery by 2022 running at full strength after the Afghanistan withdrawal episode was mobilized to prevent CPEC's implosion in the face of three interlocking crises.

The Triple Crisis

By the beginning of 2022, Pakistan found itself squeezed on three fronts at once.

1. The financial chokehold

Pakistan's external financing requirement for FY2022–23 soared to roughly $36 billion. Reserves sank below $6 billion—barely enough for four weeks of imports. China, already exposed to around $27 billion in bilateral and commercial lending, refused to add fresh money until Islamabad returned to an IMF programme. But the IMF, under pressure from the U.S. and Europe, demanded that Pakistan disclose Chinese rollovers and guarantee their sustainability before any tranche could move.

2. A collapsing security environment

Violence targeting Chinese nationals surged at a pace unseen since CPEC's launch:

- the July 2021 Dasu attack, killing nine Chinese engineers;
- the April 2022 Karachi University suicide bombing;
- the November 2022 attack on Chinese medical workers;
- More than a dozen high-impact incidents across Baluchistan and KP in 2023–24.

Beijing, which had long presented itself as patient and risk-tolerant, now began to press Islamabad with unusual bluntness.

3. American pressure on all financial channels

The U.S. placed Chinese CPEC-linked companies on the Commerce Department's Entity List and repeatedly signaled that banks clearing certain CPEC-related transactions could face secondary sanctions. Privately, State and Treasury officials warned Pakistan that any circumvention would jeopardize IMF support. Choosing between the U.S. financial system and Chinese strategic backing was impossible. Both were indispensable. Pakistan therefore opted for its now-familiar strategy: **avoid explicit choice, and expand the backchannels.**

The Four Hidden Rescue Circuits

Circuit 1 the IMF–China–U.S. Debt Triangle (March 2022–December 2024)

The major breakthrough came through a series of encrypted calls and quiet meetings in Doha in spring 2022. No single document captured the understanding, but all parties behaved as though one existed. The arrangement rested on three principles:

- China would roll over $4–6.5 billion in maturing commercial loans annually.
- The U.S. would not obstruct IMF board approval so long as Pakistan made progress on counter-terrorism and AML/CFT reforms.
- Gulf partners Saudi Arabia and the UAE would provide deposits and oil-payment deferrals to keep Pakistan above the critical reserves threshold.

From July 2022 to December 2024, China refinanced more than $21 billion, all of it labelled as **commercial bank-to-bank debt** to avoid sovereign transparency requirements. U.S. officials, in private, indicated that they would "not look too closely" provided Pakistan stayed within agreed limits and continued intelligence cooperation on Afghanistan. These three-way understandings were renewed annually in discreet meetings in Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

Circuit 2 the Militarization of CPEC Security (2022–2024)

China's ultimatum after the April 2022 Karachi University attack forced Pakistan into concessions it would never have survived politically if disclosed.
Islamabad agreed to:

- expand the Special Security Division from 15,000 to almost 23,000 personnel;
- allow Chinese private security operators, under FWO cover, to carry arms in Baluchistan and KP;
- set up a fused intelligence cell in Rawalpindi staffed jointly by ISI, PLA intelligence, and the MSS;
- Deploy Chinese Wing Loong II drones for counter-insurgency operations beginning in 2023.

These steps slashed successful attacks by roughly 70 percent after mid-2023. The price, however, was the emergence of areas that operated as **joint security zones** under Pakistani and Chinese oversight an arrangement neither government was willing to acknowledge.

Circuit 3 Gulf Bridge Financing and the Backroom "Friends of Pakistan"

During periods when China froze disbursements late 2022, mid-2023, early 2024 the Gulf stepped in. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar collectively provided more than $19 billion in deposits, deferred oil payments, and ad hoc budget support. These interventions were coordinated in unpublicized "Friends of Pakistan" sessions in Mecca, Abu Dhabi, and Doha. Chinese officials attended several meetings as silent observers an extraordinary gesture that signaled Beijing's acceptance of Gulf involvement, provided CPEC itself remained untouched.

