

STRATEGIC CONVERGENCE AND COMPETITION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION: POLICY OPTIONS FOR PAKISTAN

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Abstract

With Indo-Pacific being the stage for US-China strategic influence, South East Asia's geopolitical scenario is likely to be transformed considerably. By declaring India as a Net Security Provider, the US has backed its outreach in the region by officially adjoining Pacific and Indian Oceans as the Indo-Pacific region. Major countries of the region including China, Russia, India, and Pakistan are in the phase of diversifying and reconfiguring their relationships. Within this scenario, Pakistan and India are likely to pursue their strategic interests that take them in opposite directions. While the US endows India with its strategic partner status, CPEC in Pakistan has emerged as a litmus test for China's BRI. The contestation is to have a direct bearing on the strategic matrix of South Asia generally and Pakistan particularly. This qualitative research under the framework of realist/neo-realist and complex interdependence's assumptions undertakes to account for this Sino-US strategic convergence and competition that is leading to a security dilemma in South Asia with implications for Pakistan. It concludes cooperation between the US and China is to enhance Pakistan's security both internal and external while competition is to erode it. Alongside, this paper formulates some policy options for Pakistan's decisionmakers for ensuring the security and socio-economic development of the country.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific Region, Pivot to Asia, BRI, CPEC, Strategic Convergence.

Introduction

US naval officer and historian, Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, once said: "Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This ocean is the key to the seven seas in the twenty-first century, the destiny of the world will be decided in these waters."¹ The Asia-Pacific or Indo-Pacific region (interchangeable terms) is increasingly becoming a focus of attention for competing interests of the US and China to gain strategic influence. This power quest is likely to transform the geopolitical scenario not only in the Asia-Pacific region but also in South Asia. The Indo-Pacific region signifies the importance of joining the US, India, and other major Asian states - Japan and Australia - to curb China's growing influence in this region, like the "Cold War". Competing interests of the US and China are likely to transform the strategic environs of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean and will have pronounced implications for South Asian.

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By declaring India as the Net Security Provider, the US has backed its strategic presence in the Indian Ocean as well as outreach to the Pacific Ocean, thus, officially declared both regions as the Indo-Pacific region. According to the US National Security Strategy-2017, the Indo-Pacific region is the center of geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of the world. The US resurgence to the Indo-Pacific region aims at curbing China's continuous rise as an economic giant while placing India at the center of its policy besides acknowledging it as the leading power worthy of the US defense and security agreements. Thus, major countries of the region including China, Russia, India, and Pakistan are in the phase of diversifying and reconfiguring their relationships.² These changing geopolitical configurations are leading to the emergence of a new global order having a strategic shift of the US from 'Trans-Atlantic' to 'Trans-Pacific' politics. The Indo-Pacific region is, therefore, turned out to be a new global stage for geopolitical, economic, and military competition among great powers characterizing this 21st century as 'The Asian Century'.³

This qualitative method-based research attempts to examine major powers' quest for strategic and economic influence in the Indo-Pacific region vis-à-vis the US Pivot to Asia and China's Belt-Road Initiative (BRI). While India and Pakistan's placement is central, the alignment is to have a considerable impact on South Asian security calculus. Within this environment, what security issues Pakistan is likely to face alongside prioritizing its strategic interests in the midst of great powers' quests are to be examined. The hypothesis entails that US-China strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region has a significant impact on Pakistan's security whereas a cooperative milieu is necessary to enhance its security and wellbeing. The theoretical assumptions of realism (neo-realism) and complex interdependence theories are helpful in examining the Sino-US relations at economic and strategic levels. The paper concludes by proposing policy options implying that the balancing of Pakistan's foreign policy choices is to be a logical and sensible course of action for the country's security and socio-economic development.

