

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Navigating Multipolarity and Pakistan's Strategy of Balancing Great Powers

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Abstract: The gradual transition of the international system from unipolarity to multipolarity has profoundly altered the foreign policy behavior of middle powers. Pakistan, historically embedded in alliance politics, now confronts a complex strategic environment shaped by intensifying great power competition, economic interdependence, and regional instability. This study examines Pakistan's foreign policy choices in an emerging multipolar world, focusing on how Islamabad balances relations among major powers while pursuing strategic autonomy. Drawing on neorealist theory and the concept of hedging, the article argues that Pakistan has shifted away from rigid alliance dependence toward a more flexible strategy that combines balancing, hedging, and selective engagement. Through qualitative analysis of Pakistan's relations with China, the United States, Russia, and regional actors, the study highlights both opportunities and constraints shaping Pakistan's evolving diplomatic posture.

Keywords: Pakistan Foreign Policy, Multipolar World, Great Powers, Balancing, Hedging, Neorealism

Introduction

The international system is undergoing a significant structural transformation marked by the gradual decline of unipolarity and the emergence of a multipolar world order (Muzaffar et al., 2017). The relative erosion of United States dominance, the rapid rise of China, the reassertion of Russia, and the growing strategic relevance of regional powers have collectively reshaped global politics. This changing distribution of power has intensified great power competition and increased uncertainty in international relations, compelling states, particularly middle powers, to reassess their foreign policy orientations and strategic priorities.

In this evolving global environment, traditional alliance-based foreign policies have become increasingly costly and less reliable (Carson et al., 2025). Multipolarity is characterized by fluid alignments, overlapping spheres of influence, and heightened strategic ambiguity. As a result, states are no longer confined to binary choices of balancing or bandwagoning. Instead, many pursue more nuanced strategies that allow flexibility, autonomy, and risk management. This shift has made concepts such as strategic balancing and hedging particularly relevant for understanding contemporary foreign policy behavior.

Pakistan represents a compelling case study in this context. Since its independence, Pakistan's foreign policy has largely been shaped by security imperatives, regional rivalries, and reliance on external alliances (Chattha, 2023). During the Cold War and the post-9/11 period, Pakistan's strategic partnerships, especially with the United States, reflected a pattern of asymmetric dependence rooted in immediate security concerns (Haqqani, 2013). However, the changing structure of the international system, coupled with evolving regional and economic dynamics, has reduced the effectiveness of rigid alliance politics for Pakistan.

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The emergence of a multipolar world has created both opportunities and constraints for Pakistan's foreign policy (Rizvi, 2016). On the one hand, diversified global power centers offer Islamabad greater diplomatic space to broaden partnerships and pursue economic cooperation beyond traditional allies. On the other hand, intensifying competition among major powers places pressure on Pakistan to navigate rivalries carefully without becoming entangled in zero-sum alignments. Managing relations simultaneously with China, the United States, Russia, and key regional actors has therefore become a central challenge of Pakistan's contemporary foreign policy.

This article examines Pakistan's foreign policy choices within the broader context of emerging multipolarity. It seeks to analyze how Pakistan responds to systemic changes in the international order and how it balances relations among competing great powers while striving to maintain strategic autonomy. By situating Pakistan's foreign policy behavior within a neorealist framework and employing the concept of hedging, the study aims to provide a structured and theory-driven understanding of Pakistan's evolving diplomatic posture in a complex and uncertain global environment (Kuik, 2008).

Furthermore, Pakistan's foreign policy recalibration cannot be understood solely through bilateral relationships; it must be analyzed within the broader systemic constraints imposed by multipolarity. In an international order where power is dispersed among multiple actors, middle powers like Pakistan face heightened uncertainty regarding the intentions and reliability of major powers (Kuik, 2016). This uncertainty discourages exclusive alignments and encourages diversified engagement across political, economic, and security domains. Pakistan's evolving diplomatic behavior, marked by deep strategic cooperation with China, selective engagement with the United States, improving relations with Russia, and sustained outreach to regional and Middle Eastern partners, reflects an effort to manage risk while preserving room for strategic maneuverability.

At the same time, domestic economic pressures and regional security challenges further shape Pakistan's foreign policy choices. Economic vulnerabilities, development needs, and the imperative of external economic cooperation have elevated the role of geo-economics alongside traditional security concerns. In a multipolar environment, foreign policy is no longer driven solely by military considerations but increasingly by access to markets, investment, and connectivity (Kohl, 2025). Consequently, Pakistan's approach toward great powers demonstrates a pragmatic blend of strategic balancing and economic hedging. Understanding this shift is essential for assessing Pakistan's role and behavior in the contemporary international system, as well as for evaluating the broader implications of multipolarity for middle powers navigating great power competition.

