

Balancing Act: Pakistan's Strategic Navigation of Increasing Reliance on China

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Abstract

The shifting dynamics of Pakistan's strategic partnership with China provide a fitting story of diplomacy and international interdependence which could be epitomized in the Pakistan's official approach known as the 'Balancing Act'. The development of diplomatic and operational ties with the outside world is key to the understanding and development of Pakistan and therefore as the tangle of these geometries intensify the role that China plays in Pakistan increases in proportions. This paper aims at examining Pakistan's ability to develop a stronger strategic relationship with China as well as maintain its conventional relations with other states of the world to strike a balance in its diplomacy. Evidently, Pakistan's main strategy is its socioeconomic reliance on China, which has been exemplified by the CPEC. This multi-billion-dollar infrastructure project improves the connectivity of Pakistan and entangles it further into China's economic parameter. Nevertheless, during these economic reforms, there are several issues which complicate Pakistan's positions of strategic independence and state sovereignty, including increasing tensions in South Asia and other parts of the world. Also, Pakistan's relations with China are not only limited to cooperation in the commercial field but include a strong military cooperation, includes mutual exercise of forces and arms deal. The deployment of these forces is in defense of the country's interests and also ensures that it is on the same side of the fence as China in the region. However, as Pakistan is aligning itself more and more with China, issues related with the repercussions on other allies and regional countries such as the United States as well as other regional and world powers are apparent, hence, illustrating the concept of the "Balancing Act" that is far from being achieved yet in case of Pakistan's foreign policy strategy.

Keywords: Pakistan's Strategic Navigation, China's Influence, CPEC, Balancing Act

Introduction

Pakistan has been maneuvering in the international relations just like a tightrope dancer who has to maintain her balance while performing. Staring at this diplomatic tightrope, it has a haven in China as a strategic partner and cooperating economically. This relationship generally described as the 'all-weather friendship' has strengthened remarkably in the recent past, which clearly defines a new phase in the Pakistan's foreign policy scenario (Khan, 2021; Ahmed, 2020). The increasing relations with the China would bring plenty of economic advantages in terms of projects including the China-Pak Economic Corridor (CPEC), the main aim of which is to boost infrastructure and connectivity across Pakistan. This grand plan that started in 2013, shows the strategic imperative of China in seeking to control and therefore guaranteeing markets, and nurturing regional integration (Ahmed, 2020). Furthermore, it situates Pakistan at the very center of the Chinese BRI that connects East Asia and the Middle East, thus furthering the country's strategic importance (Khan, 2021).

However, economic benefits are not the only way we view Pakistan's increasing involvement with China; however, it makes several key questions that are connected to the issue of strategic independence and dependents in informational analyzation, Smith, 2023). Despite the assurance it provides key economic resources and military support such as combined exercises and weapons acquisition, its detractor's state they ought to avoid the risks that go with depending on one country (Jones, 2022). This duality highlights the nuances that characterize the country's external relations since yields and threats, economic well-being and security threats affect sovereignty and diplomatic mobility (Hussain, 2019). For example, gains and losses of the CPEC continue to be discussed in Pakistan concerning its effect on the sovereignty and sustainable economy of the country by exploiting the claims of debt trap diplomacy and unfair distribution of economic rewards and risks (Ahmed, 2020).

This paper aims to find out how Pakistan intends to, on one hand, gain maximum advantage from the developing strategic partnership with China while, on the other hand, it also to sustain a balanced foreign policy profile at the same time. This involves maintaining strong bi-lateral ties with the traditional friends like United States and at the same time catering to regional friendly nations like India and Afghanistan (Malik, 2024). That is why the entente with China is an important vector of Pakistan's geopolitical orientation and determines its position on security

problems in South Asia, the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific region, as well as on the formation of international relations (Ali, 2023). It is not only limited to economic but also in defense where both Pakistan and China have been conducting joint military exercises with an agreement of defense equipment purchase. This military cooperation does not only strengthen the military security of Pakistan but also closely integrates it into China's system of strategic security interests in the region regarding the confrontation with such a powerful neighbor as India and the stability of maritime security in the Indian Ocean (Jones, 2022; Malik, 2024). But this alignment demands diplomacy to ensure that it is not seen as a threat to other regional powers besides balancing between economic gains and independence (Hussain, 2019).