Background to US-China Strategic Competition

The rising geopolitical relations among great powers are based on the interests of acquiring economic might while being well aware of a gigantic shift in the 21st century characterized by geo-economics. The notion of power has taken predominantly an economic dimension and is a potent driving force determining almost every move in domestic, political, and global spheres. Against this backdrop, US-China relations especially at the economic level have a potential bearing on the existing global order. Since the end of the Cold War, the US has enjoyed the only superpower status of the world. However, China's gradual ascendance as an economic power is likely to challenge the western liberal system. In this context, China is to be a true peer competitor for the US. The recent US strategy of making alliances with Asian powers is indicative of the offshore balancing strategy especially with India that manifested in the Asia-Pacific region and later in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). It is considered to be the strategy aimed at containing China - a country on the course of integrating Asia, Africa, and Europe through mega-infrastructure and connectivity projects under its BRI.⁴

Counting on Asia-Pacific dividends, it a region that includes East Asian, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Oceania region. Its significance hinges at fast-paced East Asian economies, home to almost half of the world's population, one-third of the world's economy, an abundance of natural resources, growing financial markets, and international trade sea routes. Though the Asia-Pacific region has undergone a number of structural changes, like the US rebalancing rooted in Trans-Pacific Partnership (TTP) to prevent the Sino-centric regional order, from strengthening and related developments. Nevertheless, opportunities, such as human capital, natural resources, money markets and international sea-lines of communications for achieving development and growth, are far greater than any other regions of the world.⁵

This region has seen phenomenal growth in the regional economies, such as China, by expanding investment and trade markets and developing new maritime trade routes connecting the Pacific region with IOR especially through BRI. This development has challenged the US preponderance in the region and strengthened the perception that US supremacy has been dared by the economic growth of China and soon the latter is to overpower its neighbors economically and will eventually lead to stripping the US off its power as the sole superpower. Presently, both the US and China are seen to be contesting each other's influence and presence in IOR alongside the evolving strategic assertions for opposing interests. Both are equally involved via their respective visions—Pivot to Indo-Pacific and BRI—with relevant policies of convergence and competition. However, none of the two is vocal about pursuing policies of containment, balancing, or geopolitical underpinnings against each other.⁶

The Indo-Pacific region is the center of vital interest for Beijing and Washington for multiple benefits. The US is taking notice of ascendant China and has considered its strategic shift towards this region as a necessary component of US geostrategic strategy. The US “Pivot to Asia” was initiated to assure its partners and allies in the region that Washington had not faltered after participating in decades-long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Also, that it had not been crippled by economic and political nuisances at home and most importantly to tell the world that the country is not to isolate from world matters.⁷

Moreover, the US strategic outlook is a mix of diverse fundamental goals entailing to maximize its geopolitical and national interests. The same may be true for its Asia pivot initiative which, according to analysts, is infused with strategies countering rising China's economic power and accruing greater economic dividends amid deteriorating economic indicators at home. Furthermore, the US has also developed a sense of suspicion regarding China considering it to be a totalitarian political system, an extrovert military posture, besides ambitious future economic projections. Nevertheless, rising China especially under President Xi Jinping's leadership has shaped its Asia vision and balance of power vis-à-vis US-led liberal international order.⁸ China is regarded as a potent threat to US interests in Asia by the conservatives and liberals alike. Least to say, liberals uphold a peaceful engagement and cooperation with China through trade, investment, and interdependence.⁹ On the other hand, neo-realists believe in restricting

the Chinese rise through pre-emptive maneuvering characterized by diplomatic moves, alliances, and ultimately leading towards military confrontation.¹⁰

