

The Belt and Road Initiative and Pakistan's Strategic Autonomy in the Indo-Pacific

Nimra Zulfiqar¹

Visiting Lecturer Department of Political Science

nimrazulfiqar@gcuf.edu.pk

Altaf Majeed²

PhD Scholar, Government College University, Faisalabad

altafgill2028@gmail.com

Sadia Naz³

Lecturer department of political science

sadianaz@gcuf.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

This study examines how the Belt and Road Initiative and, in particular, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), impacts Pakistan's strategic autonomy amid U.S.-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. Historically, Pakistan positioned itself at a distance in relations between the U.S. and China. However, Pakistan's diplomatic, economic, and security priorities have been reshaped, fundamentally, by the recent tendencies of great imbalance competition. The work is based on qualitative case study and draws on the strategic autonomy and strategic hedging, CPEC theory, and the literature on Pakistan's autonomy and CPEC adherence to elaborate how CPEC adherence has both empowered and constrained Pakistan's foreign policy. While the Belt and Road Initiatives or BRI offers Pakistan unprecedented opportunities for economic development, it also has, and continues to, with serious consequence, contract Islamabad's strategic options. This generates the hybrid middle-range power posture of selective alignment and strategic passivity used as the overt foreign policy. The study explains how Pakistan's level of autonomy in the Indo-Pacific is structurally constrained by geopolitical restructuring, economic dependency relations, and domestic factors.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, CPEC, Pakistan, Strategic Autonomy, Indo-Pacific, U.S.-China Rivalry, Hedging Strategy, Middle-Power Diplomacy

Introduction

The focus of global great-power competition in the twenty-first century both geopolitical and geo-economics has concentrated in the Indo-Pacific region. The region's significance is underscored by the competitive realignment of global power from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific. The United States has sought to reinforce its geostrategic dominance in the region by employing a combination of the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). The primary objective is to contain and counteract the growing dominance of China. Initiatives that strengthen military cooperation between the U.S. and the region, maritime

freedom operations, and the trilateral security partnership with India, Japan, and Australia, are aimed at preserving a legally open, liberal, and economically free regional order.

Unlike China, which through the Belt and Road Initiative, initiated and opened pathways toward establishing itself as a regional leader, Beijing started the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Initiated by China, the BRI represents a series of connectivity initiatives which address cross-border collaborations within digital, economic, trade, transportation, energy, and to some extent, sociocultural structures of regional and intercontinental networks and relationships. All of which, exceed the scope of basic intergovernmental development frameworks, to which BRI also contributes. Elements of the BRI, which incorporate cross-border infrastructure, trade, and communications networks, constitute a geopolitical development framework directed toward the macro regional and maritime dominances of the Chinese state. One of the hinges of the BRI is the circumvention of the so-called "Malacca Dilemma." Beijing is attempting to mitigate China's so-called "Malacca Dilemma" by reinforcing alternative connections to the maritime economic channels that are the key to China's economic growth and expansion. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) expands China's landlocked Xinjiang province to Gwadar Port and the Arabian Sea in Pakistan. For both Pakistan and China, the CPEC is a major geopolitical and economic development. Given the CPEC's projected economic opportunities, China's investments signal an economic development integration of China and a geopolitical 'friendship' towards Pakistan. With a dual-strategic partnership, Islamabad has to manage the geopolitically fraught position of the Indo-Pacific. Competing geopolitical interests of the U.S. and the West on China's economic development push Pakistan's geopolitical position into a 'functional relationship' that is guaranteed. With the CPEC and BRI, Pakistan is the only country in the world that has strategically positioned economic development relationships with both China and India. Thus, the BRI and CPEC economic framework predisposed to a functional partnership with the West results in a paradox of strategic autonomy. The central question, therefore, is the relationship of BRI to Pakistan's agency in an imbalanced Indo-Pacific geopolitics of polarities. Addressing this question will have consequences for Pakistan's standing in the geopolitics of the region and will indicate the possible configuration of the Indo-Pacific with China's rise and the U.S. reshuffle of its foreign policy.