The Rise of China-Pakistan Ties

China-Pakistan relationship evolved from the cold war period of the Third World politics where both the countries aligned themselves mainly because of security interest and similar mistrust of the Soviet Union. This fundamental rapport was the basis for trust and cooperation, which would define the nature of the friendship between Great Britain and the United States of America. These diplomatic relations have largely evolved and have been manifested in standard bi lateral diplomacy and economic interconnectivity coupled with military relations in the last several decades. Today, their relations can be defined as unconditional 'all-weather' relations which imply that this relation does not depend on the geopolitical or any other changes (Khan, 2021). This strategic partnership has been instrumental in influencing the regional politics especially due to the fact that Pakistan has been closely aligned with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that seeks to integrate the Asian country with other countries in the region and the rest of the world. An essential component in modern Sino-Pak relations is the CPEC, which was initiated in 2013, within the BRI concept. Currently, CPEC is symbolizing a strong investment in the development of Pakistan especially in the sectors of transport, energy and communication.

CPEC is aimed at creating economic corridors running from the Chinese western region up to the Gwadar Port Pakistan which is much advantageous to china for easier access to Arabian sea, while at the same time can offer Pakistan favorable grounds for its economic development and job opportunities (Ahmed, 2020; Khan, 2021). In addition to infrastructure building, CPEC is a people's project as it manifests the growing economic cooperation and mutual dependence of the two countries. Apart from the economic partnership, China and Pakistan have long term and

emphatic military relations to their credit. This military cooperation involves military drills, sharing of defense technologies, and counter-terrorism cooperation. China has become the largest source of arms import in Pakistan, increasing the Pakistan's capability to challenge regional security threats (Jones, 2022). Military cooperation between China and Pakistan does not only advance the Pakistan military capability and improves the regional security; which is important in the perception of maritime security in the Indian Ocean region and joint campaign against terrorism and extremism (Jones, 2022).

Benefits of a Strong China-Pakistan Relationship

The China-Pakistan relationship has remained mutually beneficial for both countries, especially in the economic capacity and prosperity of Pakistan through the Belt and Road Initiative and particularly, CPEC. CPEC describes a vision to improve infrastructure in off course Pakistan but across all sectors such as transport, power projects, and industrial zones for which it was also launched as a flagship project for China's Belt Road Initiative. In terms of capital, it is estimated that after accounting for projects of over \$60 billion, CPEC is one of the largest infrastructure development projects in the history of Pakistan with a view towards enhancing the country's modernization, employment prospects as well as the development of interconnection of the region (Ahmed, 2020; Khan, 2021). It also helps fill the gap of infrastructure in Pakistan while at the same time catering to China's strategic interests of linking maritime trade and economic connectivity across Asia.

On the other hand, China has provided strong military backup that has seen growth of Pakistan's military strength. Over the years, China has become Pakistan's major supplier of modern and sophisticated military hardware and technology needed in the modernization of the Pakistan military forces, thus enhancing their cooperation in the defense front. Thus, defense cooperation includes combined military rehearse, trading of protective technology and cooperation in countering terrorism that clearly shows the strength of the defense ties that help to maintain regional security and build up the Pakistan's defense capability (Jones, 2022).

