



Pakistan's Strategic Hedging Between the United States and China: Balancing Great-Power Competition in the Emerging Multipolar International Order

Fahad Yaqoob Awan^{*a}, Dr. Muhammad Munir^a

a. Department of International Relations, Muslim Youth (MY) University, Islamabad, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The rivalry between the U.S. and China is intensifying and has created a new security environment in the Indo-Pacific, compelling middle powers to shift their foreign policies. Pakistan lies at the junctures of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East and has adopted a multi-alignment approach more in line with strategy than alliance politics. Scholarship is limited to Pakistan's alliance dependence or its strategic alignment with China, while few efforts have examined how Pakistan has actually engaged in strategic hedging. This article scrutinizes Pakistan's foreign policy in the period of 2023-2026, using qualitative case study research to apply theories of Neoclassical Realism, Strategic Hedging Theory, and Constructivism. It analyzes policy documents, government statements, and scholarly studies on Pakistan's stance against China while, to some extent, aligning with the USA. In addition, the scope of the study reflects the reality of a new regional security environment due to the Israel-Hamas war, the upcoming confrontation between Iran and Israel, the US military presence, and the new significance of energy security and crisis diplomacy in the region. These developments have boosted Pakistan's strategic, economic, and diplomatic value for Washington and deepened its relations with Beijing in all three fields accordingly. The article argues that Pakistan's foreign policy could be interpreted as adaptive strategic hedging (ASH), which is a method of foreign policy with an unfixed approach to security, economic, and diplomatic interests to achieve strategic autonomy for Pakistan. The study helps advance current discussions on middle-power agency, strategic autonomy, and hedging in an increasingly multipolar world.

1. Introduction

The world of the nineteenth century faces its most dramatic structural transformation since the Cold War. Economic, technological, and military power is now inching toward dissolution, moving toward a multipolar, more contested system in which the U.S. loses its dominance. The new strategic rivalry between the U.S. and China is not merely military; it's technological, geoeconomic, and rooted in relative supply-chain resilience, maritime security, and concepts of international order.[†] Concurrently, the region is experiencing various crises, including the war in Russia and Ukraine, the war between Israel

* Correspondence to: Department of International Relations, Muslim Youth (MY) University, Islamabad, Pakistan
E-mail address: fahadniner@gmail.com (F. Y. Awan).

[†] Iftikhar Ali, Noraiz Arshad, and Roy Anthony Rogers, "Trilateral Dynamics in Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Balancing China and Hedging the US," *Strategic Analysis*, December 31, 2024, 1-17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2024.2434382>.



and Hamas, and the possible conflict between Iran and Israel in 2025 and the anticipated attacks by the US military on the Iranian nuclear facilities, making regional crisis management and stability even more topical and relevant.[‡]

Thus, it has emerged as one of the key theatres of the current great power competition in South Asia. The United States has strengthened the Indo-Pacific Strategy through its strategic relationship with India, the 'Quad' and AUKUS, while China has been expanding its footprint in the Indo-Pacific region through the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI), 'China-Pakistan Economic Corridor' (CPEC), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and growing presence in the 'BRICS'. In the context of this parallel evolution, the region, in the midst of a geopolitical uncertainty, has become an "economically interdependent and competitively strategic space", with regional countries seeing a necessity of pursuing a strategy that combines security with economic development, flexibility with diplomacy.[§]

Pakistan faces a unique situation in this evolving regional system. Islamabad has been working on strategic cooperation with China (CPEC) and defense ties with other nations, while also trying to resurrect pragmatic relations with Washington. This is evident in how Pakistan engaged with the United States and Iran in the volatile region during the 2025 crisis by pursuing regular de-escalation efforts, maintaining a pro-peace stance on the Iran-Israel conflict, and holding regular talks with Washington on regional security and counterterrorism.^{**} Likewise, Pakistan has not given up its agenda of statehood during the current Gaza crisis. Still, it has done so with the added advantage of opening the door to constructive dialogue with the USA on other matters and simultaneously differentiating issues of interest.^{††}

These developments require a new juncture for reconsidering the Pakistani narratives that either depict it as a US security partner or a Chinese client state. Instead of playing one great power against the other, Pakistan has been increasingly balancing its traditional strategic tie-up with China with selective cooperation with the United States. It is seeking to increase its cooperation through multilateral institutions and regional economic cooperation. The declaration comes amid a wave of politicians lowering the American flag and asserting more autonomy, especially as great power rivalry with China grows.^{‡‡}

While the concept of strategic hedging is having a major impact on the study of International Relations, scholarship has been largely confined to the case of Southeast Asian countries, with Pakistan only receiving a modicum of attention. To fill this gap, the present article offers a concept of Adaptive Strategic Hedging (ASH): a security-measures adjustment strategy that Pakistan is constantly practicing by evolving its security engagement, foreign economic policies, connectivity initiatives, and multilateral response to changes in systemic conditions.^{§§} To highlight and demonstrate the inter-layered influences of structural pressures, Pakistan's strategic decisions, and evolving diplomatic narratives in the conceptualization of Pakistan's pursuit of strategic autonomy in a more multipolar international order, the article employs the lenses of Neoclassical Realism, Strategic Hedging Theory, and Constructivist theory.^{***}

2. Literature Review

The rise of American and Chinese competition frameworks has fueled one of the most vibrant research areas in contemporary IR. As power has become more diffused across an array of great powers and the "more multipolar, more contested" nature of the global system has increased uncertainty, Middle and Secondary Powers have been the focus of investigators trying to understand how this uncertainty is being handled. Strategic hedging has been used in comparative terms as an analytical lens on Pakistan. While other concepts such as balancing, bandwagoning, alliance formation, and strategic autonomy have been

[‡] Ali Bagheri Dolatabadi, "The June 2025 Israeli War: Iran's Assessment and Regional Consequences," *Middle East Policy*, September 8, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.70008>.

[§] Ahmed Bux Jamali and Mehmood Hussain, "Examining Pakistan's Strategic Hedging Between the United States and China," *Pacific Focus*, May 5, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pafo.70027>.