Literature Review

The Belt and Road Initiative and Global Power Politics

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was to start promoting cross-border trade and investment through land and sea infrastructure and energy construction networks in 2013. Rolland (2017) analyses the BRI as an economic development model and a tool for the growth of China's geopolitical reach. Supporters of the initiative emphasize its economic development potential for the Global South, while detractors see it as a vehicle for "debt diplomacy" that undermines the economic sovereignty of client states. Overall, the BRI remains poorly articulated, particularly in International Relations, and more particularly, the impacts it has on local populations and the development of sub-national regions.

Pakistan and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

CPEC is one of the most ambitious projects under the Belt and Road Initiative and is considered a multi-billion dollar infrastructure project aimed at linking the continent of Asia with Europe, the Middle East and Africa. According to Wolf (2019), despite the challenges to be faced regarding the transformation of CPEC, it is expected to change Pakistan's energy landscape and enhance the potential for regional connectivity. Recently, the studies that have emerged empirically indicate that the financial arrangements and governance of CPEC have created asymmetrical dependent relations that increase the level of control China has over Pakistan. The prioritisation of CPEC as a matter of 'national interest' has restricted public discourse, sidelining local voices from areas such as Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan, which are on the margins.

The Case of Small and Middle Powers: Strategic Autonomy and Hedging

The concept of strategic autonomy comes from European security studies and is the ability of a state to achieve policy goals free from external control. In the Indo-Pacific region, smaller states are more likely to pursue hedging strategies, which is where competing powers are relationships and subsequently costs and risks. The U.S. view of the CPEC is mainly as a regional challenge to its influence and interests and as hegemonic competition with China, which impacts Pakistan's relative freedom the most. Currently, Pakistan is pressured to fulfil U.S. strategic interests amid the U.S.-India alliance with Pakistan.

Research Gaps

Research on the economic impacts of CPEC is plentiful. However, few studies are focused on Pakistan's diplomatic agency, CPEC, and strategic flexibility within the Indo-Pacific. Much of the research either reproduces the state-sponsored narratives of cooperation between China and Pakistan or looks at the dynamics of the region and the world and ignores the local perspective, which includes the element of human security. This study seeks to fill these gaps by theorising BRI engagement from strategic autonomy and reflecting on CPEC as a political and economic space that impacts marginalized people and political strife within Pakistan.

Theoretical Framework

In this paper, the Strategic Autonomy Theory and the Hedging Strategy Theory are combined to explain the foreign policy behaviour of Pakistan. Strategic Autonomy refers to the ability of a state to independently perform a policy action, while Hedging is the ability to maintain a balance of relations with rival powers so that a state does not become too dependent. For Pakistan, these were explained as Islamabad using a dual engagement strategy of close alignment with China under the BRI and also being careful not to overly align with the U.S. and other multilateral bodies. Such conduct is a form of hybrid middle power strategy in the sense that autonomy is constrained under asymmetric conditions. The approach also recognizes the mediating external factors of domestic institutions and civil-military relations. The weakening of democracy and the civil-military balance in Pakistan has been fundamentally influenced by the implementation of CPEC and the external push of these forces.

Methodology

In this study, a qualitative case study methodology is employed, specifically examining the time frame of 2013 to 2025 in Pakistan's foreign policy behaviour. This type of study design enables the researcher to elaborate on and analyse the particular real world instances of complex political phenomena.

The sources of data were as follows:

- Official documents as in statements of foreign policy by Pakistan, white papers by China, and transcripts of parliamentary debates.
- -Research articles and scholarly books in the field of South Asian Studies and literature analyzing the Belt and Road Initiative.
- -Reports from the Wilson Center, Brookings, and Chatham House.
- -For the economic data, I utilized resources from the IMF, World Bank, and the Pakistan Ministry of Finance.

For the research 'thematic content' was used, in which 'autonomy', 'dependence', and 'hedging' were the primary themes in Pakistan's foreign policy. The qualitative approach of the research was to explain the interrelation of structural factors and domestic politics in the formation of Pakistan's strategic foreign policy, especially in regard to the sub-national level and silenced voices that are typically absent from dominant accounts. There was a reliance on the secondary sources triangulation, which serves as a means of validating the qualitative approach.