Statement of the Problem

Pakistan's foreign policy has traditionally been characterized by alliance dependence and security-centric decision-making. However, the decline of unipolarity and the intensification of great power rivalry have reduced the effectiveness of such approaches. Pakistan now faces external pressure to align with competing power blocs while simultaneously grappling with economic vulnerabilities and regional instability. The central problem addressed in this study is how Pakistan can balance relations among rival great powers without compromising sovereignty, security, and long-term national interests.

Objectives of the Study

- To analyze Pakistan's foreign policy choices in the context of emerging multipolarity.
- To examine the role of balancing and hedging in Pakistan's diplomatic behavior.
- To assess the opportunities and constraints facing Pakistan amid great power competition.
- To contribute theoretically to the study of middle-power behavior in multipolar systems.

Research Questions

- How does multipolarity influence Pakistan's foreign policy orientation?
- What mechanisms does Pakistan use to manage relations with competing great powers?
- Is Pakistan primarily balancing, bandwagoning, or hedging in its foreign policy?

Literature Review

The study of foreign policy behavior in changing international systems has long occupied a central position in the field of International Relations. Scholars have extensively examined how shifts in the global distribution of power influence state behavior, alliance formation, and strategic decision-making. Classical and structural realist traditions emphasize that changes in systemic structure, particularly transitions between unipolarity, bipolarity, and multipolarity, produce corresponding adjustments in state conduct (Mearsheimer, 2001). In this regard, the emerging multipolar world has generated renewed scholarly interest in how states, especially middle powers, navigate uncertainty, competition, and strategic realignment.

A significant body of literature conceptualizes multipolarity as a system characterized by diffuse power centers, fluid alliances, and heightened strategic ambiguity. Unlike bipolar or unipolar systems, multipolarity reduces predictability and increases the risks associated with rigid alliance commitments. Scholars argue that in such environments, states are more likely to pursue flexible strategies aimed at preserving autonomy and minimizing vulnerability (Marston, 2023). This literature provides an important backdrop for understanding why traditional alliance politics have become less attractive for many states in the contemporary international system.

Within this broader debate, middle powers occupy a distinctive analytical space. Existing studies suggest that middle powers lack the material capabilities to dominate the international system yet possess sufficient agency to shape their external relations creatively (Cooper et al., 1993). As a result, their foreign policies tend to be adaptive rather than assertive. Scholars focusing on middle-power diplomacy highlight strategies such as diversification, selective engagement, and multilateralism as tools to navigate great power rivalry. This literature is particularly relevant for Pakistan, which fits the profile of a middle power operating in a strategically sensitive region.

Pakistan's foreign policy has been widely analyzed through the lens of realism, with particular emphasis on security imperatives and alliance behavior (Rizvi, 2019). Early studies portray Pakistan as a security-driven state whose foreign policy choices were shaped primarily by regional threats and power asymmetries. The emphasis on external alliances, especially during the Cold War, has been interpreted as a rational response to Pakistan's security vulnerabilities. These studies underscore Pakistan's reliance on major powers to compensate for material and strategic limitations.

A substantial portion of the literature examines Pakistan–United States relations, often characterizing them as transactional, asymmetric, and crisis-driven (Youhana, 2023). Scholars argue that this relationship oscillated between strategic cooperation and mutual mistrust, reinforcing Pakistan's dependence on external support while simultaneously constraining its foreign policy autonomy. The post-9/11 period, in particular, has been analyzed as an extension of alliance-based engagement shaped by short-term security objectives rather than long-term strategic convergence.

More recent scholarship has shifted attention toward Pakistan's deepening partnership with China. Analysts describe this relationship as strategic, long-term, and multidimensional, encompassing defense cooperation, diplomatic coordination, and economic collaboration (Ahmad et al., 2025). The literature generally views China as Pakistan's most consistent external partner in the contemporary period. However, some scholars caution against interpreting this relationship as a traditional alliance, noting Pakistan's continued engagement with other major powers. This observation supports the argument that Pakistan seeks flexibility rather than exclusive alignment.