Theoretically, there has been a prevalence of different views vis-a-vis China's economic growth during the past two decades; first, the threat perception argues that China must have been modernizing its military, thereby, potentially challenge US predominance in the Asia-Pacific region.¹¹ The proponents of this view include Samuel Huntington,¹² Richard Bernstein, Ross H. Munro,¹³ and John Mearsheimer,¹⁴ who opine that the rate at which China is growing has all the potential to destabilize the present status quo not only in the Asian continent but the world. Hence, these scholars propose a strategy of containing China at the earliest and by employing all means at disposal. Second, the liberal view, which is upheld by Professor Aaron Friedberg,¹⁵ Prof. G. John Ikenberry,¹⁶ Baogang Guo and Sujian Guo.¹⁷ They emphasize that incorporating China into the world system is the right course. They argue that the growth potential of China should not be perceived as a threat to global order rather an economically ascendant China would provide huge market opportunities to the world for consumption of its goods and unbound economic growth. They base their views on the notion that China is inherently and culturally non-expansionist; the present world of mutual interdependence will eventually increase China's prosperity and as a result, it will not undertake any move to disturb the present global status quo in military and economic domains; and since China's participation in international organizations has increased manifold that would also prevent it from disturbing the status quo in the international order. Hence, China's association and involvement in the international structures are likely to influence the country pursue and observe international mechanism and practices out if its own choice and own benefit.

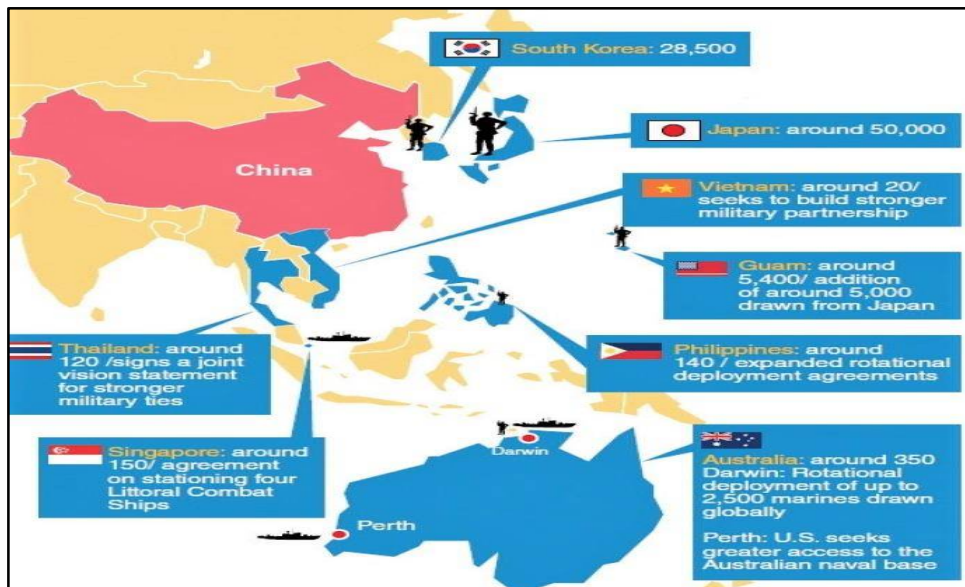
An ascendant China may be a leading consideration for US foreign policy circles and their continuous efforts at devising ways and means to keep prolonging its 'Unipolar Moment'¹⁸ in the world. However, they need to understand that China would never like to be the way the US had been in its past. Nonetheless, being skeptical of ascendant China, the US has resorted to a number of strategies pointing at containing the country, and the Pivot to Asia is yet another manifestation of its geopolitical ambitions. How far will the US be able to achieve its goals must be left to time but the consequences of a potential conflict between the two are bound to be huge. Within these changing geostrategic environs characterized by competition and cooperation assumptions of liberals and conservatives hold equal footing. Liberals under the influence of complex interdependence philosophy emphasize on a peaceful evolution by means of trade, interdependence, connectivity, and investment among countries who choose to be a part of BRI and the neorealists bloc (the US and allies) directs at retarding Chinese growth through pre-emptive measures of forming alliances in the Indo-pacific region especially with India and by building up the momentum for probable military confrontation. Having discussed the background to geopolitics in the Asia-Pacific region, the paper now attempts to highlight US Rebalancing or Pivot to Asia Strategy and China's BRI, being two competing and converging visions at play.

Pivot to Asia

The US rebalancing strategy in Asia is an amalgamation of gradually emerging different paradigms of US foreign policy taking lead from the country's defense perspective.¹⁹ Mr. Andy Marshall being one of the prominent strategic thinkers in the US military propounded this strategy.²⁰ The post-Cold War era underlined the fast-paced changing economic dimensions of the world and its strategic repercussions on geopolitical scenario made the US policy circles' extremely conscious regarding the US' future supremacy vis-a-vis a question that what would be rising China mean for the world in general and the US in particular.

