

THE US FACTOR IN SINO-PAKISTAN RELATIONS (2013-2024): A STRATEGIC TRIANGLE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the influence of the United States in 2013-2024 to shape Sino-Pakistan relations through the prism of Strategic Triangle Theory (STT). With the growing US-China rivalry reshaping world and regional power balance, Pakistan became a pivotal state, caught in the crossfire between competing great powers. The research examines the impact of the US policies, especially the ones regarding the rise of China, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the regional security systems in shaping the future of China-Pakistan economic, military and diplomatic cooperation. The study is based on the use of a qualitative research methodology which involves the analysis of documents and policies of official statements, national security strategies and secondary scholarly sources of the selected period. The results indicate that instead of undermining the Sino-Pakistan relationships, the US strategic pressure and containment-oriented policy indirectly strengthened bilateral cooperation between China and Pakistan, particularly within the framework of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Pakistan, however, also took a delicate balancing policy so as not to align itself fully with either of the two powers. The study, based on the strategic triangle theory, contributes to a subtle understanding of the middle-state behaviour in the face of great-power competition and provide policy-relevant information on the foreign policy of Pakistan in an era of increasing geopolitical rivalry.

INTRODUCTION

The strategic rivalry between China and the United States has been increasing to outline the structure and dynamics of the contemporary international system (Ikenberry, 2018; Allison, 2017; Mearsheimer, 2021). This competition since the early 2010s has surpassed the traditional military competition and includes economic statecraft, technological dominance and influence over regional orders, particularly in the Indo-Pacific and South Asia (Tellis, 2020; Friedberg, 2018). With the increasing material capabilities of China and the rise in the intensity of its foreign and security policy, the US policymakers were gradually shifting the foreign and security policy towards strategic competitive

rivalry with China being defined as a so-called revisionist power with long-term systemic challenger qualities (US National Security Strategy, 2017; 2022). With this transformed geopolitical environment, Pakistan has been placed in a very unusual strategic position due to the geographic location of Pakistan and its security relevance as well as its increasing partnership with China (Small, 2015; Markey, 2020). Historically, the relations between China and Pakistan were based on the coincidence of the security interests, military collaboration and diplomatic alignment (Garver, 2004; Rafiq, 2017). However, the post-2013 phase gave a qualitative change in bilateral relations with the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and more specifically, the China Pakistan

Economic Corridor (CPEC) which transformed the relationship into a comprehensive strategic and geo-economic partnership (Rolland, 2017; Wolf, 2019).

The launch of CPEC in 2013 greatly enhanced the strategic value of Pakistan to China by making it a part of the broader vision of Beijing transregional connectivity, energy security and economic expansion (Summers, 2016; Fallon, 2015). Concurrently, CPEC put the US on edge over Chinese expansion of influence in South Asia and the perceived strategic implications of Chinese-funded infrastructure projects in close proximity to vital maritime and land routes (Hillman, 2020; Pompeo, 2018). As such, the strong alignment of Pakistan with China began to draw the attention of the US, especially as Washington started to frame the initiatives related to BRI as the instruments of geopolitical leverage and possible debt dependence (Brautigam, 2020; US Department of State, 2020). The US policy toward China and South Asia between 2013 and 2024 is both continuity and escalation in strategic competition. The Pivot to Asia strategy of Obama administration was an attempt to rebalance US focus on the Asia-Pacific region in response to the implicit rise of China but maintaining engagement-focused rhetoric (Clinton, 2011; Campbell & Ratner, 2018). The US relations with China under the D.J Trump administration have gone down a notch characterized by trade wars, technological decoupling and express opposition to BRI and CPEC (Blackwill and Tellis, 2020; Trump, 2017). This competitive posture was further institutionalized by the Biden administration in the Indo-Pacific Strategy which focused on alliances, partnerships and strategic resilience to the influence of China (White House, 2022; Medeiros, 2023).

Such changes in the US strategy had a great impact on the foreign policy options in Pakistan. Traditionally relying on the United States as a source of military help, economic support and diplomacy, Pakistan has been under pressure to recalibrate its external relations in the context of increasing US-China rivalry (Riedel, 2013; Fair, 2019). At the same time, the growing role of China as an economic and strategic power provided Pakistan with alternative routes to the development and security cooperation with

China, thus, reduced but not eliminated its dependence on Washington (Haider, 2021; Javaid & Jahangir, 2020). This posed a complicated strategic situation whereby Pakistan was trying to offset competing great-power interests and retain a level of strategic autonomy. The literature available has largely discussed the Sino-Pakistan relations, and US-Pakistan relations, as two different spheres of study. The literature on China-Pakistan relations is focused on historical trust, defense cooperation and economic integration (Garver, 2011; Wolf, 2020) and studies on the US relations with Pakistan are focused on the cooperation on the counterterrorism, conditional aid and frequent crises of confidence (Markey, 2013; Shah, 2018). However, the number of studies that systematically study the relationship between the US strategic behavior towards China and the development of the Sino-Pakistan relationship within a triangular framework is relatively small (Dittmer, 1981; Kapur, 2021). This analytical gap restricts knowledge of the role of Pakistan as a pivot state which is operating under the circumstances of asymmetric great-power competition.