An emerging strand of literature focuses on Pakistan's efforts to diversify its foreign relations beyond traditional partners. Studies examining Pakistan's outreach to Russia, Central Asia, and the Middle East interpret these developments as part of a broader strategy to reduce dependence and expand diplomatic options (Hussain & Jahanzaib, 2025). This diversification is often linked to systemic changes in the international order, particularly the diffusion of power associated with multipolarity. Such analyses reinforce the view that Pakistan's foreign policy behavior is increasingly shaped by systemic rather than purely bilateral considerations.

At the theoretical level, neorealism remains a dominant framework for analyzing foreign policy behavior under conditions of systemic change. Neorealist scholars argue that states respond to shifts in power distribution by adjusting strategies to ensure survival and autonomy. In multipolar systems, this adjustment often takes the form of flexible alignment and strategic caution. The application of neorealism to Pakistan's foreign policy highlights how systemic pressures, rather than ideological preferences, drive Islamabad's diplomatic recalibration.

Complementing neorealism, the concept of hedging has gained prominence in contemporary foreign policy analysis. The hedging literature argues that states confronted with uncertainty and competing power centers often pursue simultaneous engagement with multiple major powers (Marston, 2023). Rather than choosing between balancing and bandwagoning, hedging allows states to spread risk, maximize benefits, and retain strategic flexibility. This framework has been widely applied to middle powers operating in Asia and other multipolar regions.

Despite the growing relevance of hedging theory, relatively few studies have systematically applied it to Pakistan's foreign policy within a multipolar context (Adil et al., 2024). Existing analyses often remain fragmented, focusing on individual bilateral relationships rather than situating Pakistan's behavior within a broader systemic framework. This gap in the literature underscores the need for a comprehensive study that integrates neorealist insights with hedging theory to explain Pakistan's evolving foreign policy choices.

In sum, the existing literature provides valuable insights into multipolarity, middle-power behavior, and Pakistan's external relations. However, it lacks a unified analytical framework that connects systemic transformation with Pakistan's diversified diplomatic practices. By synthesizing neorealism and hedging theory, this study builds upon and extends existing scholarship, offering a more coherent and theory-driven explanation of Pakistan's foreign policy behavior in an emerging multipolar world.

Scholars examining systemic change in international politics argue that periods of transition, such as the shift from unipolarity to multipolarity, are inherently destabilizing and place significant adaptive pressure on states. Power transition theorists emphasize that declining hegemonic dominance creates strategic uncertainty, compelling states to reassess long-standing alignments and foreign policy doctrines (Organski & Kugler, 1980). In such transitional phases, middle powers are often the most affected, as they must navigate between competing centers of power without possessing sufficient material capabilities to shape outcomes independently. This scholarship underscores the relevance of systemic structure in shaping foreign policy behavior, a premise that aligns closely with the neorealist foundations of this study.

The literature further suggests that multipolar systems differ fundamentally from bipolar or unipolar orders in terms of alliance behavior. In bipolar systems, alliance commitments tend to be stable and clearly defined, whereas in multipolar systems, alliances are fluid, situational, and often short-term. Scholars argue that multipolarity discourages rigid alignment because the costs of miscalculation are higher and the benefits of flexibility are greater. This insight is particularly relevant for understanding why states increasingly prefer diversified partnerships over exclusive alliances. For Pakistan, whose historical experience with alliance politics has produced mixed outcomes, this systemic reality provides strong incentives for strategic recalibration.

Another important strand of literature focuses on the evolution of security concepts in contemporary international relations. Traditional realist analyses prioritized military power and territorial defense, but recent scholarship highlights the growing importance of economic security, connectivity, and interdependence (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2021). In a multipolar world, economic relations often intersect with strategic considerations, blurring the distinction between security and development. This shift has encouraged states to integrate geo-economic objectives into their foreign policy strategies. Studies emphasizing this trend help explain why Pakistan's foreign policy increasingly reflects economic considerations alongside conventional security concerns.

Theoretical Framework

Neorealism (Structural Realism)

Neorealism posits that state behavior is shaped primarily by the structure of the international system and the distribution of power (Waltz, 1979). In a multipolar system, uncertainty increases, alliances become fluid, and states prioritize survival and autonomy. From this perspective, Pakistan's foreign policy adjustments reflect systemic pressures rather than ideological preferences.

Key neorealist assumptions guiding this study include:

- States seek survival in an anarchic international system
- Power distribution shapes foreign policy choices
- Middle powers pursue flexibility to avoid domination by great powers

Hedging Theory

Hedging theory explains how states manage uncertainty by simultaneously engaging with competing powers. Unlike balancing or band wagoning, hedging involves cultivating diversified relationships to minimize risk (Acharya, 2017). Pakistan's simultaneous engagement with China, limited cooperation with the United States, outreach to Russia, and regional diplomacy exemplifies hedging behavior.