Analysis and Discussion

The Indo-Pacific Context and the Strategic Importance of the CPEC

The Indo-Pacific is becoming the main area for the competition of power between the USA and China, with Pakistan situated in the middle. The USA's Indo-Pacific strategy, expressed through the Quad and AUKUS, seeks to maintain the USA's dominance and limit Chinese power. China, on the other hand, is presenting the 'Belt and Road Initiative' as a means to control the region with a massive China-centered order and views the CPEC as a flagship and illuminated jewel of this order in South Asia. The strategic competition between the great powers is altering the Indian Ocean sufficiently to compel politicians to term it a new 'centre of gravity' in geopolitics. Sea trade and energy routes are converging, providing new, substantial opportunities and risks for the regional powers.

Strategically, Pakistan occupies a unique confluence of advantages in this regard. Owing to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, China can gain access to the Arabian Sea and the warm waters of Gwadar Port. Moreover, the Corridor can help China's landlocked western provinces achieve access to the sea, alleviating the problem of access at their western front. China's maritime access problem is compounded by their predicament in the Strait of Malacca, a

chokepoint through which 80% of their oil imports transit. The Corridor's position is thus more than economically advantageous. For China, it is a strategically imperative lifeline for their oil imports. As noted by the authors in their 2025 work (Uddin et al 2025), "The U.S. perceives CPEC as advancing China's hegemonic ambitions through unfair financial practices." Consequently, Pakistan finds itself at the centre of developments in the emerging South Asian Cold War. Its positioning is also influenced by recent developments in the region. While Pakistan is increasingly involved with China's strategic partnerships, India is taking on a greater role in the U.S.-led Quad. Such divergences have led some scholars to speak of South Asia's 'new bipolarity.' With proxy competition between India and China, Islamabad contends with a more sophisticated great power rivalry. Pakistan has always considered India to be the immediate and existential threat to its national security. Such a focus has been complicated by the new global inequities in power which the major South Asian states have themselves created.

Pakistan's Strategic Space and CPEC

CPEC is having a positive impact on Pakistan's geopolitical identity. With China's assistance, Pakistan's identity has transformed from core-peripheral security to a central player in transcontinental connectivity. No longer does Pakistan perceive itself as a loser. Pakistan, attention is shifting to you. The first-stage CPEC projects were critical in addressing Pakistan's perennial energy problem, and the 8,000 megawatts' generation capacity was a major breakthrough in ending the debilitating power shortages, which for decades blocked the industrial sector from growing. Significant structural dependencies limit choices throughout CPEC's development, and Pakistan, in particular, suffers from a lack of system openness. Pakistan's borrowing under the corridor has amplified unsustainable levels of debt, worsening defaults on CPEC loans, and resulting in a debt-to-GDP ratio of approximately 85% (IMF) while subsidised Chinese debt is notably becoming more prominent. Concerns around the opacity of Chinese loans, along with the massive flows from CPEC, heighten the risk of compromised sovereignty and unsustainable debt. The lack of debt transparency with the CPEC has become a focus of the Fund to capture during the 2023 negotiations and outlined conditions to the IMF from Pakistan related to the opaque debts in CPEC.

Table: CPEC Project Implementation and Strategic Implications

Project Phase	Key Components	Strategic Benefits for Pakistan Dependency Risks
Early Harvest (2015-2020)	Energy projects, transport infrastructure	Reduced energy deficits, improved road networks Commercial loan repayments
Medium-Term (2021-2025)	Special Economic Zones, industrialization	Technology transfer, export diversification Market access dependence, technical

		standards alignment
Long-Term Vision (2026-2030)	Agricultural modernisation, tourism corridors	Rural development, service sector growth Cultural influence, soft power penetration

The asymmetry of the China-Pakistan relationship in the context of CPEC has particularly come to light. Although CPEC was originally perceived by Pakistani officials to be a joint endeavour, the actual execution of CPEC projects has crystallised inequalities in power regarding the planning, financing, and human resource allocations for projects. Chinese firms continue to exercise dominant control in management and technical roles, while local workers are assigned to the more menial, unskilled positions. This has resulted in an under-realisation of expectations regarding the transfer of technology and skills, thus contributing to the developmental dependencies, rather than ameliorating them.

Hedging as a Foreign Policy Strategy: Theory and Practice

Scholarship on international relations describes Pakistan's engagement with these divergent reference points as "complex hedging." Pakistan's economic, military, and diplomatic statecraft simultaneously reflects engagement and balancing strategies, along with some controlled bandwagoning. Foremost in Islamabad's economic crisis mitigation strategies since 2019 has been Pakistan's deepened engagement with Western international financial institutions, especially with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. While Pakistan has contracted substantial debt to Beijing, CPEC-related Beijing has deepened selective crisis engagement with Islamabad, culminating in the recent debt rollovers and the IMF's Extended Fund Facilities for Pakistan. Islamabad reflects bandwagoning conditional to cooperative debt relations for the Western financial institutions.