Additionally, it goes beyond mere economic and military alliance, for example, another strategic importance of China Pakistan relationship is that it has a countering influence against India in the South Asian region. Accordingly, as India appears to increase its influence and activity in the region, Pakistan finds that it has China on its side of the conflict and with strategic partnership,

which gives Islamabad diplomatic muscles and the economy's immunity. As the Chinese ambassador to Pakistan Kenji pledged in January 2021, continued support from China strengthens Pakistan's flexibility in regional political relations and helps it address security issues of mutual concern and maintain regional stability (Khan, 2021). It also contributes to the enhancement of Pakistan's economic development and the improvement of its defense capacities and its strategic presence in the South Asia region. Important constituent of China-Pakistan Relations Deepening relations of China with Pakistan do not only help the Pakistan economically and to make it stronger in defense but it also play a vital role in giving enhanced strategic position to Pakistan in South Asian region. This complex partnership defines a comprehensive cooperation agreement based on the aim of achieving the development of both countries and the improvement of the regional connectivity and cooperation, indicating both countries as the loci of the favorable geopolitical development of the region.

Challenges of Dependence

The inclusion of CPEC and Pakistan's reliance on China generates several factors for the enhancement of Pakistan's soft power. Debtor and opaque have been the two common criticisms levelled to CPEC projects by different scholars such as Malik (2023) Siddiqui (2022) and others. Based on the size and nature of Chinese investments and loans connected with CPEC, there is a troubling sign of Pakistan's poor debt resilience and its capacity to pay and service its debt during the economic changes (Soomro, 2021). Certainly, the level of Pakistan's entanglement with China may put the sovereignty and more notably, the economic sovereignty of Pakistan at risk. Since the china increasingly plays a role in funding and implementing important infrastructure projects in Pakistan including transport and energy sectors, Pakistani experts also have concerns over the country's ability to manage its economic and strategic affairs (Malik, 2023; Siddiqui, 2022). This dependency might put the talent out of the reach of Pakistani people to bargain improved terms and also getting to own important frames of infrastructure; it also initiate a concern of economic sovereignty and national interest.

In the same manner, close relations with China may burden the traditional friendly relations between Pakistan and the United States and other Western countries. As for the Pakistan, historically, Pakistan has kept strategic relations with the U. S in defense and security affairs, but the strong relations with china may entail geo-strategic rivalry and divergent interest between

these super powers (Soomro, 2021). These two sets of alignments are the foreign policy assets that remain difficult for Pakistan to manage for providing balance to its international relations in conjunction with managing regional politics and international relations that exist between countries. On one hand the bilateral relationship between China and Pakistan presents economic advantages and strategic opportunities; but on the other Pakistan has several problems that arise from the growing close relation with China. These challenges include economic concern as a result of the projects that are of CPEC, issue of sovereignty and economic independence, and possible pressure on the relation between Pakistan and traditional allies of west. Solving these issues needs efficient economic policies, proper disclosure of the project implementation, and skillful diplomacy to protect country's interest and at the same time being neutral and not inclining toward any specific country.

Navigating the Tightrope

Pakistan has been amid the quagmire of managing its strategic partnerships; or, as it can be called more of a balancing act. Australia has to use the improving relations with China to ensure that economic benefits and development of security structures from Beijing's influence are maximized while avoiding the pitfalls associated with a solely reliance on one global giant. That imperative therefore casts Pakistan the responsibility of diversifying its strategic interactions in so many directions. However, the kind of relations which Pakistan enjoys with China through the CPEC and other deals and through military cooperation, Pakistan needs to handle these relations with caution to avoid getting dominated and loosed of its sovereign control.

Strategic diversification also implies the nurturing of strong relations with traditional friends which include the United States that contributes significantly to Pakistan's defense security strategy as well as regional security endeavors. A fine balance means that Pakistan can manage the complexities of the international environment to avail the opportunities of relations such as CPEC and at the same time not lose its sovereignty and strategic autonomy (Aziz, 2021). As a consequence, Pakistan may broaden its diplomatic sphere of influence and improve its configuration of strategically advantageous interactions with the other regional actors and international actors.