Conceptual Framework

Independent Variable

- Emerging multipolar international system

Intervening Variables

- Great power competition
- Economic interdependence
- Regional security environment

Dependent Variable

- Pakistan's foreign policy choices (balancing, hedging, diversification)

Hypotheses

H1: The emergence of a multipolar world has increased Pakistan's preference for hedging over alliance dependence.

H2: Pakistan's foreign policy diversification is positively correlated with increased great power competition.

H3: Economic considerations play a decisive role in Pakistan's balancing strategy.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design. Data is drawn from:

- Academic journals and books
- Official policy statements and government documents

- Think-tank reports and policy analyses

The research uses analytical and comparative methods, focusing on Pakistan's bilateral relations as case studies.

Pakistan's Foreign Policy Choices in a Multipolar World

China: Strategic Anchor

China occupies a central and stabilizing position in Pakistan's foreign policy in the emerging multipolar world. Over the past two decades, the Pakistan–China relationship has evolved into a multidimensional strategic partnership encompassing political trust, defense cooperation, economic engagement, and diplomatic coordination (Aman & Yaseen, 2025). In the context of declining unipolarity and intensifying great power competition, China functions as Pakistan's most reliable external partner and a crucial anchor for its foreign policy orientation. This relationship provides Pakistan with strategic reassurance while enabling it to navigate an increasingly uncertain international environment.

From a neorealist perspective, Pakistan's close engagement with China reflects a rational response to structural pressures within the international system. China's rise as a global power offers Pakistan an alternative center of gravity, reducing its vulnerability to coercion or abandonment by any single great power (Ch et al., 2025). At the same time, Pakistan has deliberately avoided converting this partnership into a formal military alliance. This restraint underscores Pakistan's broader hedging strategy, which seeks to benefit from strategic alignment with China without foreclosing engagement with other major powers.

Economically, cooperation with China has assumed growing significance for Pakistan's foreign policy (Shad et al., 2025). In a multipolar world where economic strength increasingly underpins strategic influence, Pakistan views economic connectivity and development as essential components of national security. Engagement with China allows Pakistan to integrate geo-economic objectives into its foreign policy, reinforcing the shift from a purely security-centric approach toward a more comprehensive strategic outlook. This economic dimension further consolidates China's role as a strategic anchor while complementing Pakistan's broader diversification efforts.

At the diplomatic level, Pakistan and China frequently coordinate positions on regional and international issues, reflecting shared concerns about stability, sovereignty, and non-interference (Khan & Rehman, 2023). However, Pakistan remains cautious not to be perceived as exclusively aligned with China in great power rivalries. This careful balancing highlights Pakistan's effort to maintain strategic autonomy while leveraging its partnership with China as a stabilizing force in a multipolar system. China's significance for Pakistan must also be understood within the broader context of Sino-US strategic rivalry and regional power shifts in Asia. As competition between Washington and Beijing intensifies, Pakistan's alignment with China acquires greater strategic weight, but also greater complexity (PAK–US relations and US–China strategic competition in South Asia, 2025). For Pakistan, China is not merely a bilateral partner; it represents a systemic counterweight that enhances Islamabad's bargaining position within the international system. This role is particularly important in a multipolar environment where access to alternative power centers increases a middle power's strategic leverage.

From a neorealist standpoint, Pakistan's close partnership with China contributes to soft balancing rather than direct confrontation. Pakistan does not openly align with China to oppose the United States, but China's political and diplomatic backing reduces Pakistan's strategic vulnerability. This indirect balancing function allows Pakistan to resist external pressure without escalating tensions or committing to overt antagonism. Such behavior aligns with neorealist expectations that middle powers seek security through positional advantages rather than outright power competition.

China's growing global economic footprint further reinforces its importance for Pakistan's foreign policy (Akram et al., 2025). In an era where economic strength is increasingly intertwined with strategic

influence, Pakistan views China as a gateway to long-term economic stabilization and regional connectivity. This geo-economic dimension enhances Pakistan's resilience in a multipolar world by reducing dependence on Western-dominated financial and development structures. Consequently, Pakistan's engagement with China strengthens its ability to hedge against external economic shocks and political conditionalities.