The Obama administration announced its 'Pivot to Asia' strategy in 2012 that marked a great tilt in US foreign policy's focus from the Middle East and European theatre to Asian countries, some of which are located in proximity to China. This strategy was regarded as a haughty one with the overt military, economic, cultural, and diplomatic dimensions focusing on consolidating US position in Asia. It is being materialized by means of new US defense deployments and rigorous diplomatic activities marking at leveraging US position through its maritime deployments in the Asia-Pacific region. This follow-up is actually based on establishing military balance in the region that will ultimately lead to US economic preponderance. In this regard, establishing a US base in Australia is, nonetheless, a symbolic move that is accompanied by an increase in US military deployments in the region as shown in Figure-1.

Figure-1: US Policy for Asia-Pacific Rebalancing

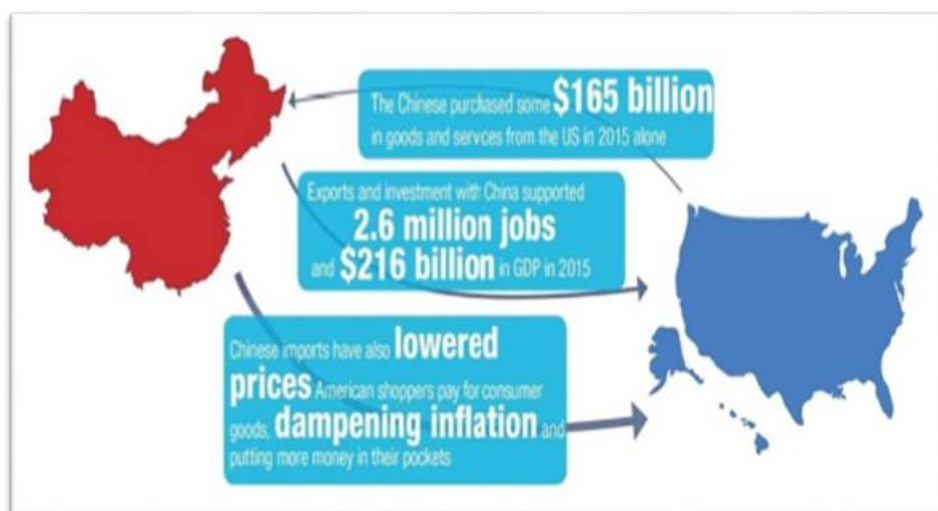


(Source: <http://www.koreaherald.com>)

This increase in military footprint in combination with diplomatic outreach to almost all neighbors of China is seen in warming up of US-Vietnam relations.²¹ In

addition, the US with its military, strategic, and economic tilt toward the Asia-Pacific region has increasingly become attentive to India that has far-reaching impacts on the strategic dynamics of South Asia. The US resurgence to Asia is perceived as the country's 'Containment policy of China'.²² The US strategic thinkers believe that weak and divided China will not be a problem for US hegemony in Asia and this goal could be achieved by establishing close diplomatic, economic, and military ties with China's neighboring countries. However, several other political analysts view that US renewed interest in Asia is not a unique phenomenon. The reality of ascendant China with unbelievable pace as a global economic power is definitely a new turning in the world's strategic domain. Nevertheless, US-China economic dependence deserves due attention as economic indicators of the year-2019 amply display the US as the world's largest economy while China as the second-largest. China's economy is, in fact, bigger than the US in terms of its Gross Domestic Production (GDP) when it is measured in Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) – with the former at \$19.617 trillion and the latter at \$19.519 trillion as revealed by the statistics of World Bank's International Comparison Program.²³ Furthermore, China has been recorded as the second-largest foreign creditor nation to the US after Japan.²⁴ With economic dependence on each other for the past two decades, one may think that the US Pivot to Asia policy is not a new but an old one.