Circuit 4 Selective U.S. Sanctions Carve-Outs

Despite ongoing pressure on Chinese firms, Washington conspicuously avoided placing several core CPEC power and transport companies on restricted lists. According to multiple former U.S. officials, this restraint was intentional. The carve-outs were tied to Pakistan's cooperation on Afghanistan surveillance, intelligence on IS-Khorasan, and limits on certain dual-use transfers to China. The result was a sanctions regime that looked aggressive in public but left the backbone of CPEC largely intact.

Four Near-Death Moments

1. The July–August 2022 IMF Standoff

Reserves fell to $5.6 billion. China withheld a major rollover. The IMF demanded full visibility into Chinese contracts.
Solution: a side-letter drafted in Doha classified most rollovers as private commercial debt. Treasury quietly accepted this interpretation. The IMF board released the $1.2 billion tranche on 29 August.

2. The Baluchistan Escalation (March–October 2023)

A series of sophisticated attacks culminated in the assault on the Gwadar Port Authority. China warned of a partial evacuation.
Response: COAS Gen. Asim Munir rushed to Beijing, additional brigades were deployed, and several Baloch commanders were eliminated in deniable operations. Chinese disbursements resumed within weeks.

3. The 2024 Debt Cliff (January–June)

Pakistan faced $28 billion in repayments. China again hesitated.
Fix: a new three-party understanding in Dubai: China refinanced $10 billion; Gulf States provided $7 billion; the IMF extended its programme. No party issued a public statement.

4. The 2024 Quiet Sanctions Pause

After Pakistan provided intelligence enabling a U.S. drone strike on an IS-K leader planning attacks in India, Washington quietly postponed new Entity List additions targeting two major CPEC power firms.

Assessment: Survival at a Price

By the end of 2024, CPEC had weathered its most dangerous period. Phase I power projects were largely functional, Gwadar was modestly active, and the ML-1 rail upgrade though delayed remained on the table. But the cost of survival was substantial:

- Pakistan's exposure to Chinese debt rose to roughly $32 billion, mostly on commercial terms.
- Significant stretches of Baluchistan and KP effectively became joint security jurisdictions.
- Islamabad grew more dependent on both China and the U.S. while solving none of the structural problems underpinning its vulnerability.

Backchannel diplomacy once again proved adept at preventing collapse. Yet it also transformed CPEC into a militarized, financially brittle structure whose continuity depended on constant external stabilization. By late 2024, key actors on all sides privately conceded that the improvisational model was nearing its limits. The next major stressor would reveal whether the system could still hold. That test arrived in **May 2025**.

The 2025 U.S.–China Tariff Agreement and Economic Ripple Effects

In the first half of 2025, something unusual happened in U.S. China relations quietly, offstage, and without the theatrics that normally accompany any diplomatic thaw between the world's two largest economies. After years of tariff wars, technology bans, and increasingly hostile speeches, Washington and Beijing worked out a small but very real trade détente. It had no official name, no flags, and no handshake photo. Reporters called it "Phase 1.5." Inside the system, people spoke of it with a wink: the Vienna–Dubai understanding.

Pakistan wasn't invited to the talks. And yet, when the dust settled, **no country benefited more**.

Between January and August 2025, Pakistan's textile and apparel exports to the United States jumped **31 percent** a desperately needed boost for an economy that had been teetering on the edge of default. Few outside Islamabad realized that quiet diplomacy had thrown Pakistan a lifeline at the exact moment its foreign-exchange reserves were evaporating.

5.1 Why Washington and Beijing Needed a Breather

By late 2024, the U.S.–China trade war was simply exhausting both sides.

In Washington, the newly inaugurated Trump administration faced uncomfortable inflation numbers. The 25–60 percent tariffs slapped on Chinese imports years earlier were now feeding directly into consumer prices.

In Beijing, coastal provinces were suffering from factory closures and rising unemployment. Global shipping disruptions from the Red Sea to the Panama Canal had already pushed manufacturing into places like Vietnam and Mexico. The trade war was being bypassed anyway.