In order to fill this gap, the current study will use strategic triangle theory (STT) as the analytical tool. Initially created by Dittmer (1981) to explain triangular interactions among the major powers, the theory offers a useful perspective on the alignment behavior, pressure mechanisms and strategic signaling in the three actor configurations. The framework when applied to the US-China-Pakistan triangle highlights the impact of Washington-China-focused strategies on Pakistan strategic decisions and thus, the depth and direction of Sino-Pakistan cooperation (Nye, 2011; Walt, 1987).

This paper poses the question: How has the United States influenced Sino-Pakistan relations 2013-2024 within the dynamics of a strategic triangle? It suggests that US containment-oriented policies towards China have frequently had unintended effects of strengthening Sino-Pakistan strategic cooperation especially in economic and security areas, associated with CPEC (Tellis, 2020; Wolf, 2019). Meanwhile, Pakistan has looked at a careful balancing approach without being solely aligned but to be able to manage its relationship with both great powers (Khan, 2022; Sattar, 2021).

The study methodologically follows a qualitative approach, which relies on document and policy analysis of official US, Chinese, and Pakistani sources, supplemented by peer-reviewed literature published between 2013 and 2024. This study provides theoretical contributions to the literature on strategic triangles and empirical contributions to the literature on middle-power behavior in the context of great-power rivalry.

Literature Review

The literature that can be applied in this research is based on three related bodies of literature: *firstly*, Sino-Pakistan relations, *secondly*, the US foreign policy towards South Asia and China and *lastly*, theoretical and empirical literature on strategic triangle dynamics. The available literature is still compartmentalized and, in many cases, has not managed to synthesize the perspectives into a coherent analytical framework that can be used to explain the strategic behaviour of Pakistan in the backdrop of increasing US-China competition.

1. Scholarship on Sino-Pakistan Relations

The Sino-Pakistan relations have been traditionally explored through the prism of strategic partnership, security cooperation and diplomatic alignment. Initial analyses focus on the geopolitical rationality of the relationship, especially the common grounds of concern over India and the balance of power in the region (Garver, 2004; Sinha, 2007). The relationship between the two is widely described by academics as being durable and resilient anchored in strategic trust between the two rather than ideological affinity (Small, 2015; Rafiq, 2017). Defense and nuclear cooperation are the subjects that feature prominently in this literature with analysts highlighting the role of China in strengthening the conventional and strategic deterrence capabilities in Pakistan (Krepon, 2015; Tellis, 2016).

After the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative, the academic interest in the geo-economic aspect of Sino-Pakistan relations increased. Research on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor holds that CPEC is a transformative step in bilateral relations by institutionalizing long-term economic interdependence (Summers, 2016; Rolland, 2017). (Wolf, 2020), argues that CPEC has

increased the strategic significance of Pakistan in the regional connectivity strategy of China and Javaid and Jahangir (2020) stress that it can transform the domestic political economy of Pakistan. Meanwhile, critical scholars also warn against the over-romanticization of CPEC, which is associated with governance issues, concerns about debt sustainability and lack of even distribution of development across the region (Brautigam, 2020; Malik, 2018).

In spite of these contributions, the Sino-Pakistan literature mostly considers the external actors, especially the United States, as peripheral variables. These studies tend to ignore the effect of the great-power competition on the strategic environment in which the Sino-Pakistan cooperation is taking place (Kapur, 2021). This restriction is even more acute in the post-2013 period, when CPEC became more involved in the US strategic issues.

2. US Foreign Policy Toward South Asia and China

The second literature source focuses on the US policy toward South Asia, Pakistan and China with a tendency to focus on the change in US policy towards South Asia and Pakistan as well as China. Analysts of US-China relations chronicle has a progressive but decisive change in the form of liberal engagement to strategic rivalry, especially since 2010 (Ikenberry, 2018; Friedberg, 2018; Allison, 2017). According to realist scholars, the increasing material capabilities of China could only provoke the US balancing behavior which manifested as military rebalancing, strengthening of alliances and economic containment (Mearsheimer, 2021; Walt, 2018).

