

Impact of the US-China Geostrategic Competition on Pakistan's Foreign Policy in the Second Trump Administration

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Abstract

Pakistan's foreign policy is heavily impacted by the geostrategic rivalry between the United States of America (US) and People's Republic of China (PRC). The frequent change in US administration means that Islamabad must recalibrate its approach to this great power competition following each transition in the White House. This article analyzes Pakistan's foreign policy choices during the second administration of Donald Trump (2025-2029). The danger that Pakistan faces is that it will be misled by statements by the president and some of his supporters and cabinet officers that the US will turn away from President Joe Biden's liberal internationalism in favor of a return to the isolationism that characterized the earlier America First movement in the 1930s. In such a scenario, the US would withdraw from entanglements in Asia and leave South Asia, including Pakistan, within a Chinese sphere of influence. While it is true that Trump eschews foreign interventions based on the policy of protecting liberal principles such as democracy and human rights around the world, he is a realist committed to maintaining America's global hegemony, including its continuing dominance in the Indo-Pacific. Because China represents a growing challenge to the status quo, the foreign policy of the Trump administration will be China-centric and largely based on military deterrence. The international structure will remain unipolar, with a still-dominant US threatened by a rising China. It is in Pakistan's national interest, therefore, to balance its close relationship with China with ongoing economic,

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diplomatic, and military engagement with the United States, one of its most enduring strategic partners.

Keywords: US, China, Geo Strategic Competition, Pakistan Foreign Policy, Donald Trump

Introduction

Pakistan, like other strategic partners of the United States, in the making of its foreign policy, must navigate an international environment strongly influenced by the competition between a hegemonic United States and a rising China. This article describes the choices Pakistan faces and the risks and opportunities presented by each. Two of the most important decisions that Pakistani policymakers must make is how to characterize the international system and the place of the United States in it. Pakistan, moreover, must navigate new waters because of the election of Donald Trump to a second presidential term, 2025-2029. The article queries how Trump's likely approach to rivalry with China will differ from that of the Joe Biden administration and affect Pakistan's interests.

The geo-strategic rivalry between the United States and China affects all of America's traditional allies, including Pakistan (Holland, 2024). US allies often face pressure to align firmly with the United States in its strategic competition with China. This pressure can strain the ally's economic ties with China, often its largest trading partner. Disruption of trade due to tensions between Washington and Beijing can affect nations' exports to China. The US may pressure allies to distance themselves from China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and to refuse to adopt Chinese technologies, such as Huawei's 5G telecommunications infrastructure. The rivalry has led the United States to reinvigorate security alliances, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Quad (comprising the US, India, Japan, and Australia) and to expand their scope to the Indo-Pacific (Ford and Goldgeier, 2021). Allies are

under pressure to increase their defense spending and to take sides in the territorial disputes with China and its neighbors in the East and South China Seas. The United States often encourages its allies to support Taiwan diplomatically, economically, and militarily, without advocating for formal diplomatic recognition of the island democracy as an independent state (Lin, 2021; Garamone, 2023). Allies are often pressured by the US to take a stand on China's human rights abuses, risking diplomatic or economic retaliation from Beijing. The United States views China as a competitor and systemic rival but its allies often regard China as a partner. America's Asian allies often view economic integration with China as more important than deterrence against a Chinese invasion. The US demands greater coordination with its allies in confronting China, including initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) and technology-sharing partnerships like AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, United States). The US asks allies to rally around its framing of the rivalry as a contest of moral principles, including the promotion of democracy and the rules-based international system. The US-China rivalry places America's allies in complex positions and introduces economic vulnerabilities and political tensions (Abrams, Hess, and Kurlantzick, 2024).

The primary risk for Pakistan lies in embracing Chinese President Xi Jinping's portrayal of the West—particularly the United States—as being in decline, while viewing China as an ascending power poised to surpass the United States as the preeminent force in the Asia-Pacific region and fundamentally reshape the international order. There is a growing tendency of Pakistani officials to express a preference for strengthening relations with China over the United States, reflecting a strategic inclination towards Beijing. Some notable instances include a 2023 memo written by Hina Rabbani Khar, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, in which she advised Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif to avoid “appeasing the West” at the expense of Pakistan's “real strategic” partnership with China. She

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emphasized that Pakistan could no longer maintain a “middle ground” between China and the United States. Senator Mushahid Hussein Syed in 2023 expressed apprehension about the United States’ role in Pakistan while endorsing a deepening of relations with China. He suggested that instead of asking Pakistan to balance ties between China and the United States, Washington should dispense some balance between India and Pakistan (Khan, 2023). It is critical for Pakistan’s foreign policy, therefore, to determine whether the US is still the world’s sole superpower, or whether the world is essentially bipolar, in which a roughly equal United States and China face each other in a contest for supremacy, or whether the international structure is multipolar, with several great powers competing for influence.