By constraining U.S.-Pak military relations, Washington forgoes "preferential status." CPEC continuing debt rollovers and the IMF's extended funding facilities to Pakistan have "primed" conditional cash flows from Western financial institutions. While Pak-China cooperative defence has been "no strings attached," military engagement with China has "primed" these strategic conditions. U.S. maritime and counter-terrorism aid include U.S.-Pak military exercises. To elaborate on Pakistan's sophisticated diplomatic positioning, while supporting China on core issues (e.g. Xinjiang, Taiwan), Pakistan has also remained neutral on the periphery of the U.S.-China competition. For example, Islamabad has not supported China's position on the South China Sea and has been careful in her engagement with U.S. climate change and global health security initiatives. This issue-based alignment allows Pakistan to maintain working relationships with a multitude of actors in the face of the great-power rivalry, which has increasingly become zero-sum.

Domestic Political Dynamics and Strategic Autonomy

The development of CPEC interacts with the domestic intricacies of Pakistan's politics and the implications for strategic autonomy are profound. The project's governance framework has been highly centralized, with powerful federal agencies (e.g. the CPEC Authority) casting the 'hegemonic' shadow over and, in many instances, overriding variance of control at the provincial tier. This has fuelled the 'politics of the centre' in relation to Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, with the federal government at the centre, where tensions have built on issues of sharing the benefits of development and the 'politics of the environment'.

Of great importance regarding CPEC are the civil-military relations that develop around it and the consequences that stem therefrom. The military establishment has been afforded an extended role in the governance of the economy and the role of the state in international relations because of the security needs of protecting the Chinese and their infrastructure. In the words of Wolf (2019), because CPEC was implemented and secured "an environment in which the military could legally build-up a far-reaching institutionalized, formal role in the political-administrative system." The consequences of this ongoing institutional restructuring could stall the development of democracy in Pakistan and the control of foreigners over the diplomacy of the civilian authorities in Pakistan. Tensions that constrain Pakistan's flexibility in the foreign arena are also the consequence of the political economy of CPEC. The geopolitical dynamics that surround the allocation of development projects, the awarding of contracts, and the distribution of benefits that stem from CPEC have resulted in a political struggle. The lack of bipartisan agreement in the discourse on relations with China that stems from the domestic political struggle has led opposition political actors to periodically criticize the incumbents for accepting dominant positions in the CPEC agreements. The perception of dissent from within the country can be a reason for the Chinese to adopt inflexible and dominant positions in the negotiations.

The Security Dimension: Navigating the Indo-Pacific Rivalry

Vulnerability on the internal and external alignment fronts has created Pakistan's security policy. The allocation of about 15,000 protective security staff attests to the magnitude and securitisation of the development of the CPEC. The "security-first" ideology has led to the transformation of parts of Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan and created a militarised zone that can worsen the local grievances while providing the project infrastructure the physical security. The CPEC's new maritime components and the CPEC's new Gwadar Port generated new CPEC strategies that are confusing and even conflicting. Pakistani authorities had said that the CPEC and Gwadar Port have no other commercial uses; however, other analysts helped fuel international tensions and contradictions on the CPEC and Gwadar Port by stating that there are uses for the C in the G for the Chinese Navy to operate in the Indian Ocean. This perspective has created unbalanced tensions, specifically with India, that Pakistan sees as Chinese "strategic encirclement" developing. The unresolved discomfort for the Pakistani state is optimizing the economic development of "downtown" Gwadar while managing the economic development dilemmas of the region to which the Gwadar development was aimed.

Another complicating facet of Pakistan's security equilibrium is counterterrorism collaboration. While implementing counterterrorism policies with the United States, Pakistan has simultaneously been extending collaboration with China on the militancy flow targeting CPEC projects. Synchronized cooperation leaves opportunities for conflicting threat perceptions and biases while having conflicting policies with Beijing and Washington. In relation to Islamabad's counter-terrorism cooperation with China, there are joint security operations targeting actors and groups with a disruptive agenda against any of China's stakeholders and investments.