Figure-2: US-China Trade Relationship



(Source: The US-China Business Council²⁵)

Explaining the US Pivot to Asia strategy, former National Security Advisor, Tom Donilon, delineated, in 2013, what the US was actually trying to achieve in Asia through this strategy.²⁶ US foreign policy outlines the course of action by means of creating a steady security milieu characterized by a regional hierarchy steeped in economic freedom, peaceful conflict resolution mechanisms, and honoring universal rights and liberty. These goals are to be realized via taking action in consolidating alliances, strengthening partnerships with rising powers, restructuring a constructive, productive, and stable connection with China, firming up of regional organizations, and constructing

a regional economic structure.²⁷ Also, the former US Deputy Assistant Secretary of East Asian and Pacific Affairs of the State Department, Joseph Y. Yun, reasserted these objectives once again in 2013 when he mentioned that US commitment to the Asia-Pacific region was enacted through multiple ways including extensive engagement of the country at every level deemed appropriate.

Meanwhile, stationing 2500 US marines at Australian base Darwin in 2011 as part of the Obama Administration's Pivot to Asia strategy has further solidified under Trump administration. Australia will continue hosting US troops until 2040.²⁸ Figure-3 shows the architecture of the US and China naval bases in the Pacific Ocean.

Figure-3: Naval Bases of the US and China in Pacific Ocean



(Source: <http://www.economist.com>²⁹)

This development raised alarm bells in China³⁰ despite the fact that US-China economic reality is a matter of broad integration and interdependence. However, the former's resurgence to Asia has raised a number of questions at its inherent spirit. This kind of competition and cooperation simultaneously is very much unlike the Cold War where the two opposing sides were separated along the 'Iron Curtain' as Communist and anti-Communist blocs. The present geopolitical realities colored by geoeconomics render any policy impotence where military and political strategy is devised in isolation from the economic policy.³¹ The question arises that what has compelled the US to rebalance Asia. The answer lies in the future prospects of Asia that are all about its burgeoning economy, demographic trends, natural resources, and sea lines of communication that are set to make Asian economies larger than the rest of the world collectively in 2020. Hence, the strategic power shift is visible from the West to the East and the US aims to get the lion's share from the abundant resources and wealth of Asia. For that end, the US off-shore

balancing is at play and is being strengthened via multiple hedging policies in military, economic, and strategic domains.

Practicing two contradictory policy directions is not abnormal in international relations wherein states' national interests reign supreme over all other considerations. The US pursuance of balancing and engagement strategies through forums, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) – the US, Japan, Australia, and India – for keeping a check on China's increased military and economic power beside considerable trade activities are important to note. It is said that the US is not containing China rather it is hedging its bets.³² Notwithstanding all these patterns of containment, alignment, and readjustment, US-China economic datasheet represents a reality of integration. It would be difficult to imagine both economies existing without each other. This interconnectivity between the two is evident from Chinese debt assets in manufacturing and trade and many such similar areas. The US-China economic relationship is colored more with cooperation rather than competition. Then, how could a geopolitical military strategy be detached from economic considerations? In this context, the US' resurgence to Asia is nothing new rather a policy to get the lion's share from the continent's colossal economic dividends.

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

China's prospective-economic might was predicted by David Shambaugh in 1993 when he predicted that China possessed the capability of surpassing the US and EU in economic growth in the 21st century.³³ The same sentiment was expressed by Fareed Zakaria in the cover story of his Newsweek article titled "The Rise of a Fierce Yet Fragile Superpower." He postulated that China as a global power has not remained a mere prediction rather a reality.³⁴ Hence, China, a global economic giant, has shown its outreach to the world in a massive way through its BRI projects that President Xi Jinping unveiled in 2013.³⁵ China's BRI is an aspiring strategy purpose to connect Asia, Africa, and Europe through land and maritime networks comprising six corridors with the sole purpose of augmenting regional integration with an increased trade and businesses resulting in rising economic growth. Its six corridors involve over 100 countries and global organizations, encompassing 116 projects worth about \$1 trillion. It will benefit two-third of the world's population, one-third of world's GDP, and one-fourth goods and services of the world.³⁶