Evidently, maintaining and improving relations with neighboring countries and other regional players constitute the key of Pakistan's geopolitical approach. Apart from economic and security

factors, it is in Pakistan's interest to have cooperative relationship with countries in South Asia and the extended Middle East that could make it a regional stabilizer and key player in resolving many of the conflicts in the region. Besides, it also "relocates" Pakistan on the map of the region as a significant actor and enhances the country's immunity to pressures and changes taking place in the world. Thus, the exact critical course for Pakistan's strategic orientation is to embrace its all-weather friendship with China while not losing sight of the need for the diversification of its strategic relationships. This way, using its partnership with such countries as the United States and focusing on developing regional cooperation, Pakistan is able to cope with the geopolitical threats and ensure the maximum level of economic and security investments.

Looking Ahead

Thus, there should be no doubt about the focus of Pakistan's foreign policy making: the fundamental urgency of this project consists in the fact that only the right approach to the multiplex realities of the world tomorrow will determine the success of the further evolution of the country and secure the safety of its people. At the heart of this task lies the attempt to keep on calibrating the intensity of its integration with China so as to make the most of the rising economic gains while simultaneously not over-exposing itself to the China factor. Although China's investments especially through the utilization of its Belt and Road initiative such as CPEC present significant economic gains to Pakistan it is vital that Pakistan guard its sovereignty and policy making independence to the rights of these investments. Fundamental to Pakistan's long-term plan is the need to build up its own strengths economically and technologically. Hence, by developing infrastructure internally, supporting local businesses, and encouraging invention, Pakistan can support itself and be less vulnerable to foreign cooperation's (Khan, 2021). At the same time, this approach not only contributes to sustainable economic development but also strengthens Pakistan's capacity to secure more favorable conditions in international cooperation and expand the nature of its relations.

Moreover, therefore, as Pakistan plans for the future, sustentation of a broad and balanced spectrum of strategic relations regally synonymous remains mandatory. Cultivating and enhancing relationships with traditional partners, such as the United States, yet also deepening interactions with regional actors and enjoying affiliation with international organizations gives

Pakistan a multilayered strategy through which one can protect and advance peculiar national interests and boosting its geopolitical standing (Ahmed, 2020). It is possible to state that proactive diplomacy helps Pakistan adapt to new conditions in the international context and become a guarantor of stability in South Asia. Thus, Pakistan's future capacities for survival, territorial security, and strategic mobility stand in relation to its successful management of the challenges of its international counterparts. Thus, with proper regard to economical returns and independence, focusing on the internal development, as well as diversifying its diplomatic relations and partnerships, Pakistan can become a significant actor in the region and worldwide in order to achieve its sustainable growth and development.

Conclusion

In the context of foreign politics, Pakistan stands at a crossroads that requires it to deftly manage conflicting alliances and working relations, as well as shifting economic interests including a growing partnership with China by way of infrastructure projects such as the CPEC. On the one hand CPEC holds great economic opportunities and is expected to do a great deal of business involving infrastructure and improving connectivity, however the increasing economic relations come with their risks. Thus, for Pakistan it is crucial to address the problem and minimize its dependency without giving up the foreign resources supplied. This requires the optimization of the partnership and cooperation with China in terms of the economic benefits derived while at the same time diversifying the strategic interactions. In the future, sustainability of Pakistan and flexibility of its position depends on the reinforcement of internal economic and technological potential. This would eliminate dependence on foreign powers and develop solid foundations for the country's economy based on infrastructure development, encouragement of innovations, and support of indigenous industries. At the same time, it will help Pakistan to sustain a pro forma relations with traditional American ally and start a new process of growing relations with regional actors which will give it more diplomatic cards to play in case rises new complex set of challenges in world politics. Thus, stability and development of the future Pakistan require a sound and preferably active policy in the sphere of international relations. It becomes crucial to achieve fair freedom and growth within the international politics and ensure countries' protection and interests assertion within the global processes. Thus, overcoming its difficulties and risks, by building a diversified portfolio of partnership and investing in domestic development, Pakistan

has all the possibilities to become a key player in regional and world politics and economics, active member of the global community today that will be ready to move forward confidently towards new goals and achievements in the context of the global processes of modernity. This strategic foresight will be imperative as Pakistan goes on to steer it's toward a rudder to cope with the new challenges and opportunities globally.

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