Economic Statecraft and Dependency Risks

The economic aspect of CPEC reveals the imbalance in Pakistan-China relations and the economic diplomacy of China. While Chinese investments are partially addressing some of the primary infrastructural gaps, they are deepening relations of economic dependence, or more accurately, the relative dependence of Pakistan's economic sovereignty. While CPEC offered a number of projects, disproportionately more in terms of value, China's strategic interests in transport and energy dominated priorities. This meant China's priorities in strategic connectivity overshadowed Pakistan's industrial development priorities. This is partly a reflection of the poor pace in the development of the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) which were meant to be the cornerstone of export-led industrialization and also attract private investments.

Concerns regarding debt sustainability in connection with the CPEC initiative have become unavoidable. 35% of the government budget is now directed towards servicing external debt. Moreover, Chinese commercial loans have become more expensive than debt from multilateral lenders. This limits the government's ability to provide social services outside of the CPEC initiative, which, in the opinion of some critics, justifies the "debt trap" narrative. By tightening leverage, Chinese CPEC-related debt increases the ability of the Chinese government to economically coerce Pakistan. Pakistani officials have argued against the "debt trap" theory, with the more economically aggressive CPEC-related debt certainly limiting the range of macroeconomic policies available to the government. Pakistan's expectancy from CPEC is economically integrating with China, yet, the relationship is shackled by a growing trade imbalance. CPEC was supposed to economically integrate the two countries, however, since the programme's inception, the trade deficit with China has deepened. Pakistan's exports to China primarily consist of low-value primary commodities, yet, the imported goods largely come from the higher-value manufactured goods, and machinery sectors. This serves to reinforce the current global division of labour, which in and of itself, does little to promote economic transformation.

The Middle-Power Lens: Pakistan's Evolving Regional Role

Pakistan is not typically labelled a Middle Power; however, some of its actions resemble Middle-Power attributes. "Subregional Entrepreneurship" is a concept that captures some of Pakistan's recent historical actions. Diplomacy in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), as well as mediation attempts between Iran and Saudi Arabia, showcase some of these attributes. Due to these actions, Pakistan is able to exert some influence, albeit theoretical, that is out of line with its material capabilities, and these actions offer some influence to mitigate the costs of economic dependency.

Pakistan's position in the regional hierarchy of powers is also complicated by its nuclear status and the extent of its conventional military capabilities. While the region's smaller states may be economically reliant and politically siloed, Pakistan's dominant military resources allow it to be economically independent to a certain extent. Even with economic constraints, the military resources allow Pakistan to retain some autonomy particularly with respect to external pressures on security, particularly India, that are deemed critical to national survival. The idea of "normative alignment" provides an additional perspective from which one can analyse how Pakistan's role is changing. While maintaining an economic engagement with China, Pakistan diplomatically emphasises non-interference and sovereign equality in ways that suggest alignment with its historical foreign policy orientation. Such normative positioning provides Pakistan with diplomatic indicative flexibility. It does, however, suggest that Islamabad is avoiding total alignment with Beijing at least as far as multilateral platforms are concerned with respect to areas of autonomy that Pakistan can afford despite structural dependencies.

Comparative Pakistan, Indonesia, and Vietnam

Comparative analysis in isolation assists in understanding the case of Pakistan and the scope of its strategic autonomy. Vietnam's handling of the diplomatic and geopolitical competition between the United States and China shows how relative strategic autonomy can be achieved even when a state is economically dependent and geographically close to China. Vietnam, and particularly Hanoi, is an example of the so-called 'three no's defense policy—no alliances, no foreign military bases, and no one country dependency to the exclusion of others. In this situation, and in contradiction to the policy, an economic dependence was built towards China and, diplomatically, the U.S. and Hanoi. This dual diplomatic dependency is referred to as Vietnam's autonomy in the context of overwhelming great power competition.