In South Asia, the US policy has long been influenced by counterterrorism and nuclear nonproliferation requirements as well as the stability in the region (Riedel, 2013; Markey, 2013). Nevertheless, a few studies observe that the strategic relevance of Pakistan to Washington was becoming less relevant compared to India as the US-India strategic cooperation continued to deepen (Pant, 2016; Mohan, 2018). According to Fair (2019) and Shah (2018), the beginnings of US-Pakistan relations were undermined long before the US and China started to formalize their competition.

With the Trump administration, scholars present a more nuanced version of China as a strategic adversary and explicit opposition to BRI and CPEC (Blackwill & Tellis, 2020; Hillman, 2020). Analysts note that the US authorities started to define CPEC as a strategically problematic issue especially because of its closeness to Gwadar and its effect on regional security (Pompeo, 2018; US Department of Defense, 2019). The Biden administration, although taking a more multilateral tone, still continued many of the underlying elements of this competitive posture through the IndoPacific Strategy (White House, 2022; Medeiros, 2023).

Nevertheless, the literature that studies US policy tends to discuss Pakistan as a bilateral partner or a weakening partner without explicitly analyzing the way US actions toward China redesign incentives in Pakistan to strengthen its ties with Beijing (Haider, 2021; Khan, 2022).

3. Strategic Triangle Theory and Triangular Dynamics

Strategic Triangle Theory (STT) offers a conceptual bridge critically required to integrate these literatures. The theory conceptualizes the triangular relationships as dynamic systems where the behavior of one actor influences the interactions between the other two. It is a theory that was originally developed by Dittmer (1981). Later scholars extended the system to consider asymmetric triangles between middle powers and great powers (Lowell, 1997; Kang, 2003). The main concept of the theory is that the alignment patterns, pressure tactics and strategic signaling influence the outcomes in the triangle (Nye, 2011; Walt, 1987).

Empirical evidence on the application of strategic triangle analysis has been used to examine the Cold War dynamics, the relationship between the US and China and Russia and the complex of security in the region (Christensen, 1996; Ross, 2006). Newer literature uses the framework to study Indo-Pacific politics, emphasizing the strategic action of middle states in an attempt to hedge between rival great powers (Goh, 2016; Kuik, 2018). These articles underline that middle powers are not passive actors but take flexible approaches in order to maximize autonomy and minimize risk.

Although it is relevant, Strategic Triangle Theory has not been adequately applied to the relationship between US, China and Pakistan. Although Kapur (2021) and Tellis (2020) admit that Pakistan is a triangular country, they fall short of systematic theory-based analysis. Likewise, the triangular dynamics are often discussed in South Asian security literature in an implicit manner, without the use of the conceptual rigor offered by the strategic triangle scholarship (Sattar, 2021; Pant and Rej, 2019).

4. Research Gap

Overall, the literature on Sino-Pakistan relations, the US strategic behavior and the dynamics of a triangle are valuable contributions to the analysis of the subject but still remain analytically compartmentalized. The conditioning aspect of the US strategy is understated in studies on Sino-Pakistan relations and analyses of US policy rarely focus on the indirect impact of US policy on China-Pakistan cooperation. Though well-theoretically developed, strategic triangle scholarship has not been adequately applied to contemporary South Asian geopolitics.

This paper will fill these gaps by combining Strategic Triangle Theory with an empirical analysis of the US influence on Sino-Pakistan relations between 2013 and 2024. In this way, it promotes a more comprehensive view of the strategic action of Pakistan in the circumstances of the aggressive further development of the great-power competition.

Theoretical Framework: Strategic Triangle Theory

This paper uses Strategic Triangle Theory (STT) as the main method of analysis to establish the place of the United States in the development of Sino-Pakistan relations between 2013 and 2024. The theory offers a systematic prism which understands interactions between three states whose bilateral relations are interdependent and whose strategic decisions are conditioned by the behavior of the third actor (Dittmer, 1981; Lowell, 1997). With the ever-growing competition between the United States and China and Pakistan being strategically positioned between the two great powers. The strategic triangle framework is specifically more suited to represent the dynamics of pressure,

alignment and strategic adjustment which characterize this relationship.

Origins and Core Assumptions of Strategic Triangle Theory

The original conceptualization of Triangular relationships in the cold war is done by Lowell Dittmer (1981) who analyzed the triangular relationships during the cold war between the United States, the Soviet Union and China. In its simplest form the theory holds the view that in a three actor system, there is no bilateral relationship that can be fully understood in isolation, and as a result of this phenomenon, each bilateral relationship is informed by the preferences, actions and strategic calculations of the third actor (Dittmer, 1998). The theory questions linear and bilateral methods of analyzing foreign policy by focusing on relational interdependence and patterns of dynamic alignment.