^{**} Bechlaghem Lamia, "The United States and Israel's Military Escalation Against Iran and Its Geopolitical Implications for the Middle East," *أبحاث قانونية وسياسية* 11, no. 1 (June 11, 2026): 541-61, <https://asjp.cerist.dz/en/article/296898>.

^{††} Nuraan Davids et al., "Gaza: We Need to Talk!," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 57, no. 11 (July 16, 2025): 964-89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2025.2531932>.

^{‡‡} Yaqoob Ul Hassan, "Navigating the Great-Power Competition: Pakistan and Its Relationship with the United States and China," *Asia Policy* 29, no. 4 (October 2022): 199-223, <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2022.0057>.

^{§§} Cheng-Chwee KUIK and Nur Shahadah JAMIL, "The Feasibility and Future of Middle-State Hedging," *East Asian Policy* 16, no. 04 (December 1, 2024): 7-28, <https://doi.org/10.1142/s1793930524000254>.

^{***} Alena Juvova et al., "Reflection of Constructivist Theories in Current Educational Practice," *Universal Journal of Educational Research* 3, no. 5 (2015): 345-49, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1062318>.

extensively examined, the case of Pakistan has been overlooked from this perspective.^{†††} It is important to first explore the four strands of scholarship before surmising that what is addressed in this article is unaddressed by these strands: the transformation of the international order; strategic hedging theory; middle power agency; and Pakistan's contemporary foreign policy.

2.1. Great-Power Competition and the Transformation of the International Order

Realist scholars have long cited China's economic modernization, military expansion, and institutional rise as the greatest dangers to American primacy since the end of the Cold War. This perspective is linked to the phenomenon of security competition as the rise of new powers tries to expand their influence in the region. Existing powers, by contrast, try to maintain the status quo. The literature is characterized by newer scholarship that raises doubts about the deterministic implications of Waltz's (1979) account of anarchy and self-help.^{†††}

But in today's geopolitical environment, military power is not the sole factor in competition. It now also encompasses the management of the global supply chain, digital infrastructure, AI, critical minerals, energy security, and international financial governance. It is not a rejection of globalization, but a transition process that has created a partial fragmentation of the economy: there is strategic contestation and economic dependence. The competition is multidimensional, and offers strategic opportunities for middle powers to engage in diverse partnerships, even without tie-ups.^{§§§}

But much of it remains system-oriented, rather than recognizing states as active strategic agents that can influence regional outcomes rather than be a passive responders to regional pressures. This structural determinism is ill-equipped for a country such as Pakistan, which is bound by the external system and impacted by the internal system too, given Pakistan's institutional setting.^{****} Thus, the analytical framework used to examine Pakistan's behavior must consider aspects of structural change and state agency; indeed, the structural change/state agency framework underpinning this article will help motivate Pakistan's behavior.

2.2. Strategic Hedging beyond Balancing and Bandwagoning

Traditional approaches of alliance theory have tended to emphasize "balancing" against a threatening ally (Walt, 1987) and "band wagoning" with a dominant one.^{††††} While effective, they are limited in applicability to the more dynamic foreign policies of middle powers in the era of extended uncertainty. An important concept that has emerged in response is hedging. Hedging is, in turn, a major element of analysis worldwide. Kuik (2008), S, calls hedging a policy by which states aim "to develop both cooperative and competitive relationships with other great powers and express their unwillingness to sign up for 'irreversible strategic commitment'". Hedging is not confrontation with prevailing power as in balancing, nor is it undivided allegiance to a majority as in band wagoning.

Instead, hedging offers the most strategic flexibility, involves multiple approaches in diplomacy, increases economic cooperation, and provides policy autonomy in front of a dynamic, unpredictable system.^{****} The preference for "omni-enmeshment" strategies, which involve entangling various institutional and economic connections with the rising power, is also confirmed by Evelyn Goh's previous study on Southeast Asian responses to China's rise.^{§§§§}

Existing empirical uses of hedging theory have focused on Southeast Asian states that have both security relations with the United States and economic relations with China, such as Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, and Indonesia. However, there are three significant shortcomings in the literature. Hedging is often seen as a binary concept; a place between balancing and

^{†††} Brock Tessman and Wojtek Wolfe, "Great Powers and Strategic Hedging: The Case of Chinese Energy Security Strategy," *International Studies Review* 13, no. 2 (June 2011): 214–40, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2486.2011.01022.x>.

^{††††} Walt, S. M. (1987). *The origins of alliances*. Cornell University Press.

^{§§§} Syed Shameel Ahmed Quadri et al., "Between Great Powers: Pakistan's Strategic Balancing in an Era of Intensifying Global Rivalry," *Inverge Journal of Social Sciences* 5, no. 3 (2026): 317–26, <https://doi.org/10.63544/ijss.v5i3.302>.

^{****} Dr Anwar, Dr Ghulam, and Ahmed Hussain, "Pakistan's Global Strategy: Navigating the US-China Tug-of-War," ` 3, no. 02 (2025): 2038–50, <https://www.assajournal.com/index.php/36/article/view/484>.

^{†††††} Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "Getting Hedging Right: A Small-State Perspective," *China International Strategy Review* 3, no. 2 (November 23, 2021): 300–315, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-021-00089-5>

^{****} Kuik Cheng-Chwee's , "Hedging in International Relations – EAIR Caucus," 2008, <https://eair-caucus.org/project/hedging-in-international-relations/>.