In the case of Indonesia, ASEAN centrality allows for even greater strategic balancing, as Jakarta's position within ASEAN allows for the promotion of inclusive regional use architectures which prevent any single power from regional dominance. While Indonesia engaged in Chinese cash infrastructure deals, it still maintained its traditional non-aligned position, even to the extent of broadening the country's security diversification. This ensures Indonesia takes advantage of China's economic engagement without becoming over-reliant on China. There are several reasons for Pakistan's divergence from the Southeast Asian examples, most importantly, the lack of ASEAN's institutional frameworks and the diplomatic insulation that results from it, which is unlike Vietnam and Indonesia. Far worse is the strategic imbalance that is due to Pakistan's relationship with India, which creates defensiveness that limits hedging, and Pakistan's strategic options as it is geographically fixed. These issues are unique and, in the absence of ASEAN, Pakistan is the most precariously balanced region within South Asia, which is one of the reasons for the lower Adjusted Autonomy score.

Multilateral Engagement and Strategic Signaling

The autonomy-preserving diplomacy Pakistan practices multilaterally also illustrates Pakistan's proficiency in maintaining its bilateral dependencies. Pakistan's participation in the UN, SCO, and the OIC is protective of the China-U.S. bilateral dependency. Pakistan's advocacy

and leadership on climate justice issues under the UN's sustainable development goals, particularly the recent sustainable development goals, demonstrated potential which would allow the country the development of a differentiated international posture relative to Pakistan's contemporary alignments. Diversification of the economy and partnerships in the Middle East, in the case of Pakistan, are also representative of strategic signaling. Particularly the recent investment agreements co-extended with those Pakistan made with China. While these recent investments did provide Pakistan with alternative sources of financing, they do not, as the recent investments with China do, change the fundamental structural realities influencing the bilateral economic relationship between Pakistan and China. Pakistan's diplomacy to mediate on the Iranian-Saudi rapprochement and, more widely, conflict mediation practices, exemplifies planning with an autonomy-enhancing design. This particular diplomacy positions Pakistan as a bridge between rival Middle Eastern powers and seeks to raise Pakistan's diplomatic agency to mitigate dependency narratives.

The incomplete nature of these mediation efforts still provides strong evidence that, for the first time in recent history, Pakistan appeared to be trying to take the initiative in regional diplomacy, in contrast to the prevailing external narratives.

Evaluating Strategic Autonomy: A Layered Understanding

An evaluation of Pakistan's strategic autonomy must account for its multidimensionality and contingent nature in diverse policy areas. In the case of Pakistan's autonomy in the economic domain, it is simply a function of debt dependence and trade imbalance disadvantageous trade relations will limit economic policy autonomy. In the security domain, Pakistan has a considerable measure of strategic autonomy, especially in the case of its nuclear policy and the relative autonomy it has in the deployment of its conventional forces. In diplomacy, Pakistan's autonomy is of an intermediate nature constrained in a unilateral sense in the case of its bilateral relations with great powers and more autonomy in a multilateral setting, especially in the case of gatherings of regional diplomacy and multilateral relations.

One important and often overlooked dimension of strategic autonomy is the temporality of the construct. Pakistan, as with the strategic autonomy of all other countries, has experienced significant fluctuation in autonomy due to varying domestic policy approaches, changing economic conditions, and external realities. During his first term, Imran Khan's government reportedly attempted to shift the balance of Pakistan's economic diplomacy towards the Middle East and Russia, resulting in limited economic diversification. Since economic balance and stability have been a primary goal of the current coalition government, it is evident that we have returned to a focus on the economic relationship with China. These examples serve to illustrate that autonomy is not a static construct, as it is subject to changes in the domestic and external spheres.

To understand Pakistan's psychological dimension of strategic autonomy, and how its elites comprehend their country's strategic flexibility, is of singular importance. These discourses of autonomy and independence continuously inform Pakistan's foreign policy, underscoring yet another strategic contradiction. The discord of independence and the predictably strategic

dependencies that follow construct a domestic expectation that bounds every government's latitude for accommodating external powers, maintaining the desire, if not the actual reality, of autonomy.

Policy Implications and Future Pathways

This analysis points to a number of policy pathways that can be taken to enhance Pakistan's strategic autonomy, all the while working to ensure that the country continues to reap the benefits of CPEC. First, Pakistan's institutional reforms to replace the country's negotiating capacity and the integration of the necessary technical skills would greatly bolster Pakistan's position in negotiations with the other side, in this case, the Chinese. The creation of specialized policy units in relevant ministries to oversee negotiations would address the disproportionate access to information. The lack of transparency in CPEC agreements poses a problem. While some discretion is necessary, the limits of commercial confidentiality and the integration of CPEC agreements will strengthen claims of domestic legitimacy and respond to the international concerns noted above.