Pakistan’s Risks

One of the key determinants of the foreign policy of a middle power like Pakistan is the structure of the international system. Changes in the number of great powers, says Kenneth Waltz, are the most important consideration as to how states provide for their security (2000). Competition between and among great powers presents both threats and opportunities to smaller nations. A key concept in the study of international relations is polarity. Because the international system is anarchic, with no higher power to which a state can appeal for protection, a nation’s priority is survival (Waltz, 1979). As Morgenthau argues, states pursue power and security over cooperation because they cannot trust others to prioritize collective interests over self-interest (1948). In a multipolar world, defined by the presence of three or more major states of roughly equal power, each major country seeks to defend itself by building coalitions with other great nations to maintain a balance of power against the opposing major states. No single state or two states hold overwhelming power. An example is the period leading up to the First World War (1870-1914). In a bipolar world, the international

system is dominated by the struggle for hegemony between two superpowers, as during the Cold War between the US and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) (1947-1991). In a unipolar environment, one state holds a preeminent position of power and influence, overshadowing all other states in terms of military, economic, political, and cultural dominance. An example is the period from the end of the Second World War in 1945 to the present, during which the United States has been the hegemon.

This type of international system significantly affects the behavior of medium and small states, due to differences in the distribution of power and the opportunities or constraints each system presents (Walt, 1987; Mearsheimer, 2001). In a multipolar system, small and medium states may align with one great power (bandwagon) or seek to balance against a stronger state by forming or joining alliances. Multipolarity provides opportunities for small states to negotiate with multiple major powers, maximizing their autonomy and benefits. The risk to less powerful states is being drawn into conflicts due to the fluid nature of alliances. Middle powers will face difficulty in maintaining neutrality amid competing major powers. Belgium, for example, was invaded by Germany in August 1914 despite being neutral. Allied forces, including the British and French landed in Thessaloniki in 1915, drawing Greece into the conflict, despite its official neutrality.

In a bipolar system, most small and medium states align with one of the two superpowers, becoming part of their respective blocs. The United States, for example, formed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949, which was opposed by the Warsaw Pact, established by the Soviet Union. Although neutrality is challenging in a bipolar world, some nations did pursue it during the Cold War, notably Switzerland and Finland. A risk to smaller states is their loss of flexibility and pressure to align their foreign and domestic policies with their bloc's dominant superpower. States

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located between the two superpowers' spheres of influence may act as buffer states but face heightened risks of geopolitical competition. During the Cold War, for example, Communist China, an ally of the USSR, invaded Korea and the USSR itself invaded Afghanistan. Some states, such as India and Egypt, sought to remain independent from both superpowers, forming the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) to assert their autonomy. While India sought to remain neutral, its geopolitical realities led to closer ties with the Soviet Union over time, particularly after the Sino-Indian War of 1962 and rising tensions with Pakistan. The Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation (1971) formalized a strategic partnership with the USSR. Likewise, Egypt aligned more closely with the Soviet Union, particularly after the Suez Crisis of 1956, when Israel, Britain, and France invaded Egypt.

In a unipolar world, many small and medium states align with the hegemon to gain security, economic benefits, and political favor. Following the 9/11 attacks on the United States, more than 50 countries joined the US-led coalition to topple the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, conduct counterinsurgency operations, and engage in nation-building efforts. Pakistan behaved like other small and medium states during both the bipolar and unipolar periods. In the Cold War, Pakistan allied with the United States, and, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Pakistan remained a US ally, most notably during the Global War on Terror (2001-2021).