^{§§§§} Evelyn Goh, "Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Regional Security Strategies," *International Security* 32, no. 3 (January 2007): 113–57.

bandwagoning, instead of being an ongoing process of adaptation.^{*****} Second, existing structural factors are often not analyzed, and the role of domestic institutions and individual actors that influence the national strategic narrative is largely underemphasized.^{††††} Third, empirical applications remain far more focused on Southeast Asia, where Pakistan is still relatively under-explored. However, it is undoubtedly playing a central role in the ongoing great power contest in the region. Current theories of hedging, therefore, need to be developed to account for foreign policy action in complex settings where foreign policy has multiple security, economic, and diplomatic concerns, as is the case for Pakistan.^{*****}

2.3. Middle-Power Agency and Strategic Autonomy

Middle powers are perhaps best known for their ability to play a “meaningful strategic role” in an asymmetric international architecture. This scholarship capitalizes on the notion of the “Second City” and denies great powers the luxury of believing that middle powers are indeed marginal and that they will not be able to move beyond their constraints if the Great Powers are engaged in Great-Power politics. This scholarship does not accept the view that middle powers are subordinate players serving the interests of great powers and must conform to their competition. Middle powers are not seen as merely resources to be utilized by great powers.^{§§§§§}

It is not this scholarship's view that, respectively, middle powers are mere resources to be used by great powers, or that great powers act as superior, commanding powers and inhibit, limit, discourage, or censor, in any way, the initiative of their subordinates. In this sense, strategic autonomy would not be defined by a power that is separated from great powers, but rather by an institutional capacity to relate to several great powers at the same time, without influencing the country's decision-making.^{*****}

But the bulk of the scholarship is geographically restricted, and its ideas are too. Existing studies tend to be narrow in scope, focusing either on hedging approaches in high securitized environments such as South Asia or on the link between strategic autonomy and domestic political dynamics in “fragile states” such as Pakistan, where political elites are often in dispute over power and control. The aforementioned restricts the strategic autonomy concept to a rather simplistic level and indicates that capabilities and interests vary in complexity and should be taken one step further.^{†††††}

2.4. Pakistan's Foreign Policy in Contemporary Scholarship

Foreign policy studies in Pakistan have traditionally addressed alliance politics, regional security, civil-military relations, and Pakistan-India rivalry. Previous literature generally dealt largely with calls for Pakistan to gain security from foreign bodies, primarily the United States during the Cold War era, and China since the 1960s when Pakistan and China advanced with cooperative pursuit of a deeper bilateral strategic partnership.^{*****} In addition, with the arrival of CPEC, scholarly claims that Pakistan is an integral part of China's broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) were further consolidated. Rizwana Abbasi's study, on the other hand, has explored Pakistan's foreign policy in the context of a ‘state-chosen’, ‘institutionally driven’ external culture, which is absorbed with India and persists in informing the making of threat assessments and alliances even without the pressure of the great powers.^{§§§§§}

In recent years, however, there is evidence of evolution in Pakistan's foreign policy. As a result of the desire to expand its foreign policy outreach beyond the bilateral framework, Islamabad's efforts to develop relationships with the Gulf states, Central Asia,

^{*****} Fabio Figiaconi, “Choosing Not to Choose: Hedging as a Category of Neutrality,” *European Journal of International Security*, July 28, 2025, 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10009>.

^{††††} Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon, and Ben O'Loughlin, “Strategic Narrative: A New Means to Understand Soft Power,” *Media, War & Conflict* 7, no. 1 (March 24, 2014): 70–84, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635213516696>.

^{††††} Hafsa Gul et al., “Assessing the Impact of U.S. Economic Aid and Military Support on the Strategic Dynamics of Pakistan's Foreign Policy: A Study of Diplomatic Relations and Public Sentiment,” *Future Business Journal* 11, no. 1 (May 2, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s43093-025-00528-4>.

^{§§§§§} Andriy Tyushka, “Middle Power Assertiveness as a Behavioural Model in Foreign Policy,” *Rethinking Middle Powers in the Asian Century*, September 27, 2018, 122–34, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429463846-10>.

^{*****} Michi Yamasaki, “A Study of Middle Power Diplomacy : As a Strategy of Leadership and Influence,” *Uwaterloo.ca* (University of Waterloo, October 8, 2009), <https://uwaterloo.ca/items/4b470c09-084d-4d9a-adcf-8b1bf6d390b3>.

^{†††††} Ali Bagheri Dolatabadi, “The June 2025 Israeli War: Iran's Assessment and Regional Consequences,” *Middle East Policy*, September 8, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.70008>.

^{*****} Syed Muhammad Saad Zaidi and Nirmal, “Regional Political Paradigm Shift: Challenges and Opportunities for Pakistan,” *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 7, no. 4 (June 16, 2022): 772–89, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20578911221103358>.

^{§§§§§} Rizwana Abbasi, “Global Power Shift and Foreign Policy Choices for Pakistan,” *Strategic Studies* 43, no. 1 (2023): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.2307/48829087>.

and with Türkiye and more potential, albeit more limited, and contentious, more transactional, relationship with the United States suggest an effort to diversify its foreign policy presence.^{*****} Strategic partnership with China, however, has advanced in Pakistan, without it becoming a formal member of geopolitical partnerships against the United States. These shifts indicate a more complicated foreign policy than has been articulated in the classic alliance theory.

In the face of the ever-changing trends, the evolution of Pakistan's presence within the comparative literature of strategic hedging has been weak. Existing literature on economic diplomacy is largely descriptive and limited to specific policy options, while overlooking the broader conceptual dimensions/policy vision of Pakistan's economic diplomacy, security cooperation, regional connectivity, and multilateral engagement. The theory of structural realism, domestic strategic decision-making, and identity-based diplomacy in one model have hardly been integrated over time.⁺⁺⁺⁺⁺

2.5. Research Gap and Contribution

Despite the expanding literature on strategic hedging and great-power competition, important theoretical and empirical gaps remain. First, existing scholarship overwhelmingly focuses on hedging in Southeast Asian states, with comparatively little attention to Pakistan, despite its strategic position at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, existing theories have not been able to satisfactorily capture the changing nature of Pakistan's foreign policy actions in the context of growing strategic competition between the United States and China. Second, the current literature still relies on traditional understandings of Pakistani foreign policy in terms of alliance dependence, balancing, or a strategic equation with the United States or China. These strategies ignore Pakistan's desire for strategic autonomy, as evidenced by diversified diplomacy, regional connectivity, and selective engagement with both great powers.