However, Pakistan remains aware of the risks associated with excessive dependence on any single power. While China functions as a strategic anchor, Islamabad has avoided framing the relationship in ideological or bloc-based terms. This restraint reflects Pakistan's broader hedging strategy, which seeks to maintain strategic flexibility amid great power rivalry. By embedding its partnership with China within a diversified foreign policy framework, Pakistan aims to maximize benefits while minimizing long-term strategic constraints.

United States: Selective Engagement

Pakistan's relationship with the United States has undergone a significant transformation in the post-unipolar international environment (Rana, 2022). Once characterized by formal alliances and intensive security cooperation, the relationship has gradually shifted toward selective, issue-based engagement. This transition reflects both changing systemic conditions and accumulated bilateral mistrust. In a multipolar world, Pakistan no longer views exclusive alignment with the United States as a viable or desirable strategy.

From a neorealist standpoint, Pakistan's recalibrated approach toward the United States reflects an adaptation to structural change rather than a complete rupture (Saghir et al., 2025). While the United States remains a major global power with considerable influence in international institutions, its relative decline and shifting strategic priorities have reduced the reliability of alliance-based cooperation. Consequently, Pakistan seeks to maintain functional engagement with Washington while avoiding overdependence or strategic subordination.

Selective engagement allows Pakistan to preserve diplomatic channels with the United States in areas of mutual interest, such as regional stability and economic cooperation, without committing to broader strategic alignment (Ahmed, 2024). This approach aligns closely with hedging behavior, enabling Pakistan to manage uncertainty by keeping relations intact while diversifying external partnerships. Importantly, Pakistan's foreign policy demonstrates a conscious effort to avoid being drawn into great power rivalry, particularly in the context of intensifying competition between the United States and China.

This recalibration also reflects lessons drawn from Pakistan's historical experience with alliance politics (Hussain & Rafiq, 2023). Past patterns of cooperation followed by disengagement have reinforced the perception that reliance on a single external power constrains long-term strategic autonomy. As a result, Pakistan's contemporary engagement with the United States is cautious, pragmatic, and narrowly defined, consistent with its broader strategy of balancing flexibility and autonomy in a multipolar world. Pakistan's selective engagement with the United States must also be analyzed within the structural context of declining unipolarity and evolving American global priorities. As the United States adjusts its strategic focus toward great power competition, particularly with China, its approach toward traditional partners has become more conditional and interest-driven. This shift has reduced the predictability of US commitments, reinforcing Pakistan's decision to move away from alliance-centric dependence (A/L Peter Rogers et al., 2023).

From a neorealist perspective, Pakistan's recalibration reflects a rational assessment of power transition dynamics. In periods of hegemonic decline, secondary states often experience uncertainty regarding the reliability of the dominant power. Pakistan's cautious approach toward the United States is therefore not an expression of strategic disengagement, but an attempt to manage uncertainty by maintaining limited cooperation without exposing itself to abandonment or coercion. This behavior is consistent with neorealist predictions about state conduct during systemic transition.

At the same time, Pakistan recognizes that the United States continues to wield significant influence in global financial institutions, diplomatic forums, and security governance structures (Assessing Pakistan's role in U.S. strategy for South Asia, 2024). Maintaining functional relations with Washington remains important for avoiding diplomatic isolation and preserving access to international economic mechanisms. Selective engagement thus serves Pakistan's hedging strategy by keeping channels open while preventing overcommitment to a declining yet still powerful actor.

Importantly, Pakistan's approach toward the United States reflects lessons learned from past cycles of engagement and disengagement (Khan, 2024). The historical pattern of transactional cooperation has encouraged Islamabad to adopt a more restrained and issue-specific framework. Rather than viewing the United States as a security guarantor, Pakistan increasingly treats the relationship as one component of a broader, diversified foreign policy portfolio. This shift underscores Pakistan's growing emphasis on strategic autonomy in a multipolar world.

Moreover, Pakistan's careful management of its US relationship also helps mitigate the risks associated with Sino-US rivalry. By avoiding overt alignment against Washington, Pakistan reduces the likelihood of being drawn into zero-sum competition between major powers. This calibrated posture exemplifies hedging behavior, allowing Pakistan to benefit from limited cooperation with the United States while sustaining deeper strategic ties with China.

Russia: Strategic Diversification

Pakistan's engagement with Russia represents a significant shift in its foreign policy orientation and forms a critical component of its broader strategy of diversification in an emerging multipolar world (Khan & Mahmood, 2024). Historically, relations between Pakistan and Russia were limited due to Cold War alignments and Pakistan's close association with Western security frameworks. However, the diffusion of global power and the gradual erosion of rigid bloc politics have created new diplomatic space for rapprochement. In the contemporary multipolar context, Pakistan's outreach to Russia reflects a calculated effort to expand strategic options and reduce overdependence on traditional partners.