It is of the utmost importance to Pakistan to determine whether the international system remains unipolar or is shifting to a bipolar or multipolar architecture. If the structure remains unipolar, Pakistan faces several risks in allying with a rising power intent on challenging the hegemon. The dominant power in a unipolar system may view alliances with a rising power as a direct challenge to its authority. Potential consequences include economic sanctions, punitive trade measures, diplomatic isolation, reduced support in

international forums, and military coercion or increased strategic pressure. Countries such as Iran and Venezuela, for example, faced US sanctions for aligning with China or Russia. Another risk is that the future intentions, capabilities, and stability of the rising power may be unpredictable. A rising power might fail to challenge successfully the hegemon, and internal instability in the rising power might undermine its ability to honor alliances. Russia, for instance, occupied with its war against Ukraine, abandoned the Assad regime in Syria in 2024 when insurgents approached Damascus. A rising power may exploit its alliances to further its own agenda, potentially at the expense of its allies' sovereignty or interests. Potential consequences include economic dependency through unequal trade deals, debt diplomacy, or resource extraction. Political manipulation, including interference in domestic affairs or forced alignment on contentious issues, is possible. Some developing countries, for example, which aligned with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), such as Sri Lanka, have faced concerns about debt dependency and loss of strategic assets. Aligning with a rising power can escalate regional tensions or provoke conflicts. Neighbors or rivals may perceive the alliance as a threat, leading to arms races or proxy conflicts. The hegemon may intensify efforts to contain both the rising power and its allies, causing instability. Countries in Southeast Asia, such as Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia, for example, face tensions by aligning with China, as it provokes pushback from the US and regional actors like Japan and India. Allying with a rising power often means alienating the hegemon, leading to a loss of economic, military, or diplomatic support. Possible consequences include reduced access to the hegemon's markets, aid, or security guarantees and damage to existing trade or investment relationships. When Turkey, for instance, purchased the S-400 missile system from Russia in 2019, it faced US sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries

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Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) and exclusion from the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program (*BBC*, 2020).

A rising power may demand more from its allies that they are willing or able to provide, such as increased military spending, participation in conflicts that do not serve the ally's interests, or economic burdens from aligning with the rising power's initiatives. Italy, for example, suffered significant losses due to its alliance with a rising Germany in 1939. Allies of the rising power may be caught in the crossfire during a hegemonic war or confrontation, as happened to states allied with the rising power Athens in the Peloponnesian War with Sparta, the established and victorious power, in the 5th century BC. Graham Allison popularized the term "Thucydides Trap" in 2015, inspired by the Greek historian's comment in his history of the war, "It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable" (Thucydides, 1910). Allison found that in 12 of 16 historical cases over the past 500 years where a rising power challenged a dominant one, the result was war, a modern example being the First World War, in which Great Britain fought and defeated a rising Germany (Allison, 2015).

Aligning with a rising power perceived as authoritarian, aggressive, or revisionist can damage an ally's international standing. Potential consequences include loss of support from other neutral or allied states and domestic backlash if the rising power's policies contradict the ally's principles. Countries that align too closely with China, for example, may face criticism over human rights issues, trade practices, or environmental concerns. Several Muslim-majority countries, for instance, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, and Pakistan, avoid direct condemnation of China's treatment of Uyghur Muslims, in exchange for economic, military, and geopolitical benefits, even though their silence results in international criticism (McKay, 2024). Another risk of allying with a rising power is that the long-term trajectory of the unipolar system

is uncertain, and the ascendant power might not sustain its rise. If the rising power's ascent slows or collapses, its allies may find themselves diplomatically isolated or economically vulnerable. Allies of the Soviet Union during the Cold War were left in precarious positions after the USSR's dissolution in 1991. Cuba, for example, lost massive Soviet subsidies (estimated at \$4-6 billion annually) and guaranteed markets for its sugar exports. The withdrawal of Soviet oil shipments led to severe energy shortages. The 1990s in Cuba were marked by economic collapse, widespread food shortages, and deteriorating public services (*Cuba Platform*, 2017).

One of the greatest risks faced by Pakistan's foreign policymakers is that they will adopt China's view that China is rising, America is declining, and the international structure is shifting from unipolarity to multipolarity. Chinese leaders have traditionally characterized the international system as moving toward multipolarity, emphasizing the emergence of multiple centers of power rather than a bipolar structure dominated by two superpowers. During a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese President Xi Jinping stated that the world is undergoing "profound changes unseen in a century," highlighting the importance of the China-Russia partnership in promoting a multipolar world (*Reuters*, 2024). Chinese scholars and policymakers have articulated the argument that the world is exhibiting a multipolar trend, with China positioning itself as a major power among others, rather than seeking a bipolar confrontation with the United States (Wenzhao, 2021). Pakistani officials and analysts have recently articulated views echoing the official Chinese doctrine that the world order is in transition from unipolarity to a multipolarity. In May 2024, for example, during the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Council of Foreign Ministers meeting, Pakistani Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar warned against "bloc-based

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or confrontational geopolitics,” advocating for a “multipolar world firmly grounded in multilateralism” (*The News*, 2024).

