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## Strategic Importance for Pakistan: Balancing Security Challenges and Opportunities

### Shahram Iqbal

PhD Scholar (International Relations), Federal Urdu University of Science and Technology, Karachi, Pakistan

[shahramiqbal11624@gmail.com](mailto:shahramiqbal11624@gmail.com)

### Dr. Muhammad Arif Khan

Assistant Professor at Department of International Relations, Federal Urdu University of Science and Technology, Karachi, Pakistan

[arif.khan@fuuast.edu.pk](mailto:arif.khan@fuuast.edu.pk)

## ABSTRACT

The Indo-Pacific area is crucial to Pakistan's economic development and national security because of its extensive maritime routes and economic potential. Pakistan's geostrategic location at the junction of South, West and Central Asia is favourable, particularly for energy and maritime trade across Indian Ocean. This paper examines Pakistan's strategic goals and security concerns in Indo-Pacific area with a focus on the geopolitical and geo-economics implications of India's emergence as a net security provider. The study uses a descriptive approach and secondary data sources to investigate Pakistan's perceptions of changing power dynamics, especially in view of India's expanding naval capabilities and strategic alliances with countries such as US, Australia and Japan. This paper analyses the challenges posed by India's growing role while stressing Pakistan's need to protect its maritime interests. Pakistan's significance as a major regional actor and ally of superpowers, especially the US, is also highlighted. According to the study's findings, Pakistan needs to take a well-rounded strategy that includes strategic alliances, regional cooperation, and diplomacy in order to protect its interests and promote peace and development in Indo-Pacific region.

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific; Regional security; Economic cooperation; Major Powers; Multilateralism

## INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific region can be rightly called Geo-political / strategic Bullseye of current international stage; due to the ever-increasing importance of its significance worldwide in economic, security and political arena. It has increasingly become the

focus of attention due rising geopolitical rivalries in region. Big players like China, India, Japan and South Korea, forming a major chunk of global trade (40% with estimated \$3.4 trillion in revenue) contribute significantly to the region's economic power. The region includes critical corridors like the strait of Malacca and the South China sea, which are becoming increasingly contested. In the South China Sea, in particular, rising tensions are the next major powers game.

Pakistan, although far from South China Sea, is a player in Indo-Pacific arena, particularly in Arabian Sea. Its importance is further signified by building of Gwadar Port through CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor), thus increasing Chinese presence in the theatre. The port links the Arabian waters with China thus providing an alternate access for China other than south China Sea. Though world sees this port as a stronghold in region for China, it also gives a crucial strategic edge to Pakistan as well (Gul et al., 2021). Gwadar Port has long been envisaged to become a major marine hub, due its proximity to Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea and it has the potential to become a major marine hub (Kayani, et al., 2023; Khan, et al., 2021). Pakistan's security is closely linked to these maritime routes, which are essential to her interests and carry huge importance on a worldwide scale.

Pakistan regularly engages in a number of international forums and organisations that handle Indo-Pacific issues as part of its regional diplomacy. As a participant of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Pakistan is enhancing connectivity, economic cooperation and security throughout Indo-Pacific region. The alignment of USA with China in aforementioned activities, however, constitutes a challenging task in context of US foreign policy in Indo-Pacific. It attempts to balance its relationship with Western countries while simultaneously keeping strong connections with significant global actor China. Indo-Pacific region has become an undeniable significant geopolitical region because of its economy, trade routes, dynamic security environment and involvement of major world powers. Indo-Pacific region is becoming more and more complex concept across all fields which is indicating its significance in world politics. Pakistan must adeptly navigate the complex web of regional ties and competition in order to promote peace, security and development in this crucial part of the world.

### **Geopolitical Analysis of the Indo-Pacific Region**

Indo-Pacific region has been characterized by territorial disputes, rivalries, security concerns and show of power by main international actors, each of which has contributed to create dynamic and continuously changing topography of area. China as Pakistan's strategic partner has recently increased its influence in region which is showcase of its economic growth and bridging the military divide with other superpowers (Mir, Rana, & Waqas, 2021). Global powers are expected to compete in South China Sea as next major arena. China is trying to assert its control in South China Sea. Therefore, US and its alliances are countering China by increase political, diplomatic and military presence in area. Due to China's territorial claims in South China Sea, tensions with US and its neighbors have escalated. China is also rapidly growing Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to reduce its reliance on South China Sea alone, and Pakistan is a key player in this effort through China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

(CPEC), a crucial BRI component. US being the traditional Pacific power, sees Indo-Pacific as a natural extension to her role in the region.