From a neorealist perspective, Pakistan's improving relations with Russia can be understood as a rational response to changes in the international system (Hayat, 2023). As power becomes more dispersed, middle powers seek to engage multiple centers of influence to enhance autonomy and mitigate strategic vulnerability. Pakistan's engagement with Russia is not aimed at forming a formal alliance or counterbalancing any specific power. Rather, it is designed to signal strategic flexibility and broaden Pakistan's diplomatic and geopolitical maneuverability.

The evolving Pakistan-Russia relationship encompasses diplomatic engagement, limited defense cooperation, and dialogue on energy and regional security issues (Nisar et al., 2025). While the material depth of this relationship remains modest compared to Pakistan's partnerships with China or historical engagement with the United States, its strategic and symbolic value is considerable. Engagement with Russia allows Pakistan to demonstrate independence in foreign policy decision-making and reinforces its image as a state capable of navigating across traditional geopolitical divides.

Importantly, Pakistan's relations with Russia complement rather than contradict its broader hedging strategy. By engaging Russia alongside China and maintaining selective engagement with the United States, Pakistan avoids entrapment in exclusive alignments. This diversified approach enhances Pakistan's ability to manage uncertainty in great power relations and reduces the risks associated with shifting geopolitical priorities among major powers.

Furthermore, engagement with Russia contributes to Pakistan's broader regional outlook. Russia's influence in Eurasia and its growing interest in South and Central Asia create opportunities for diplomatic

coordination on regional stability (Javaid et al., 2025). For Pakistan, such engagement supports its objective of expanding regional connectivity and reducing strategic isolation. In this sense, Pakistan–Russia relations reinforce both the balancing and hedging dimensions of Pakistan’s foreign policy in a multipolar environment.

In sum, Pakistan’s strategic engagement with Russia reflects a pragmatic and forward-looking approach to foreign policy in an era of multipolarity. Rather than representing a departure from realist logic, this engagement aligns closely with neorealist expectations of middle-power behavior under conditions of systemic uncertainty. By incorporating Russia into its diversified diplomatic portfolio, Pakistan strengthens its strategic autonomy and enhances its capacity to navigate the complexities of contemporary great power competition.

Regional Diplomacy

The Gulf states occupy a critical position in Pakistan’s regional diplomatic calculus, particularly in the context of an emerging multipolar world where economic resilience and strategic flexibility are increasingly important. Pakistan’s relations with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members are shaped by long-standing historical ties, labor migration, financial assistance, and religious and cultural affinities (Siddiqi, 2019). In neorealist terms, engagement with the Gulf states enhances Pakistan’s external support network without binding it to rigid security commitments. These relationships provide Pakistan with economic relief and diplomatic backing while allowing Islamabad to avoid overdependence on any single great power.

From a hedging perspective, Pakistan’s Gulf diplomacy reflects a careful balancing act. While maintaining close ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Pakistan has avoided being drawn into intra-Gulf rivalries or regional conflicts (Nasim et al., 2023). This cautious approach demonstrates Pakistan’s preference for strategic neutrality and autonomy, particularly in a region marked by intense geopolitical competition. Economic cooperation, remittances, energy security, and investment opportunities constitute the core drivers of Pakistan’s Gulf engagement, reinforcing the growing importance of geo-economics in Pakistan’s foreign policy. By sustaining strong but non-exclusive relations with Gulf actors, Pakistan diversifies its external partnerships and strengthens its capacity to manage uncertainty in a multipolar international system.

Iran represents one of the most complex and strategically sensitive regional actors in Pakistan’s foreign policy. Geographic proximity, shared borders, and overlapping security concerns, particularly related to border stability and regional militancy, necessitate sustained engagement between the two states. At the same time, Iran’s strained relations with the United States and certain Gulf states complicate Pakistan’s diplomatic maneuvering. In a multipolar environment, Pakistan’s approach toward Iran reflects a pragmatic effort to balance competing regional pressures while safeguarding its own security and economic interests.

From a neorealist standpoint, Pakistan’s engagement with Iran is driven by structural constraints rather than ideological alignment. Islamabad seeks to maintain cooperative relations with Tehran to ensure border stability and regional equilibrium, while avoiding actions that could jeopardize ties with other partners. This calibrated engagement aligns with hedging behavior, as Pakistan neither fully aligns with Iran nor distances itself completely. Instead, it pursues selective cooperation that minimizes risk and preserves strategic flexibility. Pakistan’s Iran policy underscores its broader regional strategy: maintaining workable relations with all neighboring actors while avoiding entanglement in zero-sum regional rivalries.