BRI's two main components include the overland Silk Road Economic Belt and the Sea-based 21st century Maritime Silk Road (MSR). Together, they make up the belt and road connected with one another. This project promises unprecedented geographical and financial opportunity by imaging a \$1.3 trillion through Chinese-led investment plans that would create a strongly interwoven web of infrastructure of roads, highways, railways, energy pipelines, and telecommunications. The Silk Road Economic Belt will include high speed rail along with hydrocarbon pipeline systems.³⁷ This initiative is about improving physical land infrastructure with its six land corridors that are equivalent to the old Silk Road. These infrastructure corridors are encompassing almost 100 countries altogether with nearly 60 countries in Asia and Europe including Oceania and Africa as

well.³⁸ All the BRI projects receive financial support from the Chinese Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).³⁹

Figure-4: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)



(Source: <https://www.mekongeye.com>⁴⁰)

The immense importance of the Eurasian region in this schema of connectivity may be gauged by the geopolitical theories of political philosophers, Mackinder, Spykman, and Mahan. “The Heartland Theory” given by Mackinder propounds that the core of global influence lies in the heartland of the world, i.e., Eurasia, due to its size, affluence of resources, and population, whichever nation is in control of the heartland has the potential to command the world.⁴¹

‘The Rimland Theory’ given by Nicholas John Spykman views that whoever controls the thickly populated western, southern, and eastern parts of the Eurasian continent will be the ruler of the world.⁴² Similarly, US naval strategist, Alfred Thayer Mahan believes that national greatness owes inextricably to sea power particularly to its commercial use in peace and control in war. A nation possessing control over seas is bound to rule the world. ⁴³ Hence, BRI is a skillful move that seeks dominance in the heartland and sea that is likely to wean Europe away from the US and transforming and connecting regions via BRI with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as its lynchpin.⁴⁴ CPEC is to grant China direct access to the Indian Ocean. Through Gwadar seaport, China will accrue greater dividends via connectivity with the Suez Canal. Thus, there is rivalry in IOR by means of ‘String of Pearls Policy’ by China in competition with ‘Necklace of Diamonds Policy’ by India; hence, a battle for seaports are ensuing in IOR with India having 9 ports and China with 13.⁴⁵

Figure-5: Chinese Ports in the Indian Ocean Region



(Source: <https://www.researchgate.net>⁴⁶)

The change of magnitude in geopolitics, according to Kurt Lewin Model, will invite competition between enabling forces and constraining ones. While enabling forces to let the change take place, on the other hand, constraining forces try to retard it.⁴⁷ Hence, such a change is not uncontested as both constraining and enabling forces are at play. The US resurgence to Asia is the realization that “the future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the US will be right there at the center of the action.”⁴⁸ Ascendant China is very much in the view of US policymakers, therefore, criticism on BRI is branded as ‘Debt-Trap Policy’⁴⁹ and China being a ‘Revisionist Power’⁵⁰ is challenging current geoeconomics strategies of the US.

Marshall Plan vs. Belt and Road Initiative

Several political analysts are labeling BRI as China’s ‘Marshall Plan’. This comparison draws on geopolitical similarities existing in both initiatives having a significant bearing on the international order. The way the Soviet Union and Communism were targeted by the Marshall Plan given Communist philosophy’s rise in Europe and undermining Soviet Union’s moral superiority for its sophisticated armaments and machines that had led to the Allies’ success in WW- II, in the same way, BRI envisions strategic ends via making inroads into US area of influence by offering infrastructural aids to Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) countries to draw their support for proposed Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). The way Marshall Plan offered aid to Soviet-controlled satellite states to wean them away from the rival’s camp; BRI does the same though with greater difficulty since the contemporary world order has entrenched most countries into the global capitalist system. That’s why BRI got its early diplomatic success in the Central Asian region as those countries were less involved in the US-led economic structure. No doubt BRI does offer a systematic alternative of economic and financial vision against the US economic superstructure and

seeks greater strategic goals and influence across the globe.⁵¹ Table-1 sums up a comparison between the two.