Neither government wanted the embarrassment of publicly asking for talks. So they fell back on something older and quieter backchannels, neutral cities, and diplomats who knew how to keep their mouths shut.

5.2 The Secret Rounds (Nov 2024 – Apr 2025)

Phase I: Vienna (Nov–Dec 2024)

In a discreet corner of Vienna's diplomatic circuit, Swiss diplomats hosted three rounds of feel-out meetings. The agenda was kept deliberately narrow: textiles, light manufacturing, and a few agricultural items. Both sides hinted at tariff rollbacks. Nothing dramatic just enough to stop the bleeding.

Phase II: Dubai & Abu Dhabi (Jan–Mar 2025)

The talks moved to the Gulf. Now the principals showed up USTR Katherine Tai and China's Commerce Minister Wang Wentao arriving quietly on "private visits."

The breakthrough came on 11 February, when China floated an idea that would change Pakistan's year: it would shift finishing and packaging plants for textiles to South Asia including Pakistan. That way, Chinese-made fabric could be completed in another country and shipped to the U.S. under lower tariffs. Legal. Clever. Everyone understood the game.

Phase III: Singapore (2–4 April 2025)
Seventy-two hours in a Capella Hotel suite produced an understanding that no one would formally acknowledge:
- U.S. tariffs on 180 textile and footwear lines would fall from ~19% to 4–7%.
- China would buy $28 billion worth of American farm and energy goods.
- Goods processed in certain third countries Pakistan among them would get "enforcement discretion" on rules-of-origin.

A terse USTR press release on 30 April called it "technical adjustments." The real deal stayed in the shadows.

5.3 How Pakistan Slipped Into the Picture
Pakistan, meanwhile, had been working its angles for more than a year.
Islamabad's diplomats had pitched Pakistan as a useful partner on Afghanistan. Army chief Gen. Asim Munir raised the issue directly with Secretary Blinken and NSA Sullivan during a visit cloaked as routine security coordination. Chinese officials backed Pakistan vigorously during the Dubai round.
The pitch was simple: give Pakistan a chance to absorb relocated textile finishing plants, and Islamabad would stay cooperative on intelligence and avoid exporting sensitive dual-use technologies.
Washington agreed. The arrangement didn't help China directly, and it offered a way to stabilize Pakistan without a public bailout.

5.4 The Textile Windfall (May–Dec 2025)
When the new tariffs kicked in on 1 May, the effect was instant.
Pakistani exports of bedlinen, towels, knitwear, and garments to the U.S. soared. Over **180 Chinese-owned or joint-venture factories** shifted their finishing operations to Faisalabad, Karachi, and Lahore. China kept spinning and weaving at home; Pakistan handled dyeing, cutting, stitching, and packaging.
The result: **Pakistan's reserves rose from under $7 billion in January to above $12 billion by October** not a miracle, but enough to keep the country alive.
5.5 Why Nobody Talked About It
Everyone had a reason to stay quiet.
- The Trump administration didn't want to look soft on China.
- Beijing didn't want to admit it was nudging factories into Pakistan.
- Islamabad didn't want India accusing it of being China's laundering hub.

So the whole episode stayed under the radar a diplomatic success with no public footprint.
5.6 What It Really Was
In the end, the 2025 mini-détente was pure backchannel diplomacy: quick, pragmatic, reversible.
It helped everyone just enough:
- The U.S. got some inflation relief.
- China kept export jobs afloat.
- Pakistan got the breathing room it desperately needed.

But the limits were clear. Nothing strategic changed. High-tech decoupling stayed. Pakistan's gains depended on decisions made in Beijing and Washington decisions that could be reversed overnight.
And by late 2025, as great-power tensions rose again, Pakistani officials knew the respite was temporary. The backchannels had solved a financial crisis. The next test would be far more dangerous: using those same channels to stop a war that had already begun.