Third, the literature has failed to adequately account for recent geopolitical events that occurred between 2023 and 2026, such as the Israel–Hamas conflict, the Iran–Israel confrontation in 2025 and the involvement of the United States, the renewed Pakistan–US strategic talks on regional stability and counterterrorism, and the ongoing development of the Pakistan–China strategic partnership via CPEC and regional cooperation. These developments have altered Pakistan's external dynamics and offer fresh empirical evidence to rethink its foreign policy approach. This study aims to fill these gaps by presenting a conceptual framework of Adaptive Strategic Hedging (ASH) of Pakistan's foreign policy and using a multi-instrumental framework of Neoclassical Realism (NCR), Strategic Hedging Theory (SH), and Constructivism to analyze how the three concepts collectively affect Pakistan's foreign policy in the context of its evolving multipolar framework.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Methodology

This study takes the integrated theoretical framework in this context that is the amalgamation of the three theories of Neoclassical Realism, Strategic Hedging Theory, and Constructivism that shape the framework for an understanding of Pakistan's foreign policy in the backdrop of its emerging rivalry with China. Realism explains the constraining nature of the system and the policy diversification of hedging; constructivism explains the constraining nature of strategic identity and elite perceptions. Taken together, these views shed light on the evolving trajectory of Pakistan's foreign policy. The study considers Pakistan's Adaptive Strategic Hedging (ASH) foreign policy, which is a flexible approach being pursued by Islamabad to strive to balance the US and China in its regional and national security, trade, and diplomatic relations.

3.2. Neoclassical Realism and Pakistan's Strategic Environment

The most important explanatory bases for this study are neoclassical realism, which constitutes a theory that can connect with systemic-level explanation and relate to domestic-level decision-making. Drawing on Rose's other book-length critique of a previous iteration of realist theory, neoclassical realism proposes that systemic pressures filter through to domestic states, domestic elite perceptions, strategic culture, and state capacities that determine foreign policy outcomes.^{*****} The same contextual factors, therefore, can yield varying policy responses within state lines based on political and institutional features

^{*****} Farhan Hanif Siddiqi, "US Indo-Pacific Strategy and Pakistan's Foreign Policy: The Hedging Option," *Strategic Studies* 42, no. 1 (2022): 1–16, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48732341>.

⁺⁺⁺⁺⁺ Lisa Curtis, "The Reorientation of Pakistan's Foreign Policy Toward Its Region," *Contemporary South Asia* 20, no. 2 (June 2012): 255–69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2012.670205>.

^{*****} ABDUL RAZAQUE LARIK, SHAH NAWAZ MANGI, and SYED GULZAR ALI SHAH BUKHARI, "Do Statist Ideology and State-Sponsored Nationalism Intervene in Pakistan's China Policy? A Neoclassical Realist Perspective," *Issues & Studies* 59, no. 03 (August 23, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1142/s101325112350008x>.

within each state. Pakistan's policymakers face a permissive environment as no one major power can force exclusive allegiance in Pakistan, and a restrictive environment because of Pakistan's economic vulnerability, as witnessed by Pakistan's long preoccupation with security challenges from India. §§§§§§

The shift towards a multipolar world has influenced Pakistan's external strategic environment. In particular, regional states are under pressure from outside to clarify their strategic agenda and increasingly have the option to engage selectively with competing centers of power as the US-China rivalry goes head-to-head. These systemic changes are further significant given Pakistan's geographical location at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Indian Ocean. ***** But the question remains that external balancing isn't the only factor in Pakistan's foreign policy as internal strategic factors like development policies, institutional coordination, security issues involving India and militancy, and perception of strategic autonomy also play a significant role in formulating policies.

According to a neoclassical realist interpretation, the Pakistani "strategic approach" is not only not being loyal to China but is also not a move towards re-dependence on the USA. Foreign policy, on the other hand, is a function of the interplay of outside systemic pressures and inside strategic objectives; outside pressure will push for diversification, and the decision of which type of diversification will be pushed for will be up to the choice of the domestic decisionmaker. ++++++

3.3. Strategic Hedging Theory

Neoclassical Realism offers little detail on instruments of policy, by which states are able to maintain strategic autonomy, although it does help in articulating a motivation for states to want flexibility under conditions of structural uncertainty. To fill this gap, Strategic Hedging Theory, a theory of foreign policy that goes beyond the dichotomy of balancing and bandwagoning, has been developed. +++++

In Kuik's formulation, hedging is the conscious practice of cultivating several partially overlapping ties with two or more rivals to mitigate strategic vulnerability and to maintain policy options. It is not designed for conflict with a dominating power, as in balancing, nor does it involve unconditional dependence, as in bandwagoning. Implementing hedges, however, is not about neutrality; it is about keeping strategic options open "because of systemic uncertainty in the medium to long-term" and does not require a set of specific actors, but rather involves various actors in security cooperation, economic diversification, diplomacy, and institutions. §§§§§§

This is quite similar to the viewpoint accepted in Pakistan. This contemporary outlook of Pakistan's foreign policy is due to certain features that are not definable in the traditional concept of alliance theory. Formalizing and strengthening ties with China (CPEC and long-term economic partnerships) and communication with the USA on trade, critical minerals, counterterrorism, education and regional stability. ***** Pakistan is also very active in negotiating within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. It is also looking to expand its engagements with the Gulf states, Central Asia and the institutions of the Global South. This is not balancing or 'bandwagoning' but rather making a deliberate effort to have strategic ties in multiple directions simultaneously. ++++++

Although there exists work by hedging scholarship, it has not been fully conceptualized, in one significant regard: research tends to look at hedging as a rather stabilized product of ongoing foreign policy processes – one that sits between balancing and bandwagoning – which overlooks the dynamism of processes of strategic decision-making in shifting geopolitical

§§§§§§ Atta ur Rehman Khilji and Aubaidur Rehman Khilji, "Pakistan's Strategic Resurgence: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis of the Saudi-Pakistan Defence Pact in a Changing Middle East," *Journal of Development and Social Sciences* 6, no. 4 (2025): 147–56, [https://doi.org/10.47205/jdss.2025\(6-IV\)12](https://doi.org/10.47205/jdss.2025(6-IV)12).

***** Dr Syed Munib Ali Bukhari and Muhammad Nazim, "Pakistan's Strategic Diplomacy with Central Asia Under Afghan Security Challenges," ` 4, no. 02 (2025): 3251–65, <https://www.assajournal.com/index.php/36/article/view/1246>.