Table-1: Comparison between Marshall Plan and BRI

US-led Marshall Plan	China-led BRI
Increased exports by exporting excessive industrial produce after WW-II in the face of lowering military demands	Industrial excessive produce post-2008-09 world financial crisis and devised its economic stimulus program in the face of declining western consumption of products
Replaced British Pound Sterling by exporting its currency (US Dollar)	Undertaking internationalization of Chinese currency Renminbi (RMB) as yet inconvertible, and closed currency
Countered the rival Soviet Union by hedging to hinder its growing influence in Europe	Hedging US control over essential trade routes used for energy supplies in the region
Fostered strategic divide; ensured geopolitically important countries such as Germany not to be under Soviet influence	Dividing existing organizations, such as Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) by providing member states with infrastructure investments
Drew off diplomatic support from Soviet satellite states but offered them aid (Yugoslavia case in point)	AIIB involves EU members and central European countries

(Source: Author's Compilation based on Comparative Study of BRI and Marshall Plan⁵²)

Convergence and Competition: An Analysis

President Trump's National Defence Strategy announced in 2018, termed the interstate competition and not terrorism as the primary concern for the US, henceforth, a clear escalation of the Asia Pivot Policy.⁵³ The manifestation of a new Cold War is already progress including high trade tariffs against imports from China, restrictions on investments to and from China, sanctions on China's military entities, US renewed arms sale to Taiwan, sanctions on Russia, and US expansion of freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea.⁵⁴ President Trump on July 11, 2019, used the term Indo-Pacific instead of Asia-Pacific saying the coinage underlined the significance of India as being a close partner to the US and with which the US has strong and rising ties. The US bestowing India with the 'Net Security Provider' status is evident in envisioning for her the role of an extra-regional anchor. That is by means of investing in the country through its capacity building, logistics exchanges, technology, and defense and thus, making her a major defense partner to the US in the region.⁵⁵

The US and China are committed to the path of constructive engagement in Asia as both are matured given the history lessons that seriously underline that disruptive confrontation would not be serving anyone's interest. Thus, areas of convergence

between the two include supporting stability and nuclear security of Pakistan, preventing the conflict of Kashmir, securing Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) in IOR, cooperating against terrorism, and supporting the Afghan peace process. Nevertheless, anti-terrorism efforts in Afghanistan remain a serious business for both nations. Thus, both support all initiatives directing at curbing this menace particularly support for the ongoing peace negotiations with the Taliban in Doha for a peaceful settlement to Afghan conundrum.⁵⁶

The Connector of Regions and Implications for Pakistan

Pakistan by virtue of its pivotal geographic and geostrategic position has opted for being part of BRI's lynchpin, CPEC, to further capitalize on its position as the Zipper of Eurasia, Asia, and South Asia, therefore, a geoeconomics pivot and an important stakeholder in the present geopolitical environment. CPEC promises Pakistan around \$72 billion worth projects of connectivity and infrastructure. This road infrastructure starts from Kashgar in the Chinese province of Xinjiang passing through Pakistan's Khunjab Pass and all the way down to the Gwadar port in Balochistan; cutting short a distance of 13000 kilometers to 2500 kilometers for China to the Persian Gulf via Gwadar.⁵⁷ The present strategic competition, the US Indo-Pacific vision and strategic cooperation through BRI, wherein, India and Pakistan are positioned respectively, has led to a two-bloc scenario in the region: the US-India bloc and the China-Pakistan bloc are suggestive of yet another great game ensuing in the region.