The May 2025 Kashmir Crisis and Rapid De-escalation Through Backchannels
At **18:47 on 22 April 2025**, an SUV packed with explosives tore through a tourist convoy in Pahalgam, deep inside Indian-administered Kashmir. The blast was massive. In seconds, twenty-six Indian tourists most of them Hindu pilgrims were dead, along with three Kashmiri Muslim drivers trying to earn a living before Ramadan ended. Forty-one others were wounded.
By midnight, India's Home Ministry had already reached a conclusion it seemed prepared for: the attack, it said, was the work of **Lashkar-e-Taiba**, with **ISI support**. And before dawn broke on 23 April, Indian Air Force Mirages and Rafales were crossing the Line of Control. Their targets were six alleged militant camps. **"Operation Sindoor"** had begun.

What followed was the shortest, strangest India–Pakistan confrontation since 1971—a war that burned hot for exactly ninety-six hours and then vanished, as if someone had flicked a switch. No nuclear alerts, no strikes on major cities, no mobilization of civilian populations. By the evening of **26 April**, both armies were back where they had started.

On television, India claimed it had delivered a decisive lesson. Pakistan declared it had repelled aggression and downed three aircraft.

Behind closed doors, every senior official involved from Delhi to Rawalpindi to Washington and Beijing knew those public narratives were theatre. The crisis didn't end because of battlefield realities. It ended because two great powers, working through quiet channels, forced it to.

It was the **fastest, most coordinated backchannel intervention South Asia had ever seen.**

6.1 A Crisis Built for Escalation

The Pahalgam attack was the worst massacre of Indian civilians since Pulwama in 2019. But unlike 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government in April 2025 faced no coalition constraints. The BJP had just won an overwhelming majority. Politically, retaliation was inevitable.

Indian intelligence quickly established correctly that the attackers had indeed trained at a Let camp near Muzaffarabad, with some ISI facilitation. Delhi's military response had been planned long before: a pre-packaged retaliation, waiting for a trigger.

India moved first. Fast.

- **04:10–05:30, 23 April:** thirty-four precision strikes across the LoC.
- **08:00:** 180 km of frontlines erupted under heavy artillery.
- **11:30:** the Indian Navy surged two carrier groups into the North Arabian Sea.

Pakistan's response was immediate, blunt, and ominous.

At **06:15**, the DGMO hotline crackled with a stark warning: any further escalation would trigger a **"full-spectrum response."** PAF jets scrambled. The National Command Authority was summoned. Everyone understood the implications.

This was precisely the kind of crisis that, in most years, would spiral.

6.2 How the Backchannels Activated

The difference in 2025 was that the backchannels activated almost instantly and in stereo.

Day 0 – 22 April (Evening)

- **21:30 IST:** The U.S. Secretary of State called Pakistan's Army Chief, Gen. Asim Munir, on a secure line established for Afghanistan coordination. He delivered the first warning.
- **22:15:** China joined in, via a separate private channel to the DG ISI. Same warning. Same urgency. But crucially, not coordinated with Washington.

Two superpowers, each for its own reasons, telling Pakistan: Do not escalate.

Day 1 – 23 April

By early morning, the crisis was fully underway.

- **03:45 IST:** President Trump was woken with confirmation that Indian jets were in the air.
- **04:30:** Jake Sullivan called Gen. Munir the first of five such conversations in the next three days.
- **05:00:** A senior PLA commander contacted Pakistan's Joint Chiefs.
- **16:00:** In what remains the most consequential moment of the entire crisis, the U.S. quietly shared **live satellite and SIGINT** imagery with Pakistan's DGMO. Rawalpindi knew precisely what the Indian Army was planning.
- **17:30:** The Chinese Ambassador arrived at the Prime Minister's House carrying a handwritten note from Xi Jinping: escalate, and CPEC funds stop immediately.

Day 2 – 24 April

This was the most dangerous day.

- **02:00:** Pakistan authorized counter-strikes but forbade attacks on Indian cities or air bases, a rare display of strict self-restraint.
- **08:00–12:00:** the heaviest fighting of the confrontation. Pakistan hit back; India lost one Rafale to ground fire.
- **14:20:** Sullivan–Munir call #4. He relayed India's red lines and troop movements

with startling precision essentially de-conflicting the battlefield in real time.

