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Strategic Autonomy in a Multipolar World: Reassessing Pakistan's Foreign Policy between China, the United States and the Gulf

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Abstract

The transformation of the international system from Uni-polarity toward a more complex Multi-polar order has increased both opportunities and constraints for middle and strategically constrained states. Pakistan occupies a particularly significant position because of its relations with China, the United States, and the Gulf states. While China has emerged as Pakistan's principal strategic and connectivity partner, the United States remains important for technology, markets and diplomacy, while Gulf countries provide energy, investment, financial and labour-related opportunities. This article argues that Pakistan's foreign policy should be understood not simply as balancing or strategic hedging, but through the concept of Relational Strategic Autonomy (RSA). RSA refers to a state's ability to preserve meaningful policy choices by diversifying partnerships, managing external dependencies, developing bargaining leverage, maintaining issue-specific flexibility and strengthening domestic resilience. Using a qualitative, theory-informed comparative case study, the article examines Pakistan's relations with China, the United States and the Gulf. It argues that diversification can enhance Pakistan's strategic space, but autonomy ultimately depends on reducing economic vulnerability and converting external partnerships into domestic productive capacity.

Keywords

Strategic autonomy, Pakistan, China, United States, Gulf, strategic hedging, Multipolarity, geo-Economics

1. Introduction

The international system is increasingly characterized by dispersed power, intensified great-power competition and greater strategic agency among middle powers. For Pakistan, this transformation presents both opportunities and risks. Located at the intersection of South

Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East, Pakistan maintains important relationships with China, the United States and Gulf countries. Its strategic partnership with China has expanded through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), while its relationship with the United States continues to matter in trade, technology, diplomacy and international institutions. At the same time, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and other Gulf partners remain significant sources of energy, investment, remittances and diplomatic support.

The central challenge is therefore not choosing one major power over another, but maintaining sufficient policy flexibility to benefit from different relationships without becoming excessively dependent on any single external actor. Recent scholarship similarly identifies Pakistan's foreign policy as pragmatic hedging between Washington and Beijing (Awan & Munir, 2026; Jamali & Hussain, 2026).

This article asks: When does strategic hedging and partnership diversification translate into meaningful strategic autonomy for Pakistan? It argues that hedging is a mechanism, whereas strategic autonomy is the capacity produced when diversification is combined with dependency management, bargaining leverage, policy flexibility and domestic resilience.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Gap

Realist theory emphasizes power, security competition and the constraints imposed by an anarchic international system (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979). Alliance formation may therefore reflect efforts by weaker states to respond to threats and unequal distributions of power (Walt, 1987). Neoclassical realism adds domestic variables, arguing that systemic pressures are filtered through state institutions, leaders and domestic political structures (Rose, 1998; Ripsman et al., 2016).

The literature on strategic hedging provides a more useful explanation of how states avoid committing completely to competing powers. Hedging involves maintaining relationships with multiple actors while avoiding irreversible alignment (Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019; Haacke, 2019). However, hedging does not automatically produce autonomy. Its effectiveness depends on the state's economic resources, strategic environment and ability to manage competing dependencies (Ciorciari, 2019; Korolev, 2019).

Geo-Economics scholarship further demonstrates that economic networks can become instruments of power. States can use trade, finance, technology and infrastructure to generate influence or vulnerability (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Breslin & Nesadurai, 2023). Pakistan-related scholarship increasingly emphasizes strategic hedging, geoeconomics and balancing between China and the United States (Ali et al., 2024; Hussain, 2026).

The theoretical gap lies in the separation of these concepts. Existing literature explains balancing, hedging, economic diversification and strategic autonomy individually. This article connects them through a single causal sequence:

Diversification - dependency management - bargaining leverage - policy flexibility - strategic autonomy.

Domestic resilience determines whether this process becomes sustainable.

3. Relational Strategic Autonomy Framework

This article conceptualizes Relational Strategic Autonomy (RSA) as the ability of a state to preserve meaningful choices while operating within asymmetric relationships.