In summary, while allying with a rising power in a unipolar system can offer strategic and economic opportunities, it also comes with significant risks. States, such as Pakistan, caught in the geostrategic rivalry between the United States and a rising China, must carefully weigh their options to navigate these challenges effectively.

US Foreign Policy Under Trump 2.0

A second critical question for Pakistan, in addition to whether the international system is trending from unipolarity to multipolarity, is how the superpower will behave on the world stage under the leadership of Donald Trump during his second term. American foreign policy since the end of the Second World War has been marked by the promotion of liberal democracy and free markets, promotion of human rights, military and economic hegemony, interventionism, counterterrorism, contesting of China’s rise in the Indo-Pacific, and multilateralism. During his single term in office (2021-2025), President Joe Biden focused on restoring alliances and multilateralism, promoting democracy and human rights, countering authoritarian powers, revitalizing US preeminence in trade and economics, and exercising climate change leadership. During his successful re-election campaign in 2024, the Republican presidential nominee, Donald Trump, criticized Biden’s foreign policy on several fronts, including support for Ukraine in its conflict with Russia. He criticized NATO allies for not meeting defense spending commitments, even stating he might “encourage” Russia to act against non-compliant NATO countries (Debusmann and Zurcher, 2024). Trump’s rejection of Biden’s idealist foreign policy suggests that he is a realist in his understanding of international relations. His criticism of multilateralism implies that he prefers unilateral action. His preference for a protectionist economic policy suggests that he is an isolationist, and his invocation of the term

“America First” suggests an alignment with the America First movement of the 1920s, 30s, and early 40s, opposed to US involvement in the Second World War (Suedfeld and Kuznar, 2021). Some of its adherents, like some Trump supporters, expressed nativist sentiments and advocated restricting immigration into the United States.

A second Trump term, however, will not alter the unipolar nature of the international system or lead to an isolationist foreign policy. The fundamental position of the United States as the global hegemon will not change. What will shift is the abandonment of liberal idealism as the principal theme of American foreign policy and its replacement by realism, rooted in a narrow view of the country’s self-interest (Cooley and Nexon, 2025). In other words, the United States will behave like other great powers have behaved over the centuries. Trump believes “the United States has no obligation to pursue anything larger than its own self-interest, narrowly construed” (Brands, 2024). This eschewal of the mission of sustaining the liberal international order has important implications for Pakistan. Historically, the United States has played a significant role in preventing full-scale wars between India and Pakistan, acting as a diplomatic balancer, applying pressure, offering mediation, and leveraging relationships to de-escalate crises. Trump’s transactional, “America First” focus, however, deprioritizes long-term diplomatic engagement in South Asia. For the second Trump administration, courting India as an ally against a territorially aggressive China is likely to take precedence over defusing the India-Pakistan conflict, especially as a multilateral effort (Kurlantzick, 2024).

In the post-liberal world of a second Trump administration, the tendency will be for the United States to pursue its global interests through the raw exercise of power. The US maintains a significantly greater ability to project military power globally compared to Russia and China, the world’s two most powerful revanchist nations, due to

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its expansive network of overseas bases, superior logistics, advanced technology, and alliances. The US has unmatched global reach, with over 750 military bases in more than 70 countries. Key bases in Europe, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific enable rapid deployment across continents. The US Navy operates 11 nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, more than the combined carriers of the rest of the world, enabling force projection far from US shores. The US operates the most advanced fleet of aircraft, including stealth fighters like the F-22 and F-35 and has global reach with strategic bombers, including the B-2 and B-52 (Cordesman, 2022). The US possesses significantly greater airlift capability than both Russia and China, with unmatched capacity for rapid global deployment and logistical support (*Global Firepower*, 2024; *Min*, 2025).