+++++ Mizaj Ullah, Najm Ullah, and Muhammad Zahid Ullah Khan, "China's Security Strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Protecting Belt and Road Interests Amid Regional Instability," *Social Science Review Archives* 3, no. 4 (November 7, 2025): 1435–46, <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v3i4.1240>.

***** Hunter S Marston, "Navigating Great Power Competition: A Neoclassical Realist View of Hedging," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 24, no. 1 (February 16, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcad001>.

§§§§§§ Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "Getting Hedging Right: A Small-State Perspective," *China International Strategy Review* 3, no. 2 (November 23, 2021): 300–315, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-021-00089-5>.

***** Lisa Curtis, "The Reorientation of Pakistan's Foreign Policy Toward Its Region," *Contemporary South Asia* 20, no. 2 (June 2012): 255–69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2012.670205>.

+++++ Ayman El-Dessouki and Ola Rafik Mansour, "Small States and Strategic Hedging: The United Arab Emirates' Policy Towards Iran," *Review of Economics and Political Science* ahead-of-print, no. ahead-of-print (February 14, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1108/rep-09-2019-0124>.

environments. States regularly reassess their partnerships due to evolving security concerns, economic opportunities, technological developments, and regional crises.*****

3.4. Constructivism and Strategic Identity

Material capacities and system-incentives do help to explain foreign policy behavior, but not completely. Constructivist scholarship has been located in a product of the state: collectively forged interests, individual identities, a narrative strategy, and elite discourse that spring from the nation's experiences (Wendt, 1992). Foreign policy is thus an indicator of the balance of power at the objective level, but also of the perceptions of foreign reality and of the notion of national interest of the political actors. However, Wendt (1999) explains, the same material distribution can facilitate drastically different relational logics, Hobbesian, Lockean or Kantian, depending on the understandings of the other that states produce as they interact.*****

The following are the ideational reasons that have manifested in Pakistan's present foreign policy. The emphasis has shifted from the logic of exclusive alliance ties to "strategic autonomy", "regional connectivity", "sovereign equality", and "economic diplomacy". This language is used in Pakistan's national security documents, official speeches, and diplomatic statements, where Pakistan is routinely seen as a very active and constructive player in the regional scenario, with the capacity to interact with multiple centers of global power. In translating systemic pressure into policy choices, Constructivism further emphasizes the diplomat's role in shaping and authenticating diverse external engagement through elite perceptions and strategic identity.*****

3.5. Research Methodology

This study aims to analyze the strategic balancing of the United States and China in Pakistan's changing multipolar international scenario and is suitable for a qualitative explanatory case study approach. A qualitative approach is suitable as the study aims to explain the causal mechanisms that shape Pakistan's foreign policy behavior, not to statistically measure the relationship between foreign policy and a population of cases.***** The case study design is used due to the complexity of strategic decision-making, enabling evaluation of the relationship between systemic pressures, domestic political dynamics, and strategic perceptions in Pakistan's external engagements.*****

Pakistan has been chosen for its uniqueness because of its geopolitical location and significance: it is located on the Indo-Pacific rim, between South Asia, Central Asia, and the rest of the Indo-Pacific region, making it a critical case study in the present article. Meanwhile, Pakistan has a sizeable and extensive strategic partnership with China whose trajectory will naturally evolve as it continues to seek out strategic engagement with the USA in a way that would involve diplomatic, economic and security interaction, making this an intriguing case to examine the process of strategic hedging in the context of heightened great power rivalry.***** The empirical analysis spans from 2023 to 2026, when the US-China rivalry deepened, the second phase of CPEC began, and relations between the two countries largely deteriorated amid a resurgence of a loose-fitting relationship, all of which had a significant impact on Pakistan's foreign policy position.*****

Theoretically, the study is based on the principles of critical realism, which considers objective, structural limitations to state actions as well as how policymakers interpret such limitations. This epistemological approach aligns in a way with the integrated theoretical approach presented in this article, which allows for the joint treatment of material power relations, home strategic calculations and identity-based diplomatic discourse.

***** Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "Getting Hedging Right: A Small-State Perspective," *China International Strategy Review* 3, no. 2 (November 23, 2021): 300-315, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-021-00089-5>.

***** Yaqing Qin, "A Relational Theory of World Politics," *International Studies Review* 18, no. 1 (2016): 33-47, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24758336>.

***** Atif Shafique, "The Case for Constructivism in Analysing the India-Pakistan Conflict," *E-International Relations*, September 7, 2011, <http://www.e-ir.info/2011/09/07/the-case-for-constructivism-in-analysing-the-india-pakistan-conflict/>.

***** Stephen Silverman and Eve Bernstein, "What Counts as 'Good' Research?: Stephen Silverman and Eve Bernstein," March 15, 2012, 47-56, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203807170-9>.

***** Diana Braakmann and Gerhard Benetka, "Quantitative and Qualitative Research: Beyond the Debate," *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science* 42, no. 3 (September 2008): 266-90, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12124-008-9078-3>.

***** Muhammad Jahanzaib, *The Interplay of Geo-Politics and Geo-Economics in Pakistan's Foreign Policy (Post-2008)* (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2026), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-95-7469-8>.

***** Atta ur Rehman Khilji and Aubaidur Rehman Khilji, "Pakistan's Strategic Resurgence: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis of the Saudi-Pakistan Defence Pact in a Changing Middle East," *Journal of Development and Social Sciences* 6, no. 4 (2025): 147-56, [https://doi.org/10.47205/jdss.2025\(6-IV\)12](https://doi.org/10.47205/jdss.2025(6-IV)12).