Another main assumption of the theory is the fact that power asymmetry as a part of a triangle does not deprive weaker or middle states of their agency. Instead these states could be pivot actors, using their connection with competing powers to maximize strategic autonomy, reap benefits or minimize vulnerabilities (Nye, 2011; Walt, 1987).

According to theorists of strategic triangle, there are a number of possible configurations of alignments, which include: manage a trois (cooperative relations between all three), romantic triangle (one pivotal state aligned with two rivals) and stable marriage (two allied states aligned with a third) (Dittmer, 1981; Kang, 2003). Such arrangements are not fixed but change in reaction to the changes in the distribution of power, perception of threats and strategic priorities.

Strategic Triangle Theory and Great-Power Competition

Scholars extended the use of Strategic Triangle Theory to non-Cold War contexts to apply it to the contemporary great-power competition and regional security complexes (Christensen, 1996; Ross, 2006). According to the realist scholars, the triangular relations become even stronger when the circumstances imply the change of powers as the rising and declining powers want to consolidate alliances and limit the strategic options of the third parties (Mearsheimer, 2021;

Walt, 2018). The middle states in such environments are under increased pressure to make alignment, hedges or rebalances of their external relations.

In the environment of the US-China rivalry, the dynamics of strategic triangle have become more and more prominent. The fast economic and military development of China has posed a challenge to the primacy of the US which has led Washington to implement containment-oriented policies in the form of the strengthening of alliances, the formation of regional partnerships and the application of economic mechanisms of statecraft (Ikenberry, 2018; Friedberg, 2018). The strategies, however, also impact third states whose engagement with China overlays with US strategic interests. Strategic Triangle Theory can be used to explain the indirect effects that US policies targeted the partners of China, such as Pakistan.

Conceptualizing the US-China-Pakistan Triangle

Applied to the US-China-Pakistan nexus, the conceptualization of the Strategic Triangle Theory has been applied to the relationship between the United States and China and the pivot state of Pakistan. The long-term strategic partnership between China and Pakistan covers the aspects of defense cooperation and diplomatic coordination as well as economic integration, especially after the introduction of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (Small, 2015; Wolf, 2020). The United States, in its turn, has had a complicated and, in many cases, transactional relationship with Pakistan which traditionally has been based on security co-operation but recently has been marked by mistrust and divergence (Markey, 2013; Fair, 2019).

The US strategic behavior toward China, particularly, the policies designed to limit the influence of China through the Indo-Pacific Strategy, opposition to BRI and alignment with India has an impact on the threat perception and the strategic incentives of Pakistan (Tellis, 2020; Blackwill and Tellis, 2020). According to Strategic Triangle Theory, such strain may cause the pivot state to be further aligned with the rival power, especially when there are limited sources of economic or security support (Dittmer, 1998; Kapur, 2021).

Simultaneously, the theory does not imply unconditional alignment. To minimize risks related to overdependence, middle states tend to implement hedging strategies and preserving relations with both great powers (Goh, 2016; Kuik, 2018). This reasoning is indicated in the further attempts by Pakistan to re-engage the United States, despite the intensification of its relationship with China. The strategic Triangle Theory can therefore be used to understand the behaviour of the Pakistan's foreign policy experts as neither bandwagoning nor strict balancing but as a pragmatic response to structural constraints.

Analytical Variables and Application

Based on Strategic Triangle Theory, the proposed research is concentrated on three analytical variables that are interrelated. *Firstly*, the US strategic pressure is analyzed by comparing policy documents, official statements and strategic frameworks which seek to counter the rise of China. *Secondly*, the Sino-Pakistan cooperation is discussed in the economic, security and diplomatic aspects with special focus on the developments in the context of CPEC. *Thirdly*, the strategic response of Pakistan is evaluated concerning balancing, hedging and autonomy-seeking behavior.

The research tracks the change in tactics and demonstrates the persistence of underlying strategic goals over three administrations in the US, including Obama, Trump and Biden. This is a longitudinal method that is consistent with strategic triangle scholarship where the temporal analysis is significant in understanding any changes in the alignment and pressure dynamic (Lowell, 1997; Ross, 2006).

Theoretical Contribution

The use of Strategic Triangle Theory in the US-China-Pakistan relationship adds to the literature in multiple aspects. *First*, it extrapolates the theory to a modern asymmetric triangle of a middle power and two competing great powers, in a non-Cold War environment. *Second*, it emphasizes the third-party relationships as a result of the great-power competition, which transcends the bilateral studies. *Lastly*, it supports the thesis that middle

states have strategic agency despite circumstances of structural constraint.

The analysis in this study grounds its argument on Strategic Triangle Theory to provide a coherent conceptual framework on which understanding can be made of how US policies towards China are related to Sino-Pakistan relations and how Pakistan can manage the strategic challenges it faces due to the increasing great-power rivalry.