### **United States Narrative**

Over the years, United States has actually constructed a narrative that suggests that China's assertive actions are a threat to Indo-Pacific regional peace and stability. The allegation is based on China's increased military might, the territorial conflicts in South China Sea and US reservations about China's growing influence in area. The US has adopted what it calls a "free and open Indo-Pacific" policy. According to US's perspective, it is looking to establish a "rules based international order" in the area (Department of Defense, 2019). US has started forming alliances in the region and bringing its strategy to practical shape. These include Quad, I2 U2 and AUKUS which are reflecting Indo-Pacific strategy of United States. These alliances have diverse objectives which include security, economic pacts and collectively tackling the rise of China in the region. As result, these developments carry significant implications For Pakistan in Indo-Pacific. The consolidation of these groupings may potentially affect the regional balance of power, influencing security dynamics and strategic alignments in the Indo-Pacific (Fatima & Maqbool, 2022). Pakistan, situated in close proximity to this region, must closely monitor these alliances and partnerships to navigate potential challenges and opportunities within the evolving geopolitical landscape.

### **Geo-economic Analysis of Indo-Pacific Region**

Economy and politics form backbone of importance of Indo-Pacific region. This region's states must strike a balance between trade and security and make wise economic decisions. This demonstrates how closely security and financial matters are related in this region of the world. Due to significant countries, long-standing rivalries, territorial disputes and security concerns, the region's geo-economics significance is growing on a global scale (Ali, et al., 2023; Yasmin, et al., 2020). Their objectives are to strengthen ties throughout the area and increase China's economic might. The United States views Indo-Pacific as crucial for protecting its interests in the region because it has historically maintained a significant economic presence in this Pacific region. In order to maintain its economic presence and offset China's growing economic power, United States has actively supported trade accords like Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

CPTPP, formerly known as the TPP, is a significant international trade agreement that includes nations across Pacific Rim and seeks to promote economic cooperation, trade facilitation and prosperity. It promotes impartial trade practices by enforcing strict rules for labor, trade, environment and intellectual property. Furthermore, CPTPP enables United States to strengthen its economic ties with allies in Indo-Pacific region, expanding beyond trade and counting diplomacy and pursuit of regional stability in light of China's growing economic power. Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) serves as a tool for US to strengthen its diplomatic relations in area while countering China's influence over Indo-Pacific. It also acts as an economic instrument to support and offer a counterbalance to China's economic hegemony in area. Pakistan, a key participant in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), may face economic and geopolitical difficulties

because United States tries to offset China by expanding its diplomatic and economic ties in Indo-Pacific through Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). These challenges may become the source of potential changes in trade dynamics and regional alliances. India is also hedging her bets in the big game. India due to its location in “west of Indo-Pacific” is strengthening its economic links with Southeast Asian countries by making programs such as “Act East Policy”. Overall in the region’s internal politics, India and China are the great rivals, investing in infrastructure projects and business alliances throughout South and Southeast Asia in an effort to increase their diplomatic and political weight. It will be challenging for Pakistan to maintain its position in the Indo-Pacific considering India's increasing influence and strategic alliances.

### **Pakistan's Strategic Positioning and Response**

Pakistan's location in Indo-Pacific is influenced by its topography, particularly by its access to Arabian Sea and Gwadar Port. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a vital part of Pakistan's strategy in this area (Wolf, 2020). CPEC helps China reach the Indian Ocean via Gwadar Port, giving Pakistan important leverage. To deal with the changing economic situation in Indo-Pacific, Pakistan takes a practical approach. It maintains strong economic ties with China, recognizing the benefits of this partnership. At the same time, Pakistan aims to work with other major economic powers like United States and Japan to diversify its economic relationships and address its interests in this ever-changing region.