Various primary and secondary sources are used to collect the data with a view to analytical rigor and triangulation. The primary sources include statements made by the Pakistani Government and Ministries, joint communiqués, readouts of the U.S. Department of State (e.g., U.S. Department of State, 2025), CPEC-related official documents, and statements made in the forums of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS. This type of secondary evidence comprises scholarly papers published by others, focusing on hedging or the neoclassical realism school of thought, on Pakistan security and Pakistan activities in security matters vis-à-vis each other within the region, as well as news reports and analyses published by current policy and news sources from 2006-2012 of Pakistan-US and Pakistan-China relations. ++++++

The empirical analysis uses process tracing, qualitative content analysis, and elite discourse analysis. The process tracing approach is used to draw linkages between the changes in the international order and Pakistan's foreign policy options. Official statements are analyzed in a systematic manner using qualitative content analysis to see how themes of strategic autonomy, geoeconomic diversification, and great power engagement emerge. Elite discourse analysis builds on this by examining the narratives produced by the political and military elite, reflecting the ideational aspect of foreign policy identified in Constructivist theory, and examining the discourse of strategic autonomy and balanced diplomacy. ++++++

To make the results as valid as possible, data triangulation and theoretical triangulation were used to compare data from several documents and interpret them based on the integrated theory. This approach does not provide statistical generalization. Still, it does provide analytical generalizability regarding the role of middle powers within the international environment in the 21st century, the concept of Adaptive Strategic Hedging, and implications for discussions of middle power agency, strategic autonomy, and adaptation in the new multipolar international order. As with any single case design, causal inferences should be treated as theoretically general, and not as statistically generalizable to the behavior of middle powers broadly. \$\$\$\$\$\$

4. Systemic Transformation and the Dynamics of Us-China Strategic Competition

4.1. The Structural Transformation of the International System

The international system is undergoing dramatic reconfiguration, and the bipolar post-Cold War world picture is coming to an end. The international system is in a state of radical reconfiguration, with a multipolar and competitive geopolitical system getting over the bipolar post-Cold War world picture. The upcoming systemic transition is neither as defined nor as straightforward as previous systemic transitions, but is marked by technological innovation, geoeconomic power, digital governance, supply-chain security, artificial intelligence, energy security, and institutional leadership. US-China strategic competition has emerged as the primary driver of this new order, shaping regional security architectures and foreign policy decisions among middle powers in the region and beyond. *****

This has been accelerated recently by geopolitical pressures and is now occurring at an even quicker rate. The Russia-Ukraine war has affected global energy security; the Israel-Hamas conflict and its aftermath with Iran and Israel have ushered in a new Middle East in the realm of strategic competition; and the US military strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities have cast a shadow over Iran. The Russia-Ukraine war has thrown a dislocating glitch over the world's energy and food security; the Israel-Hamas war and its fallout between Israel and Iran have immortalized a new Middle East that's now in a duel; and American military strikes on Iranian nuclear installations have left Iran suffocated. The geopolitical aspects of these security concerns were also highlighted, with conflicts in one region increasingly having political and economic consequences outside the region. These concurrent crises have invited middle-power actors to strike a balance between conflicting relationships and avoid becoming involved in any of the major powers' structures. ++++++

The present global scenario is changing, and Pakistan is not limited to its four corners and poses threats and opportunities to Pakistan's strategic environment. Located at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and western China, Pakistan has been striving to stay engaged and continue to cooperate with regional and international partners, even amid the

+++++++ Farhan Hanif Siddiqi, "US Indo-Pacific Strategy and Pakistan's Foreign Policy: The Hedging Option," *Strategic Studies* 42, no. 1 (2022): 1-16, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48732341>.

+++++++ Philip Clissett, "Evaluating Qualitative Research," *Journal of Orthopaedic Nursing* 12, no. 2 (May 2008): 99-105, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joon.2008.07.009>.

\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$ Muhammad Jahanzaib, *The Interplay of Geo-Politics and Geo-Economics in Pakistan's Foreign Policy (Post-2008)* (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2026), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-95-7469-8>.

+++++++ Kai He et al., "Understanding Change in Times of Crises: US-China Competition and the Prospects for Peaceful Change," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 19, no. 2 (2026): 100-118, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poaf022>.

+++++++ Leci Zhang, "Review of the Upside of US-Chinese Strategic Competition: Institutional Balancing and Order Transition in the Asia Pacific," *International Studies Review* 28, no. 4 (July 17, 2026), <https://academic.oup.com/isr/article-abstract/28/4/viag017/8736511>.

crisscross of the Iran–Israel issue and its de-escalation. Islamabad's diplomacy has been more pragmatic and shows a readiness to be more flexible than rigid alliance roles in the light of greater geopolitical uncertainty affecting Pakistan's interests. *****

4.2. Evolution of US–China Strategic Competition

Today's competition between the USA and China has become multi-dimensional, relative to military power, technical innovation, economic might, regional power, and different visions of world governance. Through closer cooperation with allies and strategic partners, such as India, Japan, Australia, and the United Kingdom, the United States has enhanced its Indo-Pacific strategy and implemented export controls, investment restrictions, and technology policies to ensure it remains competitive in critical industries.

China, on its part, has further extended the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), strengthened the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), supported the expansion of BRICS, and increased development and security initiatives across Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. All of the programs seek to improve connectivity and cooperation in the region, facilitate greater economic connection with the rest of the world, and reshape portions of the international governance system.

Regional crises in recent years have compounded this competition. The wars in Gaza and between Iran and Israel highlighted the rise of China and the United States' new strategic competition in the Middle East that extends from the Indo-Pacific to access to energy resources, trade through maritime corridors, and peace and security. So, in the international arena, nations that can please both powers have become a matter of greater importance. \$\$\$\$\$\$

4.3. South Asia as a Theatre of Great-Power Competition

South Asia is becoming a prime arena of great-power competition due to its strategic location, expanding economic markets, weapons of mass destruction, and its association with the Indo-Pacific, Central Asia, and the Middle East. The progress of strategic partnership between the two countries is made through different areas of defense cooperation, transfer of technology, and engagements for security in the Indo-Pacific, with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) developing into the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), while the defense, economic, and technological cooperation of the two countries with Pakistan is yet to pick up. *****

A transformed regional context has compelled Pakistan to act more pragmatically in its foreign policy to maintain a friendly relationship with both China and the USA. Despite being Pakistan's most vital strategic and economic partner, Islamabad is also reaching out to Washington regarding various aspects of cooperation, including counterterrorism, economic cooperation, climate change, regional security, and investment. The relevance of Pakistan's diplomacy is further underlined during the crises in the region in 2023–2026. ++++++

During the Israel– Hamas crisis, Pakistan always favored a peaceful solution, respecting international laws, providing humanitarian relief, and engaging in diplomacy with regional and international actors, including Iran–Israel standoffs. Meanwhile, Pakistan is also progressing towards strategic cooperation with China in the fields of industrial development and connectivity, regional initiatives, and under CPEC Phase-II.