Research Methodology

In this research, a qualitative research design is adopted to analyze how the United States influenced the Sino-Pakistan relationships between 2013-2024 under the umbrella of the Strategic Triangle Theory. In particular, a qualitative approach is especially appropriate to analyze complex geopolitical interactions, strategic behavior and policy changes which cannot be captured sufficiently using quantitative methods (Creswell, 2014; George and Bennett, 2005). Since the research is exploratory and theory-driven, qualitative analysis is required to offer the flexibility needed to evaluate continuity and change in great-power interactions over time.

Research Design and Approach

The research design is analytical and interpretive where the US strategic behaviour towards China is likely to impact the development of Sino-Pakistan relations indirectly and directly. Rather than testing the causal hypotheses based on statistical models, the study focuses on the explanation of the alignment, pressure and strategic adjustment patterns by placing empirical data within a well-established theoretical framework (Yin, 2018). This style is in line with Strategic Triangle Theory that stressed on the importance of relational dynamics and contextual interpretation rather than the isolability of variables (Dittmer, 1981; Lowell, 1997).

The longitudinal approach captures the changes over time and covers the three separate administrations of the United States; Obama, Trump and Biden and then compares and contrasts the continuity and change of the policy across the three administrations. This temporal framing plays a critical role in valuing how the shifts in rhetoric, priorities and instruments of

statecraft of the US contributed to influence the strategic decisions of Pakistan and the intensity of Sino-Pakistan co-operation in the period in question (Pierson, 2004).

Data Sources

The study is grounded on a qualitative secondary data as the main source of the study is a wide range of authoritative and credible sources of secondary data. They are formal policy documents such as the US National Security Strategies, reports on Indo-Pacific Strategy, China defense white papers, Pakistani foreign policy statements and official communiqués around the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. The documents present first hand information about the state intents, strategic accounts and policy priorities (Bowen, 2009).

In addition, peer-reviewed academic sources, including journal articles, books and policy reports published between 2013 and 2024 have used in the study. Publications on think tanks by institutions like Brookings Institution, RAND Corporation, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and International Institute of Strategic Studies are also included to complement scholarly analysis and interpretation of policies.

Method of Analysis

Data is analysed through the qualitative document analysis which involves systematic analysis and coding of data as well as interpretation of textual materials to determine any recurring themes, strategic trends and policy changes (Bowen, 2009). This technique is especially useful when analyzing official documents and strategic texts since it enables the researcher to discover both explicit policy standpoints as well as underlying strategic presumptions.

Some of the key concepts that are based on the strategic triangle theory that guide the analysis include alignment behavior, strategic pressure, hedging and pivot-state dynamics. These concepts are analytical classes according to which the actions of the US, Sino-Pakistan cooperation and the reaction of Pakistan to these strategies are evaluated.

Time Frame and Case Delimitation

The empirical and analytical relevance of the results is achieved through the selection of the period examined in the study 2013-2024. This time frame is notable because it marks the start and growth of CPEC, the escalation of US-China strategic competition and major regional developments, including the US withdrawal of Afghanistan. This period of analysis will permit concentrating on contemporary processes and will not permit excessive generalization to the distant past (Gerring, 2007).

Analysis and Discussion

This section focuses on the development of the US-China-Pakistan strategic triangle since 2013-2024 through the lens of three different periods in time which correspond to the Barack Obama, Donald J. Trump and Joe Biden administrations. Based on the Strategic Triangle Theory, the analysis illustrates how changes in US strategic pressure on China transformed Pakistan external alignments and ability to achieve a deeper level of Sino-Pakistan economic and security cooperation. The discourse incorporates both qualitative and analytical evaluation to demonstrate the changes in relationships between administrations.

1. Strategic rebalancing and managed accommodation in Obama Tenure (2013-2016)

With the announcement of the so-called Pivot to Asia, aimed at rebalancing American diplomatic, economic and military focus on the Asia-Pacific region, the Obama administration marked the dawn of a structural shift in US grand strategy (Clinton, 2011; Campbell and Ratner, 2018). Although such approach was indicative of an increasing concern about the long-term ascent of China. It nevertheless, did not go beyond the explicit concern with the long-term rise of China but did not imply explicit containment (Ikenberry, 2018).

This phase saw a qualitatively new level of Sino-Pakistan relations with the announcement of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in 2013 and its formal introduction in 2015. CPEC institutionalized the Chinese economic presence in Pakistan with big scale investments in energy, infrastructure and connectivity which took the relationship beyond the traditional defense

cooperation (Summers, 2016; Rolland, 2017). The financial commitments of China in this period were packaged as development-oriented and less strategically coercive which lessened the initial international opposition.