Map-1.4: Pakistan - The Zipper of Regions



(Source: https://ndu.edu.pk/issra/issra_pub/articles/margalla-paper)

For Pakistan, this scenario is a matter of concern; its history is suggestive of the fact that each time it became part of a cold war on behalf of any superpower, it emerged greatly bruised. Alongside, South Asia has emerged as a theatre, once again, for great power rivalry. Pakistan being a strategic partner of China through CPEC and India as a US strategic partner in the region envisioned in the US Indo-Pacific strategy have serious repercussions for Pakistan's security. The US has chosen India as its strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific with increasing cooperation in the field of defense, such as the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA)⁵⁸ and Communications, Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA).⁵⁹ This emboldening of India militarily by the US to counter China has posed a security dilemma for Pakistan. The country has fallen into the rival's faction because of intensified tensions with India specifically and with the US generally. There are implications for Pakistan's security ranging from arms race in the region, Indo-Pak rivalry vis-à-vis Kashmir dispute to security dilemma for Pakistan and other regional countries in the wake of US-India cooperation, US-China rising tension, China-Pakistan cooperation and Pakistan-India tension.⁶⁰ At the same time, the US-China competition may add to Pakistan's internal security problems via political instability or affecting its socio-economic development projects. Amid such an environment, Pakistan may diversify its foreign policy options by working constructively and progressively while ensuring its internal security strong. The US recent shift toward Pakistan is an acknowledgment of the country's principled position vis-à-vis peace talks with the Taliban. In addition, Pakistan's standing is firm and unwavering given its accommodation with multiple partners for economic development as apparent in the case of CPEC.

Policy Options and Recommendations for Pakistan

This complex geopolitical scenario demands prudence, sagacity, and a meticulously balanced approach in Pakistan's foreign policy choices. Being a developing country, Pakistan cannot pick and choose at will. Nevertheless, given its pivotal geostrategic importance and the opportunities arising, thereof, demand greater wisdom in deliberating the future policy choices by its leadership. There is no denying the fact that the US and China have become major rivals in Asia as China consistently expands and consolidates its soft power. On the other hand, the US is determined to begin a cold war to maintain its full power spectrum and status quo as being the sole superpower of the world. That is by using India as an anchor for its strategy. However, this is equally understandable that both states will avoid the "Thucydides Trap" as both have learned lessons in the past. Pakistan's policymakers may need to take the following policy choices under consideration while deciding the country's foreign policy directions:

- Pakistan ought to be cautious and learn from its history.
- Considering a possibly imminent financial crisis as a result of the US-China trade war, Pakistan's leadership needs to take carefully calculated decisions for accruing short-term and long-term benefits.
- Pakistan needs to readjust its policies that new alignments and readjustments in the region are not entirely anti-China

- Pakistan can diversify its policy options by striving for common grounds with the Quad alliance on issues of climate emergency, water scarcity, and agriculture
- Pakistan can utilize the present scenario of the Indo-Pacific region in Afghanistan as an opportunity to further bolster its bilateral ties with the US by extending its complete support and facilitation for Afghan peace dialogue and especially bringing the Taliban to a negotiated settlement with all stakeholders in the country including the Afghan political government.
- If Pakistan becomes economically stable with augmented democratic practices and political traditions leading to a favorable environment in the country, international recognition, credibility, and cooperation in the international system can be harnessed.⁶¹

Conclusion

The Sino-US strategic convergence and competition via the Pivot to Asia and BRI respectively in the Indo-Pacific region have heightened tensions by paving the ground for yet another cold-war scenario embedded in containment mentality. The US-China economic inter-dependence renders unlikely war between them. However, volatility and intensification in world politics and complexities and instabilities are to impact the overall security of the Indo-Pacific and South Asian regions. Pakistan may safeguard its interests and ensure security by diversifying its policy options vis-a-vis new alignments in the region considering them as not entirely against any specific country. The country may strive to achieve enhanced cooperation with Russia, the Quad alliance on issues of mutual benefit besides strategic partnership with China. Alongside, the US-Pakistan bilateral relations may be ratified by extending cooperation in Afghanistan in reaching a deal with the Taliban. Such foreign policy directions underline taking a prudent and balanced course for accruing dividends in the wake of the renewed strategic significance of the country. Pakistan is likely to harness a conducive international environment for its due recognition and cooperation in the international system if it becomes strong internally with its institutions working in a politically viable and constructive way.

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