RSA has five interconnected dimensions:

3.1. Partnership diversification: maintaining multiple strategic, economic and diplomatic relationships.

3.2. Dependency management: preventing excessive reliance on one country, market, technology or source of finance.

3.3. Bargaining leverage: converting geographical, economic, diplomatic or strategic importance into negotiating power.

3.4. Policy flexibility: retaining the ability to cooperate with different actors on different issues.

3.5. Domestic resilience: developing economic, institutional, technological and human capacity to sustain independent choices.

4. Methodology

The study uses a qualitative, theory-informed comparative case-study approach. Pakistan is examined as the primary case, while its relationships with China, the United States and Gulf states constitute three interconnected relational cases. The analysis focuses particularly on the post-2013 period, when CPEC, changing US-China competition and expanding Gulf economic engagement significantly affected Pakistan's foreign-policy choices.

The study relies on qualitative content analysis and process tracing of academic literature, policy documents, official statements and relevant research. The objective is not to measure autonomy statistically but to identify the mechanisms through which diversification can expand or restrict Pakistan's strategic choices.

5. Pakistan's Strategic Relationships

5.1. China Strategic and Connectivity Anchor

China is Pakistan's most consequential long-term strategic partner. CPEC has expanded the relationship beyond traditional defence cooperation into infrastructure, energy, transportation and connectivity. Pakistan's strategic relationship with China therefore provides substantial economic and geopolitical opportunities.

Research by Magray, Nabi, Faraz, and Talha (2026a) highlights the wider regional-security implications of CPEC. CPEC can enhance Pakistan's strategic position by improving connectivity and integrating Pakistan into wider regional economic networks. However, strategic partnership also creates an autonomy paradox: greater dependence on one major partner can simultaneously strengthen national capabilities and reduce policy flexibility.

Pakistan should therefore seek maximum domestic returns from Chinese cooperation through technology transfer, industrialization, employment, exports and productive investment. The objective should not be to reduce China-Pakistan cooperation, but to ensure that cooperation generates Pakistani productive capacity.

Gwadar illustrates this challenge as its importance extends beyond CPEC because its geographical position provides potential for regional connectivity. However, geography becomes strategic leverage only when supported by functioning commercial networks, logistics, investment and diversified economic partnerships.

5.2. United States: Functional Diversification

Pakistan's relationship with the United States has historically moved through cycles of cooperation and disagreement. Nevertheless, Washington remains relevant because of its technological capabilities, financial institutions, educational links, international influence and access to Western markets.

Pakistan does not necessarily need a comprehensive strategic alignment with the United States. Instead, a functional relationship can provide diversification. Engagement in trade,

technology, education, investment and diplomacy can reduce excessive dependence on any single external partner.

Recent studies describe Pakistan's approach as pragmatic hedging, seeking benefits from both China and the United States rather than permanently choosing one side (Awan & Munir, 2026; Jamali & Hussain, 2026).

From the RSA perspective, the United States therefore represents an important option value. Maintaining constructive engagement increases Pakistan's alternatives and consequently its bargaining space.

5.3. Gulf States: Financial and Energy Diversification

The Gulf constitutes a third pillar of Pakistan's external economic and diplomatic strategy. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar are important in energy supplies, investment, remittances, labour markets, financial assistance and diplomatic relations.

Pakistan-Saudi relations have historically contained strategic, defence and economic dimensions (Ahmad & Faisal, 2014). However, the future significance of Gulf relations increasingly lies in economic diversification. Pakistan should seek long-term investment in infrastructure, agriculture, mining, logistics, renewable energy and industrial development rather than relying primarily on short-term financial support.

Gulf partnerships can therefore function as an autonomy multiplier when they provide additional sources of capital, energy and investment. However, replacing dependence on one external actor with dependence on another would not constitute strategic autonomy.

6. From Geo-Politics to Geo-Economics

Pakistan's strategic autonomy increasingly depends on its economic strength. Pakistan's shift from traditional geopolitics toward geoeconomics reflects the growing importance of economic security, connectivity, investment and regional integration.