Pakistan actively engages in regional economic organizations and projects, including the Belt and Road Initiative with China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Muggah, 2013). These efforts allow Pakistan to play an active role in discussions about economic cooperation, connections and trade in the broader Indo-Pacific context.

### **Influence of USA-China led Countries on Pakistan**

Several nations in Indo-Pacific region have formulated specific policies or strategies to outline their interests and approaches in this geopolitically and economically vital area (Medcalf, 2019). The policies can be divided into two distinguished groups. One group led by United States and other by China. Indonesia policy is more of a neutral with an aim to protect its interests:

#### **United States**

United States has recently put forth a strategic plan called the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy, which aims to foster a region marked by freedom, economic prosperity, security and cooperation. While the strategy appears to be aimed at addressing these various aspects, its underlying objective is largely centered around containing China. The United States has become increasingly worried about China's rapid and unconventional growth, which has led to the development of this policy. This includes the creation of alliances and blocs to counteract China's influence in political, economic and military spheres. United States' Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy, which aims at confronting China, may marginalize Pakistan by establishing anti-Chinese alliances. As a result, Pakistan may have fewer strategic and economic options in the area.

## **United Kingdom**

The UK's Indo-Pacific policy is primarily driven by its recognition of the region's increasing significance in global affairs, both economically and strategically. It's not designed to explicitly support either China or US. Instead, it aims to strengthen the UK's presence and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, foster economic ties and contribute to regional stability (Strachan, 2021). While the UK values its alliance with the US, its Indo-Pacific policy is more about pursuing its national interests and engaging with a wide range of countries in the region including China to balance out her own personal interests. The overall EU's dependence on China being a critical trade partner also puts UK in a dilemma (Shah, et al., 2025; Haq, et al., 2024; Noor, et al., 2024). Pakistan may experience conflicting effects from the UK's Indo-Pacific policy, which aims to balance its interests without overtly supporting either China or the United States. Any change in the UK's attitude away from China, Pakistan's main ally, could provide difficulties for Pakistan's regional trade and diplomatic standing, even while it might open up prospects for economic cooperation.

## **India**

The goal of India's "Act East Policy" is to improve its relations with Southeast Asian nations and the larger Asia-Pacific area. It was established in the early 1990s with the goal of promoting partnerships, cultural exchanges, and economic collaboration with countries in this region (Shahzad et al., 2022; Saba, Fatima, Farooq, & Zafar, 2021). The main goals are to strengthen India's position in area, promote economic expansion and deal with security issues. India is compatible with US Indo-Pacific strategy due to its emphasis on strategic alliances and economic integration, even though it is not overtly connected to any particular nation. India's Act East Policy, which strengthens its geopolitical and economic ties with Southeast Asia, may reduce Pakistan's regional influence and trade opportunities. India's alignment with U.S. Indo-Pacific policy may pose diplomatic and economic challenges for Pakistan, particularly in containing India's expanding influence in region.

## **Japan**

Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIPS) strategic vision of Japan advocates for an open, inclusive and rules-based regional order in Indo-Pacific region (Szechenyi & Hosoya, 2019). It emphasizes values including freedom of navigation, respect for international law and economic collaboration. FOIP supports US interests in region and is seen as a response to China's increasing influence there. Although Japan wishes to maintain positive ties with China, it also seeks to counteract China's aggression by supporting an open and free Indo-Pacific that fosters cooperation, economic progress and regional security. Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, which seeks to counter China's influence by strengthening regional alliances may present indirect challenges for Pakistan. It may create more difficult for Pakistan to form strategic and economic partnerships with nations who are a part of FOIP because of its close ties to China through Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

## **Australia**

Australia has adopted "Pacific Step-up" and "Indo-Pacific" strategies to enhance engagement with Pacific Island nations and broader region. The goal of "Pacific Step-

up" is to oppose China's increasing influence by increasing aid, infrastructure development and security cooperation. Australia is expanding its interest to Indian Ocean with "Indo-Pacific" concept in consideration of the region's increasing significance. It strives to improve ties with US, Japan and India by handling regional security challenges. Particularly, these strategies support US objectives as well as countering China in Indo-Pacific area (Ansari, Akhtar & Hafeez, 2024; Akhtar, et al., 2021). Pakistan may face challenges as a result of Pacific Step-up and Indo-Pacific policies of Australia, which support US-led efforts to counter China's influence in region. Pakistan may be excluded from regional security and economic initiatives supported by US, Australia, India and Japan. Pakistan would have a few options for trade, investment and diplomatic engagement in Indo-Pacific; and it would be more challenging to build alliances with significant regional players who are countering China increasing power.