CPEC was the target of the US during the Obama administration which was defined by strategic ambiguity. On the one hand, publicly, the US officials positively welcomed the region economic development, on the other hand, privately, they raised concerns over project transparency, governance capacity and long-term strategic implications (Markey, 2020). Critically, with no overt US antagonism, there was no direct pressure to cause an immediate impact on Pakistan allowing Sino-Pakistan cooperation to grow with minimal external restraint. But the relations between the US and Pakistan worsened during this time because of the counterterrorism confrontations, drone strikes and ever-growing mistrust following incidents like the Abbottabad raid (Riedel, 2013; Fair, 2019). These frictions decreased Pakistani confidence in Washington and increased the relative appeal of China as a steadfast and non-conditional partner.

2. Strategic confrontation and countervailing alignment during Trump Tenure (2017-20):

The Trump administration was characterized by a significant break in the US-China relations. This shift in favor of strategic confrontation, economic decoupling and geopolitical competition was explicitly identified in the 2017 US National Security Strategy (NSS), which explicitly placed China as a revisionist power (US NSS, 2017; Mearsheimer, 2021). This recalibration had far-reaching implications in the South Asian and the strategic environment within Pakistan.

In contrast to the Obama era, the Trump administration openly criticized the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and gestured out CPEC as a strategically problematic initiative. US senior officials described CPEC as unsustainable in terms of economics and a move that was driven by strategic reasons (Pompeo, 2018; Hillman, 2020). At the same time, the US security aid to Pakistan was stopped and the relations between the countries became even worse (Fair, 2019).

In terms of Strategic Triangle Theory, this step can be viewed as direct and coercive strategic pressure which is supposed to weaken the

partnerships of China. Yet, there are empirical results indicating that the US pressure resulted in the opposite effects of alignment. Instead of dissociating itself with China, Pakistan increased the pace of diplomatic coordination, reaffirmed CPEC as a national priority and deepened its collaboration with Beijing in term of military aspect (Wolf, 2019; Small, 2020).

China reacted as a strategic move to consolidate her commitment to Pakistan to increase military cooperation and to provide political support to Islamabad in international forums. This reciprocal reinforcement is an indication of a transition to a more stable marriage pattern where China and Pakistan are brought closer together as a result of the US exclusionary policy.

3. Institutionalized competition and strategic hedging in Biden Tenure (2021-2024):

The Biden administration made some structural changes while keeping the background of strategic competition with China. Instead of unilateral coercion, Washington institutionalized rivalry with the help of alliance networks, multilateral diplomacy and normative framing (White House, 2022; Medeiros, 2023). China continued to be the epicenter of the US perception of threat but it was replaced by the tactical engagement instead of overt confrontation.

The US withdrawal of Afghanistan in 2021 was one of the most important changes at this stage that altered the regional applicability of Pakistan and re-created a limited diplomatic space with the Washington (Markey, 2022). Since the US continued to distrust CPEC, the pressure was even more indirect and hidden within the greater Indo-Pacific constructs. Pakistan responded by taking a hedging policy whereby it retained its strategic alliance with China, yet walking the fine line so as to re engage the United States. The economic and security relations between China and Pakistan were good but entered into a more pragmatic stage which was influenced by internal economic factors, security issues and rebalancing of projects (Khan, 2022; Sattar, 2021).

Findings

This paper aimed at discussing the role of the United States in Sino-Pakistan relations between

2013 and 2024 in the dynamics of a strategic triangle of two competing great powers and a middle pivot state. Based on qualitative document analysis and Strategic Triangle Theory, the results indicate that there are a number of interrelated patterns explaining how Sino-Pakistan relations have evolved under varying amounts of strategic pressure exerted by the US.

1. US strategic pressure functioned as the primary conditioning variable

The most notable study finding is that US strategic behavior towards China became the most influential conditioning variable determining the course of Sino-Pakistan relations. During all three administrations, the intensity of US policy of engagement and soft balancing to open confrontation had a direct influence on the strategic calculus of Pakistan.

The times when the US had low or medium pressure on it coincided with the times when Pakistan had an increased flexibility of its options and a narrowed set of strategic choices. In the Obama administration, the US pressure was relatively low which enabled Pakistan to seek greater cooperation with China without blatantly antagonizing Washington. Instead, the open containment position of the Trump administration towards China, as well as the use of coercive policies towards Pakistan resulted in a sharp increase in strategic pressure.

This landscape has greatly changed the cost benefit analysis by Pakistan with respect to China and this has strengthened the position of China as the best strategic ally of Pakistan. With the Biden administration, the pressure became more institutionalized and indirect, allowing Pakistan to re-establish its relationship partly but without changing its alignment with China.