Trump has indicated plans to increase defense spending during his second term. Analysts project a three percent to five percent increase in defense budget topline. During his first term, Trump oversaw a significant hike in defense spending—approximately \$225 billion higher than projected from the late years of the administration of Barack Obama. Trump has pledged to expand the military and protect Pentagon spending from austerity efforts, such as attempts to reduce the budget deficit (*Associated Press*, 2024). Trump is not an isolationist and will use this overwhelming military might to further America's national interests narrowly construed. Dominance of the Western Hemisphere is a given. He has threatened to use military force to seize Greenland from Denmark and retake the Panama Canal, which President Jimmy Carter had transferred to the Government of Panama in 1999. He has referred to Canada as the "51st state," downplaying its sovereignty. In a unipolar world, the sole superpower is under no pressure to court allies. Trump, therefore, reserves some of his most acerbic criticisms and hostility for America's closest allies, reflecting his "America First" doctrine and preference for transactional diplomacy (Trofimov, Seligman, and Ward, 2024).

He is not likely to be as interventionist in Europe or Asia as his Democratic predecessors. He may not, for example, come to the aid of Ukraine or Taiwan, beset, respectively by Russia and China, since these interventions may not meet his definition of national self-interest. In fact, he is likely to downplay promoting democracy and human rights, complying with international law, and engaging with international organizations and strike deals with authoritarian regimes advantageous to US interests. Trump's economic policy will revolve around protectionism, since other countries will suffer more from high tariffs in the United States, the world's largest economy, than the homeland (Brands, 2024). Given its overwhelming power and secure geographical location, Trump's America will be able to get its way without concern for the liberal international order built by his predecessors.

Implications of Trump 2.0's Foreign Policy for Pakistan

A second Trump administration is likely to have significant implications for Pakistan, particularly in the areas of bilateral relations, regional security, and economic ties (Sulaiman, 2024). Trump's previous tenure was marked by a transactional approach to foreign policy, and this is likely to shape his dealings with Pakistan. Trump will approach Pakistan with a focus on specific US objectives, such as counterterrorism cooperation, and will demand tangible outcomes in exchange for aid or support. His administration previously suspended security assistance to Pakistan in 2018, accusing it of harboring militants—a dynamic that could resurface (Jamal, 2024). Trump's broader disengagement from South Asia, particularly Afghanistan, will reduce the strategic importance of Pakistan in US foreign policy. This disengagement is likely to lead to decreased military and civilian aid. A second Trump administration may exert more pressure on Pakistan to take decisive action against militant groups that threaten Indian or US interests, such as Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Hizbul

Mujahideen (HM), Al-Badr, Tehreek-ul-Mujahidden (TuM), The Resistance Front (TRF), and Harakat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM). The US has designated JeM, LeT, HM, and HuM as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) under Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act (*U.S. Department of State*, 2024b). Additionally, the US Department of the Treasury has targeted the financial and support networks of these groups. In 2010 the Treasury designated leaders of JeM and LeT as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs), aiming to disrupt their operational capabilities (Roggio, 2010). It is possible that a second Trump administration will accuse Pakistan of not meeting the standards of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) in combatting money laundering and terrorism financing, exposing Pakistan to economic, reputational, diplomatic, financial, and compliance costs (Shah, 2018; Afzal, 2020). Trump will maintain a strong relationship with India and its prime minister, Narendra Modi, emphasizing economic and strategic ties with India as a counterbalance to China (Jamal, 2024). This pro-India tilt could further marginalize Pakistan in US regional policy. Trump will continue to disengage from Afghanistan, whose instability will pose increased security challenges for Pakistan, such as refugee flows and cross-border militant activity. Trump's focus on countering China could force Islamabad to navigate its close ties with Beijing carefully. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) might come under scrutiny as Trump pressures allies and partners to reduce dependency on China.

Trump's emphasis on "America First" and skepticism toward foreign aid could lead to further cuts in US economic and military assistance to Pakistan. Pakistan's exports to the US, particularly textiles, might be affected if Trump revisits trade policies that prioritize American manufacturers. However, this could also open opportunities if Pakistan aligns with US supply chain diversification efforts away from China. Given Pakistan's reliance on IMF assistance, a second Trump administration might use US influence

in international financial institutions to push Pakistan toward economic reforms or concessions aligned with US interests.

If US-Pakistan relations cool further under a Trump administration, Islamabad is likely to deepen its strategic and economic partnerships with China and Russia. This shift could align Pakistan more firmly with the Sino-Russian bloc in global politics. Trump's blunt rhetoric and controversial policies might fuel anti-US sentiment in Pakistan, particularly if policies are perceived as undermining Pakistani sovereignty or favoring India. Policies affecting immigration or travel could have consequences for the large Pakistani diaspora in the United States, which could reduce remittances to Pakistan from the US. A second Trump administration is likely to continue a pragmatic and results-driven approach toward Pakistan, focusing on US priorities such as counterterrorism and countering China's influence (Nazar, 2024). For Pakistan, this could mean reduced aid, increased diplomatic pressure, and a need to balance carefully its relations with the United States and China. Navigating these challenges will require Pakistan to examine its dependency on China, given the continued hegemonic position of the United States in the Indo-Pacific, where it maintains the most powerful and sophisticated military force (*Congressional Research Service*, 2023).