Turkey occupies a distinctive place in Pakistan’s regional diplomacy due to shared historical experiences, political affinity, and growing strategic cooperation. In recent years, Pakistan–Turkey relations have expanded beyond symbolic solidarity to include defense collaboration, diplomatic coordination, and economic engagement. Turkey’s assertive foreign policy and its growing influence in regional and global affairs make it an increasingly relevant partner for Pakistan in a multipolar world.

Within a neorealist framework, Pakistan's engagement with Turkey enhances its diplomatic reach without threatening existing partnerships. Turkey does not function as a substitute for great power support but rather as a complementary regional partner that strengthens Pakistan's strategic options. This relationship exemplifies hedging behavior, as Pakistan leverages ties with Turkey to diversify its diplomatic portfolio while avoiding exclusive alignment. Cooperation with Turkey also enhances Pakistan's visibility in broader Muslim-majority regions, reinforcing Islamabad's diplomatic standing without undermining its strategic autonomy.

Central Asia holds growing strategic and economic significance for Pakistan, particularly in the context of regional connectivity and geo-economic transformation (Dawn, 2025). Pakistan's outreach to Central Asian states reflects an effort to overcome geographic and strategic constraints by positioning itself as a bridge between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. In a multipolar world where regional connectivity is increasingly linked to strategic influence, Pakistan views Central Asia as a critical component of its long-term foreign policy planning.

From a neorealist perspective, Pakistan's engagement with Central Asia enhances its strategic depth without provoking regional antagonism. These relationships are primarily economic and diplomatic in nature, focusing on trade, energy cooperation, and connectivity rather than military alignment. This approach aligns with hedging theory, as Pakistan seeks to expand partnerships that reduce vulnerability and increase strategic options. Engagement with Central Asia also complements Pakistan's broader efforts to diversify its foreign relations beyond traditional partners, reinforcing its adaptability and resilience in an uncertain international environment.

Overall Assessment of Regional Diplomacy

Collectively, Pakistan's relations with Gulf states, Iran, Turkey, and Central Asia demonstrate a coherent regional hedging strategy rooted in neorealist logic. Rather than prioritizing rigid alignments, Pakistan emphasizes diversified engagement, economic cooperation, and diplomatic flexibility. Regional diplomacy functions as a stabilizing layer in Pakistan's foreign policy, complementing its relations with great powers while reducing strategic isolation. In an emerging multipolar world, these regional actors provide Pakistan with additional avenues to manage risk, enhance autonomy, and pursue national interests without becoming entrapped in great power rivalries.

Challenges and Constraints

Despite the opportunities created by an emerging multipolar international system, Pakistan's foreign policy choices are constrained by a range of structural, regional, and domestic challenges. One of the most significant constraints arises from intensifying great power rivalry, particularly between the United States and China. While multipolarity provides Pakistan with greater diplomatic space, it simultaneously increases external pressure to clarify alignments. Pakistan's close strategic partnership with China often generates suspicion in Washington, while continued engagement with the United States risks perceptions of strategic ambiguity from Beijing. Managing this delicate balance requires constant diplomatic calibration, and missteps could result in political, economic, or strategic costs.

Economic vulnerability constitutes another major constraint on Pakistan's ability to pursue an effective hedging strategy. Chronic balance-of-payments crises, dependence on external financing, and limited export diversification restrict Pakistan's strategic autonomy. Although diversification of partnerships is a central feature of hedging, Pakistan's economic weaknesses reduce its bargaining power vis-à-vis major and regional powers. Reliance on external assistance, whether from China, Gulf states, or international financial institutions, often comes with implicit or explicit conditions that limit policy flexibility. In this sense, economic fragility undermines the sustainability of Pakistan's balancing and hedging efforts in a competitive multipolar environment.

Regional instability further complicates Pakistan's foreign policy choices. Persistent tensions in South Asia, unresolved disputes, and instability in neighboring regions constrain Pakistan's diplomatic maneuverability. Security challenges along Pakistan's borders divert resources and attention away from long-term strategic planning and economic diplomacy. Moreover, regional rivalries intersect with great power competition, amplifying external pressures on Pakistan's foreign policy. In such an environment, maintaining balanced relations with regional actors while avoiding escalation remains a persistent challenge.