### **South Korea**

In 2017, South Korean government announced its "New Southern Policy" a plan to strengthen diplomatic and economic ties with countries in Southeast Asia and India. Its main goals include increasing trade, investment and people-to-people connections with these countries. By becoming self-sufficient in infrastructure, technology and other vital trade areas, South Korea is attempting to decrease her reliance on China and US. With no special emphasis on supporting China or the US, this approach is consistent with South Korea's ambitions to strengthen its influence in the dynamic and rapidly growing economies of India and ASEAN region.

### **China**

China has Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a comprehensive development strategy that uses trade agreements and infrastructure projects to expand its economic and political influence throughout Indo-Pacific region (too less for a country like China, use connectivity as a tool). Pakistan's geopolitical and economic importance is increased by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through CPEC, improving commerce and connectivity. The regional backlash against China's dominance, however, would present Pakistan with diplomatic and financial difficulties.

### **Indonesia**

Indonesia hopes to play a significant role in maintaining stability and economic activity in the Indo-Pacific area by virtue of its fortunate location—a goal known as the "Global Maritime Fulcrum." The project's goal is to increase Indonesia's maritime power and influence in the area. Indonesia does not favor United States or China over other countries; its foreign policy is unbiased. It prioritizes preserving its independence and forming multiple types of partnerships that promote its national interests. Global Marine Fulcrum uses maritime diplomacy and self-assurance to improve Indonesia's standing in Indo-Pacific by fusing resource management and economic objectives related to maritime trade with a geopolitical framework. Pakistan may face challenges as well as opportunities as a result of Indonesia's Global Maritime Fulcrum approach. As Indonesia maintains a neutral stance toward United States and China and increases its maritime dominance. Therefore, Pakistan should also need to carefully manage its own regional policy.

## **Bangladesh**

Bangladesh's geopolitical strategy is to engage with regional organizations like Dhaka-Beijing-Myanmar-Kunming Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and keeping friendly relations with major powers like China and India. Bangladesh can use its geographic location as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia as a strategy (Plagemann, 2022). Moreover, Projects like Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt (BIG-B) and China-Bangladesh-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) also allowed Bangladesh to concentrate on economic development (Agarwala & Saha, 2019). These projects seek to improve regional investment, trade and connectivity. Bangladesh's dedication to regional economic integration is consistent with its geo-economics objectives. Bangladesh has promoted stability in Bay of Bengal region by using a diplomatic strategy to settle maritime border disputes with its neighbours. Bangladesh has set an example for resolving territorial disputes and marine issues by prioritizing peaceful conflict settlement in Indo-Pacific. Pakistan and other emerging nations in Indo-Pacific region can learn from this approach to maintain a balance between geopolitical and geo-economics factors. It demonstrates how diplomacy, economic integration and conflict resolution measure are important to manage challenges and capturing opportunities in Indo-Pacific.

### **Pakistan's exclusion from US Indo-Pacific policy**

Pakistan is a part of Indo-Pacific area, although it is not included in US Indo-Pacific policy because of its perceived lack of significance. After discussing the general aspects of the Indo-Pacific region, let us investigate the reason for US leaving Pakistan out of its Indo-Pacific policy. A complex system of geopolitical forces that have molded the Indo-Pacific region might be blamed for Pakistan's absence from US strategy in this area. These elements predominantly include Washington's attempts to preserve a strategic balance in the area, especially with regard to India, Pakistan's changing ties with China and the US exit from Afghanistan (Khan, 2021).