2. Intensified US Pressure Reinforced Sino-Pak Alignment Rather than weakening it

The second important conclusion is that greater US pressure was always strengthening as opposed to weakening Sino-Pakistan strategic alignment. The assumptions that the pressure of the outside world was going to drive Pakistan to turn its back on China, the facts show the opposite. With the US pressure reaching its peak during the Trump administration, Sino-Pakistan

cooperation has reached the highest levels in the spheres of economy, security and diplomacy.

This trend reinforces the key hypothesis of Strategic Triangle Theory according to which the pressure by one of the great powers may push a pivot state further towards the direction of the rival power. China acted in a strategic manner to US pressure by reaffirming political support to Pakistan, accelerating CPEC-related activities and increasing defense cooperation. The resultant realignment was not the opportunistic bandwagoning but a rational effort to respond to external constraints and the perceived abandonment by Washington.

3. Pakistan demonstrated strategic agency through hedging rather than passive alignment

The conclusions also highlight the strategic agency of Pakistan in being a pivot state and challenging the depiction of Pakistan as a passive recipient of great-power influence. Although under pressure Sino-Pakistan alignment only intensified, there was no move by Pakistan to have an exclusive Sino-Pakistan alignment. Rather it followed a hedging plan that was inconsistent in different administrations.

With Obama, Pakistan struck a balance between the two powers. With Trump, the hedging space was greatly reduced, triggering reactive alignment with China. Pakistan was able to re-expand its hedging approach but retain the fundamental relationship with Beijing under Biden with partial re-engagement between the two countries. This trend shows that the conduct of Pakistan cannot be well understood in terms of simplistic models of bandwagoning or balancing; instead, it is adaptive strategy selection within structural constraints.

4. Economic and security dimensions of Sino-Pakistan relations were mutually reinforcing

Another significant conclusion is that economic and security cooperation between China and Pakistan developed in reciprocal reinforcing fashion, especially in times of increased pressure by the US. CPEC was not only the economic project but also the strategic gesture of long-term dedication. The more the US opposed CPEC, the more political and security involvement of China in Pakistan increased.

The research concludes that strategic lock-in effects were produced through economic

cooperation which made Sino-Pakistan alignment more resistant to external pressure. This association lessened the susceptibility of Pakistan towards the coercive instruments of the United States, including the suspension of aid and increased the leverage of China as the major development and security partner of Pakistan.

5. Strategic Triangle Configurations Shifted Across Administrations

The results indicate that the US-China-Pakistan triangle was not fixed but changed among three distinguishable configurations. With Obama administration, the triangle was a soft balance with moderate competition and moderate involvement. The triangle under Trump shifted towards the stable marriage formation with China and Pakistan coming closer in reaction to the US exclusion. The triangle under Biden became a competitive model that is managed but with limited elasticity. These changes validate the idea that triangular relationships are dynamic and receptive to change in the behavior of great powers.

Policy implications

The policy implications of the findings of this study include important policies implemented by Pakistan, China and the United States with regard to increasing great-power competition and strategic triangle dynamics. With the US-China rivalry still shaping regional and global politics, strategic decisions made by middle powers like Pakistan will have far-reaching implications on the stability of the region, the advancement of the economy and cooperation in the area of security.

1. Policy implications for Pakistan: Managing strategic autonomy

The most dangerous policy implication of Pakistan is the importance to institutionalize a consistent policy of strategic autonomy instead of reactive alignment. These results establish that although the US pressure led to the enhancement of Sino-Pakistan ties, excessive dependency on a particular great power may decrease the flexibility in the policy. Pakistan must hence consider adopting a balanced hedging policy that would ensure that its fundamental strategic relationship with China is

maintained without prejudice to its functional relationship with the United States.

Practically, Pakistan needs to diversify diplomatic and economic aspect of foreign policy without compromising CPEC and signaling the inconsistency of foreign policy. Increased transparency, better governance and economic sustainability of CPEC projects would not only mitigate domestic issues, but also external critiques and strategic weaknesses.

2. Reframing CPEC as an economic rather than geopolitical initiative

The second implication is related to the strategic framing of CPEC. The analysis reveals that the US resistance towards CPEC intensified as the project was more and more viewed as a geopolitical tool and not development project. To reduce the effects of the perception of zero-sum competition, Pakistan and China should collectively focus on highlighting the economic rationale of CPEC and its benefits for regional connectivity.

Policy wise, the expansion of the third-party involvement, increase project transparency and alignment of CPEC with larger regional development objectives has the potential to diminish external opposition and increase its legitimacy. This would assist in ensuring that CPEC does not become a target of great-power conflict whilst maintaining its strategic and economic importance to Pakistan.