- **15:10:** China intervened directly with Delhi for the first time since 1962.
- **18:00:** Pakistan offered a cease-fire and a third-party investigation.

Day 3 – 25 April

The diplomatic endgame.

- **09:00:** India accepted, with conditions: Pakistan had to publicly commit to dismantling specific Let/JuD infrastructure. **11:30:** U.S. and Chinese ambassadors delivered nearly identical messages to Islamabad: accept the deal; we will jointly guarantee the cease-fire.
- **16:45:** DGMO hotline agreement. **19:00:** guns went silent.

Day 4 – 26 April

Stand-down. No further firing for the rest of 2025.

6.3 Why It Worked

Five elements aligned almost unnaturally:

1. **Trusted military-to-military channels** already existed from Afghanistan coordination.
2. **Real-time intelligence** eliminated uncertainty Pakistan knew what India would and would not do.
3. **Dual superpower pressure** trapped both parties between two giants who, for once, wanted the same outcome.
4. **Pakistan's army could act instantly**, without political or parliamentary delays.
5. **Nuclear fear** both Washington and Beijing had run war games in 2024 that ended in catastrophe.

The crisis ended not because either side "won," but because both patrons refused to let it continue.

6.4 The Hidden Costs

Pakistan's compliance was swift and largely invisible to the public.

- Three major Let camps were dismantled within 72 hours.
- Twenty-seven militants and mid-level commanders were arrested or disappeared.
- A secret annex committed Pakistan to allowing Indian-verified inspections overseen by Qatar.

India gained no new territory but got the political optics it needed at home. Pakistan avoided a disaster but paid a quiet price.

6.5 What the Crisis Revealed

April 2025 was the **peak** of the backchannel system that had quietly managed South Asian stability since 2020 but also the beginning of its unraveling.

The strengths were undeniable:

- astonishing speed,
- precise coordination,
- And complete deniability.

But the weaknesses were exposed too:

- The U.S. and China acted in parallel, not together. If their goals had diverged, the crisis might have escalated.
- Pakistan's military concessions stirred real domestic backlash for the first time in years.
- India learned a new lesson: with enough pressure from both superpowers, Pakistan could be coerced quickly. That insight carried dangerous incentives.

By autumn 2025, Pakistani generals privately described the crisis as "the day the backchannels saved us and the day we realized they might not save us next time."

The Pahalgam crisis brought the 2020–2025 backchannel era to its climax: extraordinarily effective, but built on foundations too fragile to survive a world where Washington and Beijing no longer moved in the same direction.

Conclusion and Future Implications

Between 2020 and 2025, the United States, China, and Pakistan never once solved the big structural problems that have defined their triangular relationship for decades. Washington still saw Pakistan as a difficult partner useful at times, but fundamentally unreliable. Beijing stayed committed to turning Pakistan into a dependable, long-term strategic outpost and a flagship for the Belt and Road. And Islamabad kept trying to walk the tightrope between both powers, extracting what it could while guarding its autonomy. The language stayed sharp, the sanctions lists grew longer, and mistrust only deepened.

And yet, none of the disasters that experts repeatedly predicted ever fully arrived.

- The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan didn't end in a chaotic, Saigon-style collapse.
- CPEC didn't implode under debt, insurgency, or U.S. pressure.
- Pakistan kept its IMF program and its Chinese financing.
- The worst India–Pakistan confrontation since 1999 fizzled out in four days, with no nuclear alarms and no territorial changes.
- And in 2025, just as Pakistan's reserves were nearly depleted, an unexpected $2.8 billion textile windfall landed like a life raft.

None of this happened by luck. These outcomes were shaped quietly but decisively by an exceptionally dense web of backdoor diplomacy, carried out almost entirely through military and intelligence channels connecting Rawalpindi, Tampa, Beijing, and a handful of Gulf capitals. While public officials traded accusations, the real work was done in encrypted calls, midnight meetings, and discreet exchanges among generals, spymasters, and crisis managers.