The main goal of US Indo-Pacific policy is to restrain China, which is one of the main reasons Pakistan is excluded from it. The US seeks to avoid direct confrontation with China and instead aims to achieve this goal indirectly through cooperation with other regional states. In this context, two potential options in west Indo-Pacific emerge: Pakistan and India. Although Pakistan has historically supported United States in "War on Terror". Washington also realizes that Islamabad is unlikely to carry out this role because of its close strategic relations to China due to membership in China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and Belt and Road Initiative (Bunting, 2019). In light of these conditions, India becomes more practical option for United States, who aspires to develop into a regional power (Shah, et al., 2025; Imran, et al., 2023). This aspiration is on its way to practical manifestation owing to the growing economic prowess of India.

Firstly, India is worried about China's assertiveness in territorial disputes, which drives it to seek a counterbalance. Secondly, partnering with the U.S. elevates India's regional status and allows it to establish itself as a significant player. Lastly, this

alignment aligns with India's broader foreign policy goals of diversifying partnerships and preserving strategic independence (Gong, 2019). India's strategic decision to support United States in its efforts to contain China raises the possibility of conflict with a future superpower. It reflects India's understanding of its own national interests, need to control regional dynamics and its ambition to have a greater influence on the future geopolitical landscape of Indo-Pacific. Pakistan's growing alliance with China is another important reason for its exclusion from US Indo-Pacific policy. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are motives of this partnership. Apart from enhancing economic ties between two countries, Washington has also criticized Pakistan for supporting China's commercial and strategic objectives in Indo-Pacific. The United States is worried about Beijing's increasing influence in region has tried to thwart Beijing's rise with its Indo-Pacific strategy, which involves strengthening relations with Australia, Japan, India and other nations.

United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan has complicated Pakistan's position in Indo-Pacific. Security concerns in this region have been heightened by Taliban's comeback and US exit from Afghanistan. Pakistan's national security is dependent on stability of Afghanistan, which shares a long porous border with Pakistan. Due to lack of a synchronized US-Pakistan strategy in the wake of the withdrawal has raised questions about Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan.

### **Historical Complexities**

The historical complicated of U.S-Pakistan relations is another important reason for Pakistan's absence from U.S. Indo-Pacific policy. United States' approach has been impacted by these relationships which have been characterized by times of collaboration and disagreement over matters like as counterterrorism initiatives, nuclear proliferation concerns and regional security dynamics. The historical mistrust and differences in strategy have affected extent to which United States embraces Pakistan in its regional policies including Indo-Pacific (Sutter, 2019). This historical background highlights complexity of Pakistan's isolation and its effects on both Pakistan's national security and regional geopolitics.

### **US's balancing act between India and Pakistan**

A difficult diplomatic balancing act has been played a critical role between United States and Pakistan which are South Asian nations with divergent geopolitical goals. The goal of United States is to support India as a partner in the advancement of its Indo-Pacific strategy and as a regional counterbalance to China. This complex diplomacy is motivated by a number of considerations (Waqas, Khan & saeed, 2024; Zafar, et al., 2023). India's increasing economic and military might has made it a desirable ally for the United States in the broader Indo-Pacific region. As a result, the US and India have enhanced their strategic partnership, which includes defence cooperation, growing trade, and improved diplomatic relationships. Nonetheless, there are ramifications for US ties with Pakistan from this expanding alliance with India. Pakistan sees a strategic shift in the strengthening U.S.-Indian relationship (Swenden, 2018). In order to exert pressure on Pakistan on issues pertaining to regional stability and counterterrorism efforts, United States has used its influence,

sometimes straining the two countries' relationship. United States' decision to halt military aid to Pakistan because of claims that it backed extremist groups was a significant source of conflict (Hanif, 2024; Islam, et al., 2020).

United States' attempt to strike a balance in its relations with India and Pakistan reflects its larger strategic objectives in South Asia and Indo-Pacific. According to the Azhar, Iqbal and Imran (2025), United States acknowledges the critical role Pakistan in promoting stability in neighboring Afghanistan and aiding counterterrorism efforts and it looks to strengthen its partnership with India in order to achieve its regional goals and oppose China's ascent. The effects on Pakistan are complex and include both cooperative and challenging aspects. In quickly changing regional geopolitical scene, Islamabad must manage a complicated relationship with Washington while attempting to protect its national security objectives. This difficult diplomatic balancing effort highlights intricacies that characterize American involvement in South Asia.