Thus, it can be argued that the models of foreign policy alliances are not sufficient to account for Pakistan's foreign policy in these parallel cases. Similarly, Islamabad looks to secure strategic flexibility through multi-alignment – using some great powers in various policies without being completely tied to a single great power. This strategy will allow Pakistan to ensure its security, create more economic opportunities, and improve its regional image in the face of a rapidly evolving regional situation. *****

***** Mumtaz Hussain et al., “Annals of Human and Social Sciences Wwww.Ahss.Org.Pk Challenges and Opportunities to the Foreign Policy of Pakistan in the Contemporary Era,” *Annals of Human and Social Sciences* 4, no. 1 (2023): 2790–6809, [https://doi.org/10.35484/ahss.2023\(4-1\)06](https://doi.org/10.35484/ahss.2023(4-1)06).

\$\$\$\$\$ Dr Nazir Hussain, “Pakistan’s Strategic Outlook 2030,” *Strategic Thought* 6, no. 1 (2024): 91–102, <https://strategicthought.ndu.edu.pk/site/article/view/110>.

***** Xiangning Wu, “Technology, Power, and Uncontrolled Great Power Strategic Competition Between China and the United States,” *China International Strategy Review* 2, no. 1 (June 24, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-020-00040-0>.

+++++ Muhammad Jahanzaib, *The Interplay of Geo-Politics and Geo-Economics in Pakistan’s Foreign Policy (Post-2008)* (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2026), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-95-7469-8>.

***** Syed Muhammad Saad Zaidi and Nirmal, “Regional Political Paradigm Shift: Challenges and Opportunities for Pakistan,” *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 7, no. 4 (June 16, 2022): 772–89, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20578911221103358>.

As revealed by this analysis, Pakistan's foreign policy outcomes are a result of the interplay between systemic changes, regional geopolitical competition, and strategic considerations at home. A combination of cooperation and competition among all its neighbors is the most critical determinant of the country's security in an international context that is both competitive and interdependent. As tensions between the United States and China reach unprecedented levels and tensions with Russia, overreach from Ukraine, the Gaza war, and the Iran–Israel crisis hit the region, security in the country is inextricably linked to its political ties with all of its neighbors. Accordingly, these developments have increased Pakistan's strategic relevance as a regional player capable of engaging positively with various power centers.^{§§§§§§§§§§}

4.5. Pakistan's Adaptive Strategic Hedging: Security, Geoeconomics, and Diplomatic Balancing (2023-2026)

The historical record suggests that Pakistan's foreign policy for the 2023- 2026 period is far more adaptive and hedging-oriented than it is about alliance politics. In security, economic, diplomatic, and institutional relationships, the diversification of the foreign policy of the Pakistani state, namely not being China-first or U.S.-first, has been tried in Islamabad. Islamabad has attempted to diversify in the areas of foreign policy, not being China-first, not being U.S.-first, in security, economics, and diplomacy and institutions.⁺⁺⁺⁺⁺ It is a pattern that is the result of a conscious attempt to increase strategic autonomy, whilst avoiding the risk of growing great-power rivalry. For the ASH prism, Pakistan's foreign policy isn't static or grounded in geopolitical alliances; rather, it is strategic and involves realigning external partnerships based on the country's specific interests.

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The strategic cooperation between Pakistan and China continues to be the backbone of Pakistan's long-term security and economic policies. In the second phase of CPEC, from infrastructure creation to enhancing industrial cooperation, technology, and Special Economic Zones, it reflects that Pakistan is preparing to undergo an economic transformation through bilateral

***** Shagufta Roobi, "Pakistan's Foreign Policy in the Emerging Multipolar World Order: Strategic Challenges, Opportunities, and Policy Implications," *Research Journal for Social Affairs* 4, no. 3(s5) (March 11, 2026): 119–30, [https://doi.org/10.71317/rjsa.004.03\(s5\).1021](https://doi.org/10.71317/rjsa.004.03(s5).1021).

cooperation. Yet Pakistan has not turned this alliance into a kind of geopolitical monopoly; rather, it remains flexible in its policies and has expressed willingness to adapt to changing regional scenarios.

Meanwhile, Pakistan has been moving toward a more practical policy in its relations with the U.S. Unlike the security-threat-focused post-9/11 model of engagement, today's priorities are trade, investment, counterterrorism, and regional stability. The recently extended bilateral dialogue in 2025, which reflects a more selective, functional cooperation based on mutual interests rather than renewed commitments to a new alliance, serves as a good example. This deep strategic cooperation with China and pragmatic engagement with the United States prove that Pakistan's foreign policy cannot be explained solely through the prism of conventional balancing or bandwagoning. Instead, it is a testament to differentiated engagement across other policy areas.

Any crisis faces international repercussions. The crisis in the region has global consequences. Moreover, Pakistan's situational foreign policy is supported by regional crises that took place between 2023 and 2026. The Israel– Hamas conflict imposed a new dimension of geopolitical competition in the wider Middle East, with a stand-off between Iran and Israel as well as an escalating crisis between the U.S. and Iran that directly affected Pakistan's strategic environment. Pakistan has never wanted to be perceived as playing the double game with anyone and has always wished for de-escalation, humanitarian assistance, and diplomacy with both Washington and Beijing.

These changes highlighted the diplomatic importance of the country, as a regional player, whose geographical position and geopolitical dynamics could enable positive interaction in multiple geopolitical contexts. The recent crises, hence, realistically indicate that Pakistan's foreign policy has now become more measured, not geared against forfeiting long-term strategic partnerships but maintaining peace in the region.