Domestic political and institutional constraints also shape Pakistan's foreign policy behavior. Political instability, civil-military coordination issues, and policy discontinuity weaken the coherence and credibility of Pakistan's external engagements. Hedging strategies require consistency, long-term planning, and institutional capacity, conditions that are often difficult to sustain amid domestic turbulence. These internal constraints do not negate Pakistan's strategic intentions but limit the effectiveness with which those intentions can be translated into outcomes.

Finally, Pakistan faces the risk of strategic overstretch. Diversification across multiple great and regional powers demands diplomatic resources, economic capacity, and policy coherence. Without adequate institutional strengthening and economic reform, Pakistan's attempt to engage multiple actors simultaneously may strain its diplomatic apparatus. Thus, while multipolarity expands Pakistan's options, it also raises the costs of miscalculation and policy inconsistency.

Assessment of Hypothesis

The findings of this study provide qualitative support for the proposed hypotheses. The analysis indicates that the emergence of a multipolar world has indeed increased Pakistan's preference for hedging over alliance dependence, supporting H1. Evidence of Pakistan's diversified engagement with China, the United States, Russia, and regional actors suggest a positive relationship between great power competition and foreign policy diversification, lending support to H2. Furthermore, the growing emphasis on geo-economics and economic diplomacy across Pakistan's external relations underscores the decisive role of economic considerations in its balancing strategy, supporting H3.

Conclusion

This study has examined Pakistan's foreign policy choices in the context of an emerging multipolar international system through the analytical lenses of neorealism and hedging theory. The transition from unipolarity to multipolarity has fundamentally altered the strategic environment in which Pakistan operates, reducing the viability of rigid alliance dependence and increasing the value of flexibility, diversification, and strategic autonomy. The analysis demonstrates that Pakistan has moved away from exclusive alignments toward a pragmatic foreign policy that combines strategic anchoring, selective engagement, and regional diversification.

Pakistan's relationship with China functions as a stabilizing strategic anchor, providing diplomatic support and economic opportunities without constituting a formal alliance. At the same time, Pakistan's selective engagement with the United States reflects a conscious effort to manage uncertainty and preserve access to global institutions without returning to asymmetric dependence. Engagement with Russia and regional actors further illustrates Pakistan's broader strategy of diversification aimed at expanding strategic space and reducing vulnerability.

From a neorealist perspective, Pakistan's foreign policy behavior reflects rational adaptation to systemic pressures rather than ideological preference. The diffusion of power in the international system has incentivized middle powers like Pakistan to avoid rigid alignment and pursue hedging strategies that spread risk and maximize autonomy. Hedging theory provides a particularly useful framework for understanding

Pakistan's simultaneous engagement with competing powers and its emphasis on geo-economics alongside traditional security concerns.

However, the study also highlights that Pakistan's hedging strategy operates under significant constraints, including economic vulnerability, regional instability, domestic political challenges, and intensifying great power competition. These limitations do not invalidate Pakistan's strategic approach but underscore the difficulties faced by middle powers navigating systemic transition. Overall, the findings suggest that Pakistan's foreign policy represents a cautious yet adaptive response to multipolarity, one that prioritizes flexibility, autonomy, and pragmatic engagement over rigid alignment.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several policy recommendations emerge for strengthening Pakistan's foreign policy in a multipolar world.

First, Pakistan should prioritize economic stabilization and reform as a core component of its foreign policy strategy. Sustainable hedging is not possible without economic resilience. Strengthening exports, attracting diversified investment, and reducing dependence on short-term external financing would enhance Pakistan's bargaining power and strategic autonomy.

Second, Pakistan should institutionalize its hedging strategy through coherent long-term foreign policy planning. Clear articulation of strategic priorities, improved coordination among state institutions, and continuity across political transitions are essential for managing diversified partnerships effectively.

Third, Pakistan should deepen geo-economic diplomacy, particularly with regional actors. Strengthening trade, energy, and connectivity initiatives with Central Asia, the Middle East, and neighboring regions would reduce overreliance on any single external partner and reinforce Pakistan's role as a regional connector.

Fourth, Pakistan should continue selective and issue-based engagement with great powers, avoiding zero-sum alignments. Maintaining open diplomatic channels with all major powers enhances Pakistan's ability to manage uncertainty and reduces the risks associated with intensifying great power rivalry.

Finally, Pakistan should invest in regional stability initiatives, as sustained instability undermines long-term strategic planning. Confidence-building measures, regional dialogue, and economic cooperation can complement Pakistan's broader hedging strategy and improve its external environment.

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