Spheres of Influence

Trump's focus on acquiring territory in the Western Hemisphere (Greenland, Panama Canal, and Canada), his disengagement from South Asia (withdrawal from Afghanistan), and his praise of authoritarian leaders such as Xi Jinping in China and Vladimir Putin in Russia have led some analysts to conclude that Trump subscribes to the view that the world is multipolar, a world in which the great powers—the United States, Russia, and China—each has an exclusive sphere of influence in which it can dominate its neighbors

(Chase, 2025). Support for this view includes his desire for the United States to dominate the Western Hemisphere and his ambivalence toward Europe which can be seen as tolerance for Russian influence. Trump's withdrawal from agreements like the Paris Climate Accord and reduced engagement in international organizations can be interpreted as a retreat from global leadership, implicitly allowing other powers to expand their regional influence. If the world were divided into three spheres of influence, Pakistan would find itself in the Chinese sphere (Ibrahim, 2018). Pakistan's dependence on China for military hardware and technology would deepen. Greater collaboration might lead to joint military operations, intelligence sharing, and enhanced Chinese influence over Pakistan's defense policy. Pakistan could face diminished ties with the United States and other Western allies. Pakistan would lose the ability to balance relations between the US and China and would become increasingly dependent on CPEC, leading to greater indebtedness and a growing trade deficit with China (Ali, 2022).

Inclusion in China's sphere could reduce Pakistan's reliance on the IMF, World Bank, and Western-led economic frameworks, steering it toward Chinese financial mechanisms like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and direct bilateral loans (Younus, 2023). Pakistan's alignment with China would exacerbate its already tense relations with India. Joint Sino-Pakistani initiatives, such as infrastructure in disputed regions like Gilgit-Baltistan, would lead to heightened military and diplomatic confrontations with India. China would expect Pakistan to play a leading role in facilitating Chinese investment in Afghanistan and Central Asia, particularly in ensuring security for Chinese projects and countering extremism that threatens Chinese interests in Xinjiang. This role would strain Pakistan's resources. Chinese influence over key sectors, such as ports, railways, and energy, could reduce Pakistan's economic sovereignty, making decisions increasingly subject to Chinese interests. Inclusion in a Chinese sphere might embolden Pakistan's

government to adopt governance practices modeled after China. Pakistan could face reduced trade, aid, and investment from Western countries if it aligns too closely with China. Pakistan might lose influence in multilateral institutions dominated by Western powers, like the FATF. Pakistan's inclusion in China's sphere might deepen its ties with China's other allies, such as Russia, Iran, and Central Asian States, while weakening its traditional partnerships with the Gulf States, Turkey, and the European Union. China could promote its soft power through expanded cultural exchanges, scholarships, and media influence, which might lead to societal backlash if seen as undermining Pakistan's Islamic identity or sovereignty. If Pakistan were included in a Chinese sphere of influence, it would have to manage its sovereignty while navigating a multipolar global order.

Confrontation with Russia and China

Trump's actions, however, suggest that he intends the United States to remain the world's dominant power. Trump's criticisms of European governments can be viewed as efforts to pressure them to spend more on defense to redress what he regards as an injustice, where the United States accounts for 70 percent of total defense spending by all NATO members combined. US defense spending is 3.3 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP), a higher percentage of GDP on defense than most other NATO countries, many of which struggle to meet the alliance's target of 2 percent of GDP for defense spending. In 2023, the defense budgets for the United States, China, and Russia, respectively, were \$916, \$330, and \$130 billion (*SIPRI*, 2024). The \$916 billion US military budget, which Trump wants to increase, indicates that the United States will continue to meet its commitments to maintaining security not only in the Western Hemisphere but also in Europe, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific. Trump has repeatedly emphasized the need for the US to maintain unmatched military power to deter adversaries and project