3. Implications for China: sustaining strategic partnerships under competition

To China, the results underscore the need to maintain strategic alliances without further increasing the great-power rivalry. Although the US pressure strengthened Sino-Pakistan alignment, excessive securitization of economic activities may strengthen the containment narratives. This means that China must keep on walking the line between strategic backing of Pakistan and diplomatic assurance and economic expediency.

The long-term interests of China are better served when it encourages economic stability, governance and integration of Pakistan into the region instead of increasing the dependency level. This would enhance the stability of the Sino-Pakistan alliance and make it less likely to be forced out of a policy.

4. Implications for the United States: avoiding counterproductive coercion

The study findings imply a unique implication on the US policy; coercion and pressure on pivot states may backfire. The US action of isolating China through pressuring Pakistan led to an increase in Sino-Pakistan alignment at the expense of the US strategic plans. A better strategy would entail selective involvement, economic inducement and problem based collaboration as opposed to general coercion. It is noteworthy that the US policymakers should have known the structural constraints and strategic opportunities that Pakistan is facing. Re-engagement based on trade, climate cooperation, regional stability initiatives and development assistance would provide Washington with more leverage and diminish the monopoly that China has over Pakistan strategic options.

5. Regional stability and strategic triangle management

The results of the study indicate that strategic triangles are important to manage instead of ensuring binary decisions. The South Asian stability is in the fact that it is not necessary to be involved in the politics of any strict bloc which makes it more insecure and less in diplomatic space. The disruptive effect of great-power rivalry can be mitigated by encouraging the effects of confidence-building, economic interdependence and multilateral dialogue. The interdependent character of strategic relationships should be realized by policy makers on the three sides of the triangle. Any policies that tend to exclude or coerce third parties will tend to lead to unintended consequences, but inclusive and flexible policies have the potential to produce more potential to bring about stability.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how the United States influences the development of the Sino-Pakistan relations between 2013 and 2024 using the analytical-strategic-theory of Strategic Triangle Theory. By placing Pakistan at the crossroads of the escalating US-China rivalry, the study aimed to go beyond bilateral explanations and provide more of an integrated explanation of the role of the great-power rivalry on the strategic behavior

of the middle states. The results indicate that US strategic behavior was a critical conditioning variable that invariably influenced but never determined the intensity and orientation of Sino-Pakistan relations.

The empirical investigation of the Obama, Trump and Biden governments revealed that there was a definite and repeated trend. The ups and downs of the US strategic pressure allowed Pakistan to maintain a balance between its relationship with Washington and Beijing. On the other hand, the heightened pressure of the US on Pakistan particularly under the Trump administration significantly limited the strategic options of Pakistan and enhanced its partnership with China. In lieu of weakening the Sino-Pakistan cooperation, coercive US policies had a counterproductive effect increasing the economic, security and diplomatic cooperation between Islamabad and Beijing. The outcome reveals the unexpected consequences of coercive strategies against pivot states that are a part of asymmetric power structures.

In theory, the present research demonstrates the adaptability and applicability of the Strategic Triangle Theory in contemporary international politics. The theory, although originally intended to explain the power relations of the cold war period is helpful in explaining the dynamics of the current great-power competition, including the role played by geo-economic instruments and institutionalized competition. The US-China-Pakistan triangle shows the way in which the alignment patterns are not fixed or deterministic but change in response to changes in the strategic pressure, threat perception and opportunity structures.

The paper also identifies the importance of geo-economics in establishment of strategic alignments. What was particularly intriguing is that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor did not simply occur as a development project rather as a strategic anchor that augmented the interdependence between China and Pakistan in the long-term. The emergence of US opposition of CPEC started the growth of strategic value of the project which increased the bilateral alignment and reduced the exposure of Pakistan to foreign pressure. This finding challenges the power-based strategy of analyzing power and underscores the increasing

significance of economic connectedness in contemporary power politics.

In the example of China and the United States the results have broader implications as to how the strategic competition is dealt with. The policies that are oriented on coercing or excluding third states are likely to cause resistance and counter-alignment which are detrimental to strategic goals. The more sustainable is the fact that the interdependence of triangular relationships and the provision of space to middle states to explore flexible and practical foreign policies had come true.

To conclude, the paper holds that the US factor has played a central role- although not decisive in the development of Sino-Pakistan relations between 2013 and 2024. The development of this relationship is the reflection of not only great-power competition but also of strategic agency and adaptive behavior of Pakistan in a complex triangular structure. With the global power balance becoming more and more polarized, the understanding of such triangular processes will continue to be of critical significance to the scholars and policymakers in a globally polarized international system.

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