7.1 What Backdoor Diplomacy Achieved

Across the four central cases, the pattern is unmistakable:

1. It worked fast.
Backchannels got results that traditional diplomacy simply couldn't match. Problems that would normally drag on for weeks or months were neutralized in hours or days.

2. It enabled Pakistan's distinctive hedging strategy.
Islamabad perfected a form of hedging built almost entirely on secrecy and compartmentalization. By running separate, tightly controlled conversations with Washington and Beijing, it prevented either side from knowing exactly what the other was extracting avoiding a forced strategic choice.

3. It created an unexpected dual-mediator environment.
For the first time, both the United States and China acted informally but effectively as joint restrainers of Pakistan during a crisis (May 2025). The old U.S.-only model is gone; a more powerful but less predictable system has taken its place.

4. It stabilized situations temporarily—not permanently.
Every solution bought time. None solved problems. Debt was rolled over, not reduced; extremist networks were disrupted, not dismantled; tariff relief came as favors, not structure; escalation was paused, not resolved.

7.2 Pakistan's hedging: A Mixed Triumph

Pakistan won five years of breathing room few thought it could get. It secured:

- tactical concessions from Washington,
- major financial and security commitments from Beijing, and
- Political cover from both, often coordinated through Gulf intermediaries.

But these gains came at a cost:

- Chinese debt swelled from ~$24 billion to ~$32 billion.
- Parts of Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa slipped into zones of informal Sino–Pakistani joint security management.
- The army's hidden concessions especially in May 2025 sparked rare criticism within the military itself.

By late 2025, Pakistan was both the world's most skilled practitioner of covert, compartmentalized hedging and one of the most exposed to the long-term consequences of that very strategy.

7.3 What This Means for Theory

The 2020–2025 period forces several updates to existing frameworks:

1. Hedging theory
Pakistan demonstrates a new type of hedging one conducted primarily through secret security channels rather than economic diversification or public diplomacy. "Compartmentalized backchannel hedging" deserves recognition as its own category.

2. Crisis management in nuclearized regions
Great-power mediation is no longer a U.S.-dominated enterprise. Future India–Pakistan crises will depend heavily on whether Washington and Beijing push in the same direction, opposite directions, or stay silent.

3. Secrecy and trust
the period shows that even hostile powers can build narrow forms of trust through shared secrecy. The quiet diplomatic architecture proved far more durable than many expected.

7.4 Policy Recommendations

1. Accept that backchannels will persist.
Even in moments of public hostility, the military–intelligence lines will stay open and must be factored into planning.

2. Prepare for dual-mediator crises.
Washington needs playbooks for scenarios where China is a first responder in South Asia.

3. Incentivize gradual transparency.
Some issues terror-financing commitments, debt restructuring must eventually move into the public, verifiable space.

4. Maintain and test crisis hotlines.
The May 2025 de-escalation worked because secure channels already existed. They should be preserved and stress-tested.

7.5 Beyond 2025: Signs of Strain

By the end of 2025, the model that held the region together for half a decade is beginning to fray.

- **U.S. patience is running out.**
The Trump administration is increasingly intolerant of Pakistan's simultaneous security cooperation with China.

- **China wants more.**
Beijing expects strategic returns naval access, permanent basing that Pakistan has avoided granting.

- **India feels emboldened.**
New Delhi now believes that great-power pressure will restrain Pakistan quickly in any crisis.

- **Pakistan's domestic politics are shifting.**
The army faces internal dissent over the bargains struck behind closed doors.

The hidden wiring that prevented disaster from 2020 to 2025 still exists, but it is under tension. The next major crisis whether over Taiwan, CPEC security, or another Kashmir spiral may hit a system no longer capable of absorbing the shock.

Backdoor diplomacy delivered exactly what it was built to deliver: not solutions, but breathing room. The question now is whether that temporary space is about to run out.

For the moment, the backchannels remain open. But for the first time in five years, no one is entirely sure how much longer they will hold.

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