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strength globally. Increased funding supports the modernization of weapons systems, research into advanced technologies, such as hypersonic missiles, artificial intelligence, and cybersecurity, and the development of space and missile defense capabilities (Miller and O'Hanlon, 2019). The military budget increases reflect Trump's view that China and Russia are the main threats to US interests (Goss, 2024). Military strength is viewed as a tool for sustaining US influence and leadership in the face of rising global competition. Increased spending is aimed at discouraging potential adversaries from challenging US power. In his first term, Trump imposed sanctions on Russia and provided lethal aid to Ukraine. He increased US troop presence in Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland and the Baltic states, as a deterrent against Russia. The clearest sign that he will not cede spheres of influence is his hardline stance against China and his emphasis on the need to counter China's influence globally, not just in Asia. His desire to acquire Greenland is based in part on the need to counter Russian and Chinese ambitions in the Arctic and the threat to take back the Panama Canal is motivated partially by unhappiness with the role of a Hong Kong-based company in managing the canal's Atlantic and Pacific ports (Morland, 2024). Actions such as the trade war, sanctions on Chinese entities, and a focus on Indo-Pacific strategy suggest that Trump does not accept China's dominance in Asia. The first Trump administration strengthened ties with Taiwan and increased US naval presence in the South China Sea, signaling resistance to Chinese attempts to increase its influence in the region. His personal admiration for Putin can be seen as reflecting a belief that Russia could be a powerful ally in the US effort to counter China (Gabuev, 2024).

Why the US Remains Critical to Pakistan's Foreign Policy?

Both realist and liberal international theory underscore the importance of the US to the furtherance of Pakistan's national

interests. Pakistan sees the United States as a critical player in ensuring its security, especially in the context of its rivalry with India. US military aid and technological support have historically been vital to Pakistan's defense capabilities. The US-Pakistan relationship has been shaped by mutual interests, such as counterterrorism, Afghanistan's stabilization, and regional power balances involving India and China. US economic aid and military assistance have been significant resources for Pakistan in bolstering its state apparatus and infrastructure. US trade, aid, and investment have been crucial for Pakistan's development and integration into the global economy. The US has supported initiatives aimed at promoting democracy and civil society in Pakistan (Ahmar, 2021). Through US support, Pakistan has had access to global institutions like the IMF and World Bank, which are essential for its economic stability. Assistance from the US is helping to complete Pakistan's evolution into a modern liberal democracy (USAID, 2021). Liberal theorists point to the spread of democracy as a means to achieve greater cooperation among nations and to maximize human freedom and welfare (Deudney and Ikenberry, 2021). China, a one-party political system, disdains democracy and liberalism as incompatible with development and actively exports authoritarianism to the Global South (Edel and Shullman, 2021). As realist theorists point out, democracies are less likely to make war on other democratic states (Williams, 2009). The liberal international order rests on the proliferation of liberal democracies—regimes that embody not only rule by the majority, the core historical meaning of democracy, but also protections for the rights of the individual, such as freedom of speech. Limited government maximizes human freedom and gives rise to a free market economy (Rao, 2023).

The United States does not expect Pakistan to choose sides in the rivalry between Beijing and Washington (Ching, 2023). China and the United States are not adversaries; they are competitors (*The White House*, 2024; Fontaine, 2017). China and the United States,

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the world's top two economies, are dependent on each other. The US imports a wide range of consumer goods, electronics, and machinery from China, benefiting from China's manufacturing efficiency and cost advantages. China is a major market for US agricultural products, including soybeans, corn, and pork, machinery, and technology. Many US companies rely on Chinese factories for assembling components or final products, including Apple and Tesla. Disruptions in Chinese manufacturing, for example, during COVID-19, highlighted the global reliance on Chinese supply chains (Wolf and Kallsh, 2021). China dominates the production of critical components like rare earth elements, used in electronics and renewable energy technologies. US companies invest heavily in China to access its large consumer market and benefit from its manufacturing ecosystem. Chinese economies and investors have significant stakes in the US economy, including real estate, technology, and entertainment. China holds over \$800 billion in US Treasury securities, making it one of the largest foreign holders. US technology companies rely on Chinese manufacturing for hardware production, while China depends on US firms for advanced semiconductors and software. Universities and corporations in both countries engage in collaborative research, particularly in areas like AI, biotechnology, and renewable energy. US brands like Nike, Starbucks, and General Motors derive substantial revenues from China's growing middle class. Chinese consumers view the US as a source of high-quality goods and services, such as luxury items and higher education. Many US and Chinese multinational corporations rely on the other's markets for a significant share of their profits (*The US-China Business Council*, 2021).