Economic interdependence, however, can produce both opportunities and vulnerabilities. Farrell and Newman (2019) demonstrate how states positioned within critical economic networks can exercise disproportionate influence. Similarly, Magray, Shaheen, and Lodhi (2026d) highlight the emerging significance of artificial intelligence and the weaponization of economic interdependence.

For Pakistan, the lesson is clear: strategic autonomy cannot rest exclusively on diplomatic balancing. It requires export competitiveness, fiscal stability, technological capacity, energy security, human capital and institutional effectiveness.

Pakistan's geographical position is an important asset, but geography alone does not create power. Strategic relevance emerges when geography is converted into trade, transit, investment and connectivity.

7. Strategic Diplomacy and Regional Relevance

Pakistan's diplomatic relevance can also increase when it contributes to regional conflict management. Its relationships with China, the Gulf and the United States potentially provide channels for dialogue across competing geopolitical blocs.

Keeping in view the Pakistan's strategic choices amid US-Iran tensions, escalation, deterrence and regional order, Pakistan's strategic role and policy choices during the 2025–26 US-Israel-Iran crisis are noteworthy. Such diplomacy can increase Pakistan's bargaining relevance if conducted without excessive alignment.

Media and diplomatic narratives also matter. Rahim et al. (2026) demonstrate the growing significance of media diplomacy in international relations. Pakistan can therefore strengthen

strategic autonomy not only through material capabilities but also through diplomatic credibility and international narrative-building.

8. Findings and Discussion

The analysis produces five principal findings.

First, diversification increases strategic options. China, the United States and Gulf states provide different forms of economic, technological, diplomatic and strategic value.

Second, diversification alone does not equal autonomy. If Pakistan remains economically vulnerable, external partners retain significant influence over its policy choices.

Third, Pakistan's geographical position can generate bargaining leverage, but only when transformed into functioning economic connectivity and regional integration.

Fourth, strategic hedging should be understood as a mechanism rather than the final objective. Hedging creates room for manoeuvre; RSA describes the broader capacity to use that room effectively.

Fifth, domestic resilience is the decisive variable. Weak economic institutions, political instability, low export competitiveness and technological dependence can reduce the autonomy generated by external diversification.

Pakistan can therefore be characterized as possessing high potential but limited realized strategic autonomy.

9. Policy Recommendations

Pakistan should pursue the following policies:

9.1. Institutionalize multi-vector diplomacy by maintaining constructive relations with China, the United States, Gulf states and other major economic partners without entering unnecessary bloc politics.

9.2. Diversify economic dependence by expanding exports, investment sources, energy suppliers, technology partnerships and international markets.

9.3. Convert CPEC into productive capacity through industrialization, export-oriented manufacturing, technology transfer and employment generation.

9.4. Develop Gwadar as a commercial ecosystem rather than treating it merely as strategic infrastructure.

9.5. Deepen Gulf economic diplomacy by prioritizing long-term investment in agriculture, minerals, logistics, energy and industry.

9.6. Maintain functional US engagement in technology, trade, education, investment and diplomacy while preserving independent policy choices.

9.7. Strengthen domestic resilience through fiscal reforms, human-capital development, technological capacity, institutional effectiveness and energy security.

9.8. Use diplomatic relevance strategically by contributing to dialogue and regional de-escalation without assuming commitments that unnecessarily restrict Pakistan's policy flexibility.

10. Conclusion

Strategic autonomy in a Multi-polar world does not mean isolation, neutrality or independence from all external relationships. For Pakistan, autonomy is fundamentally relational. It emerges when the state can engage multiple powers while preventing any single relationship from becoming overwhelmingly constraining.

Pakistan's relationship with China provides strategic and connectivity benefits; engagement with the United States offers technological, economic and diplomatic diversification; and

Gulf partnerships provide financial, energy and investment opportunities. Properly managed, these relationships can complement rather than contradict one another.

Yet the final determinant is domestic resilience. Without economic stability, productive capacity, technological development and institutional strength, Pakistan's external partnerships may generate dependence rather than autonomy. The strategic objective should consequently be neither alignment with one bloc nor equidistance from all powers, but the development of sufficient capabilities to cooperate with different actors while retaining meaningful freedom of choice.

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