Do more to articulate Pakistan's vision of regional economic integration of which CPEC is a part; it is not a substitute for other connectivity initiatives, integration approaches and initiatives to reduce regional resistance for limited cooperation from the ADB and World Bank on CPEC, expansion and connectivity initiatives to reinforce economic integration with G-6, G-7 and G-20 countries. The Centre of Pakistan's Indo-Pacific Strategy will be determined by the Centre's management of lukewarm and casual relationships, to enhance Pakistan's strategic position in the Indo-Pacific; it will enhance the connective and constructive initiatives with Pakistan working relations with the ADB, World Bank and G-20 countries. Saudi is now in negotiations with Iran to reduce aggression between the two and this will enable aggression east of the Middle East to disappear and focus on free trade and other investments in the region. This will enable soft landings for Jack of the World – economic dump.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

To a significant extent, The Belt and Road Initiative and related CPEC investments have transformed and adjusted Pakistan's regional and global positioning. Even though CPEC posed an opportunity to freely expand the economic and geopolitical domains of Pakistan, it has maintained and fixed Pakistan's asymmetric dependencies shackling global foreign policy autonomy. The BRI engagement depicts a primary geopolitical layer of Pakistan's economic engagement with China, and a secondary geopolitical layer of BRI-linked diplomatic engagement with the Western world. Pakistan's current diplomatic engagement, best described as a hybrid strategy derived from geopolitical triangulation, balances limited confrontational pragmatism on either side, thus preserving a client position of Pakistan. CPEC's impacts on Pakistan's autonomy and global positioning are neither positive nor negative. The project has economically interlinked Pakistan with new centers of global dependency and opened newly defined regional opportunities. Pakistan's future autonomy and CPEC engagement will depend on the extent to which global economic partnerships are diversified and economic corridors

strengthened, along with the articulation of an Indo-Pacific strategy that acknowledges CPEC's economic corridors and potential geopolitical trade routes.

Considering the vision of engagement, Pakistan is likely to benefit from increased CPEC investments in alternative regional trade routes, thus enhancing and rationally repositioning Pakistan's trade along trade routes. A primary step for trade rationally in the modern world and integration will be increasing trade and investments towards Europe, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia to diversify and reduce reliance on trade with China. To gain legal recognition in the world and in Pakistan, domestic accountability of civilian institutions and reform of governance while maintaining the initiatives under CPEC will assist in extending Pakistan's capacity to negotiate. To ease worries from a geopolitical angle of having strategic constraints from within, with respect to Pakistan's CPEC position, CPEC represents Pakistan's genuine engagement in the planning and execution. From participation in regional organizations which focus on the South Asian region with IORA and ASEAN initiatives, more strategic flexibility and more avenues for engagement are attained. In dealing with a nearly bipolar regional order, there will be the need for complex but unavoidable adjustments in relations with the US and China to maintain strategic autonomy.

References

Biscop, S. (2017). European strategic autonomy: Why it's not about autonomy. Egmont Institute.

Callahan, W. A. (2016). China's "Asia Dream": The Belt Road Initiative and the new regional order. *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, 1(3), 226–243.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2057891116647806>

Hurley, J., Morris, S., & Portelance, G. (2018). Examining the debt implications of the Belt and Road Initiative. Center for Global Development.
<https://www.cgdev.org/publication/examining-debt-implications-belt-and-road-initiative>

Kuik, C. C. (2008). The essence of hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's response to a rising China. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 30(2), 159–185. <https://doi.org/10.1355/CS30-2A>

Kugelman, M. (2020). Pakistan and the geoeconomics of CPEC. Wilson Center.
<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/pakistan-and-geoeconomics-cpec>

Rolland, N. (2017). China's Eurasian century? Political and strategic implications of the Belt and Road Initiative. National Bureau of Asian Research.

Uddin, A., Zada, S., & Shoukat, H. (2025). Political tug-of-war: The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in the crossfire of the US-China rivalry. *International Journal of Politics & Social Sciences Review*,

Zhexin, Z. (2020). China's BRI and the Indo-Pacific: Strategic convergence or competition? East Asia Forum.



Yaqoob, A. (2025). China's Belt and Road in Pakistan: What CPEC Leaves Behind. *New Security Beat*, Wilson Center Environmental Change and Security Program.