Why the US Remains Important to Pakistan

Pakistan needs the US to address both its security and economic concerns. Pakistan has historically relied on the US for military aid,

training, and equipment to address internal and regional security challenges, including counterterrorism operations. In May 2024, the US and Pakistan held a Counterterrorism Dialogue in Washington, co-chaired by Ambassador Elizabeth Richard, Coordinator for Counterterrorism in the Biden administration, and Pakistan's Additional Foreign Secretary for the UN and OIC Ambassador Syed Haider Shah. Both nations emphasized the importance of expanded counterterrorism collaboration and capacity building (*U.S. Department of State*, 2024a). In July 2024, the US and Pakistan conducted a two-week counterterrorism exercise at the National Counter Terrorism Center in Pabbi, Punjab. This exercise aimed to enhance the counterterrorism capabilities of both nations and address shared security threats (*Arab News*, 2024). In 2023 and 2024, over 300 Pakistani police and frontline responders received training from the US to enhance their counterterrorism skills. In December 2023, Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, General Asim Munir, visited the United States, where he met with the US Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense. Both sides agreed to enhance cooperation in counterterrorism and defense (*The News*, 2023).

The US is Pakistan's largest recipient of exports, and exporting is one of the most effective ways of earning foreign currency. Exporting goods and services builds up Pakistan's foreign reserves. This is critical for managing the balance of payments, stabilizing the currency, and funding imports. Key export sectors like textiles, rice, sports goods, and surgical instruments contribute significantly to the Pakistani economy. Only 11 percent of Pakistan's exports go to China, while 21 percent are destined for the US (*Trading Economics*, 2025). One of the most promising growth opportunities for Pakistani exports is information technology (IT) services. Pakistan exports a variety of services to the United States, with a significant focus on the IT and IT-enabled services sector. In the fiscal year 2023-24, Pakistan's IT and IT-enabled services (ITeS) exports reached an all-time high of \$3.2 billion, marking a 24%

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increase from the previous fiscal year's \$2.6 billion (*Pro Pakistani*, 2024). In the fiscal year 2023, the US accounted for approximately 54.5 percent of Pakistan's Information and Communications Technology (ICT) exports. In September 2024, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif announced that Pakistan will increase its IT exports to \$25 billion over the next five years. Pakistan ranks among the top four global providers of freelance IT services (Fida, 2024). Pakistani IT freelancers often collaborate with a diverse range of US-based clients, including startups, small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and large corporations. Many freelancers secure projects through prominent platforms such as Upwork, Fiverr, and Freelancer, which connect them with US clients seeking services in software development, web design, digital marketing, and more (*Reviewer*, 2023). The United States is the third largest source of foreign direct investment in Pakistan and the fourth largest source of remittances (*Profit*, 2024). If Pakistan is to grow its economy, a positive relationship with America is essential.

US military aid also shows signs of resuming as Islamabad fulfills the conditions of the most recent IMF financial package (*Arab News*, 2023). The United States is Pakistan's largest single bilateral donor. The American civilian assistance program partners with Pakistan to improve economic growth, international trade, energy security, democracy, civil society, the rule of law, and the ability to counter pandemics such as COVID-19 (*U.S. Department of State*, 2022).

Conclusion

The deepening geostrategic rivalry between the United States and China is having significant impacts on Pakistan's foreign policy. To make choices that optimally benefit its national interests, Pakistan must resolve two basic questions stemming from this competition. First, is the international structure multipolar, as China claims, or does it remain fundamentally unipolar, as the US asserts? Second, is

Donald Trump an isolationist, who is content with a world divided into three spheres of interest, or an interventionist, willing to take military action to maintain America's global hegemony? This paper argues that in his second administration Trump will use the overwhelming superiority of the United States economically and militarily to promote the nation's interests not only in the Western Hemisphere but also in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. The key difference between his foreign policy and that of his predecessors, both Democrats and Republicans, is that it will replace liberal idealism with power-centered realism as its compass. In other words, the United States will behave like other great powers have acted throughout modern history. In this environment, Pakistan's greatest risk is to align too closely with America's strategic rival and thereby face the potential consequences that many nations have endured when they allied with a rising power against an ultimately victorious hegemon. It is in Pakistan's interests to maintain a balance between the powerful rivals and to continue to benefit from close relationships with both the superpower and its principal challenger.

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