4.5.4. Geoeconomics and Institutional Diversification

Foreign policy priorities have thus taken a new avatar, geoeconomics, to alter the paradigm of Pakistan's foreign policy. In the current evolution of international politics, where economics is a key part of strategic power, it is becoming a significant component of the classical security agenda, alongside other key objectives that determine mutual interests, such as investment attraction, connectivity, and industrial modernization.

In addition to CPEC 2.0, Pakistan has diversified its commercial relations with the Gulf countries, Central Asia, the European Union, and the United States to reduce over-reliance on any economic partner. This diversification is backed by active participation in many multilateral institutions such as the SCO, OIC, the United Nations, and other regional organizations. Not only does institutional engagement broaden Pakistan's diplomatic vistas, but it also strengthens the institution to work more efficiently and effectively through security cooperation, rather than isolation, to expand the contours of the international landscape.

4.5.5. Evaluating Adaptive Strategic Hedging

The empirical results show that Pakistan has moved away from alliance politics and adopted a strategy of adaptive strategic hedging in its foreign policy. In various dimensions, internal economic issues, external system geopolitical tensions, and utmost regional issues have driven the reconsideration of relationships with the outside world of diversifying external partners and

Niloufer Ihsan Ijaz Khalid, "SCO and Pakistan's Foreign Policy Shift: A Study of Challenges and Opportunities," *International Journal of Special Education* 41, no. 8s (2024): 1123–40, <https://www.internationalsped.com/index.php/ijse/article/view/3501>.

Lisa Curtis, "The Reorientation of Pakistan's Foreign Policy Toward Its Region," *Contemporary South Asia* 20, no. 2 (June 2012): 255–69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2012.670205>.

Mumtaz Hussain et al., "Annals of Human and Social Sciences Wwww.Ahss.Org.Pk Challenges and Opportunities to the Foreign Policy of Pakistan in the Contemporary Era," *Annals of Human and Social Sciences* 4, no. 1 (2023): 2790–6809, [https://doi.org/10.35484/ahss.2023\(4-I\)06](https://doi.org/10.35484/ahss.2023(4-I)06).

Dr Nazir Hussain, "Pakistan's Strategic Outlook 2030," *Strategic Thought* 6, no. 1 (2024): 91–102, <https://strategicthought.ndu.edu.pk/site/article/view/110>.

Michi Yamasaki, "A Study of Middle Power Diplomacy : As a Strategy of Leadership and Influence," *Uwaterloo.Ca* (University of Waterloo, October 8, 2009), <https://uwspace.uwaterloo.ca/items/4b470c09-084d-4d9a-adcf-8b1bf6d390b3>.

achieving flexible external strategies. It is not uncertainty and indecision, but rather a rational response to a new political world of multipolarity. *****

The ASH framework is thus a more comprehensive understanding of the actuality of Pakistan's foreign policy since the security cooperation with China, pragmatic engagement with the US, geoeconomic diversification, and multilateral diplomacy have a combined impact, which are self-reinforcing and complementary parts of the overall foreign policy of a state, which is in continuous struggle with the long-term great game of China and the US.

5. Conclusion

The current article examined Pakistan's reactions to the growing strategic tilt of the United States and China in an increasingly multipolar and fragmented international system. It argues that Pakistan's current foreign policy can be framed as Adaptive Strategic Hedging (ASH) rather than traditional concepts such as 'balancing', 'bandwagoning', and 'dependence on alliances'. Pakistan has adopted a pragmatic strategy in terms of strategic engagement with China, selective engagement with the USA, geoeconomic diversification, and active multilateral diplomacy to ensure strategic diplomacy in a long-term period of geopolitical uncertainty.

In this regard, the empirical analysis reveals that Pakistan's foreign policy in the period 2023-2026 is not simply about posturing but about rebalancing as well. Both countries can achieve this by partnering. However, Pakistan does not seem to have been pragmatic enough to engage in cooperation with the United States in other areas such as Critical Minerals Technology, counter-smuggling, counterterrorism, and regional security, despite having signed the China-Pakistan partnership on various fronts, including CPEC Phase-II. Also, the Israel-Hamas tension, the Iran- Israel standoff, and the US- Iran standoff proved more to Pakistan's advantage in diplomacy. Pakistan, however, did not want to ruin its strategic relationship with China, but wanted to maintain linkages with the U.S. and felt that there was a need to de-escalate, extend humanitarian relief, and engage in political dialogue with all stakeholders. The developments indicate an issue-oriented foreign policy rather than merely a geopolitical one.

The study makes three important contributions to the IR literature. First, it adds to the scholarship on hedging by conceptualizing Adaptive Strategic Hedging (ASH) as a story—one that continuously changes shape and direction. Second, it demonstrates how Neoclassical Realism, Strategic Hedging Theory, and Constructivism can be blended to emphasize the key underlying tenet of Pakistan's foreign policy: the interplay between system pressures, domestic strategic perspectives, and foreign policy narratives of identity. Third, the article expands the empirical focus of hedging scholarship beyond its traditional focus on Southeast Asia and contributes to the ongoing discussion of middle power agency and strategic autonomy in the Global South as a whole.

The results also indicate that in the current multipolar world, middle powers have more diplomatic space than ever before, but also face increased strategic risks. In the case of Pakistan, strategic autonomy is not only about diversifying external partnerships but also about economic steadfastness, institutional strength, and continuing geoeconomic reforms at home. Although ASH has helped Pakistan navigate a rapidly evolving geopolitical climate, its sustainability is yet to be seen, as Pakistan will now have to strengthen its economic resilience, governance, and energy balance amid growing tensions between the great powers.

Future research should explore the feasibility of using Adaptive Strategic Hedging with other middle powers who are similarly constrained by geopolitical and economic factors. Comparative studies of different approaches to strategic competition in the new international order across South Asian states and other Global South states would broaden the concept and provide insights into how middle powers engage in strategic competition in the new international order. To sum up: The Pakistani case demonstrates that middle powers can not only passively absorb changes in the system, but also shape their external conduct in various ways by employing flexible, diversified, and adaptive foreign policies.

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