### **Implications for Pakistan**

Pakistan's isolation from US Indo-Pacific policy has significant consequences because it has relied on Western help for the majority of its existence. Pakistan's national security and its place in the larger regional framework are among its effects (Turner et al., 2022).

### **Security Shift**

Pakistan's security situation might change as a result of possibly reduced US support for resolving regional security issues, particularly those related to Afghanistan and its western frontiers. To fill this gap, it might automatically turn to China as her strategic ally

### **Maritime Security**

Pakistan's coastline along Arabian Sea places it in proximity to critical maritime routes which includes Strait of Hormuz and Gulf of Oman. Ensuring security and stability of these sea lanes is of paramount importance to Pakistan and the whole world. Challenges in this realm include piracy, smuggling and the potential for interstate tensions over maritime boundaries. South China Sea dispute also has consequences for Pakistan's maritime security.

### **Terrorism**

Exit of US from Afghanistan is by no means an end to war on terror, for Pakistan. Pakistan grapples with terrorism-related security challenges, including the presence of extremist groups and the ongoing security situation in neighboring Afghanistan (Imran & Akhtar, 2023). Instability in Afghanistan has led to cross-border attacks, the movement of militants and the flow of narcotics, posing significant security concerns for Pakistan.

### **US and India Getting Closer**

Challenges arise for Pakistan due to United States' strategic relations with India. The deepening U.S.-India partnership, especially in defense and security contributes to regional power imbalances (Ladwig & Mukherjee, 2019). This dynamic may exacerbate ties between Pakistan and India and have an impact on Pakistan's assessment of its national security (Shah, et al., 2024; Rasheed & Kiani, 2024).

Pakistan's security concerns are heightened by the United States' sale of advanced military technology and equipment to India, which forces Pakistan to look for strategic countermeasures and regional balance. Furthermore, Pakistan may become more isolated politically and diplomatically in global fora as a result of the United States' Indo-Pacific policy and the strengthening strategic ties between it and India. The goal of US Indo-Pacific strategy is to strengthen relationships with India, a vital partner in the Indo-Pacific area, as this could result in greater agreement between the two countries on regional and international concerns. Pakistan may therefore suffer as a result of not being included in this policy framework.

### **Greater Reliance on China**

Pakistan's strategic autonomy may be affected if it becomes more dependent on its strategic alliance with China, especially through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

### **Balancing Act**

Pakistan has attempted to ride both boats simultaneously, but it will be challenging when big countries like the US and China establish distinct boundaries. Protecting Pakistan's national interests will require a strategic approach as task of striking a balance between two power getting more difficult. These outcomes show that how Pakistan's isolation from US Indo-Pacific policy has broader implications for its regional stature and national security. Pakistan will need to overcome these challenges in order to adapt geopolitical landscape in the Indo-Pacific. In reality, Pakistan moves closer to China in order to protect its own.

### **Geo-economic Opportunities for Pakistan**

Pakistan has potential to take part in or is already involved in a number of geo-economics projects in Indo-Pacific area. The economy of Pakistan has both opportunities and problems as a result of these activities.

### **China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)**

The Gwadar Port in Pakistan is connected to western part of China by China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship geo-economics development that consists of a network of industrial, energy and infrastructure projects. It has multiple advantages which include more trade, job creation, foreign investment and improved connectivity. In same time, these projects also counter security challenges in Baluchistan and concerns over debt sustainability (Gong, 2019).

### **Gwadar Port**

Gwadar Port has enormous economic potential and is an essential part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The expansion of Gwadar city as a regional economic center, trade facilitation and regional connection are among the advantages (Khursheed et al., 2019).

### **Regional Integration**

Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) and Istanbul Process are two regional integration projects that Pakistan might participate in order to promote economic cooperation in Indo-Pacific. These programs will provide a lot of opportunities to Pakistan for economic expansion and trade diversification.

### **Investment in Infrastructure**

Pakistan can improve its connectivity with other nations in Indo-Pacific region by attracting investment in infrastructure projects especially in areas of energy and transportation which can promote trade and stimulate economic activity.

### **Partnerships with ASEAN**

Pakistan may pursue economic alliances with ASEAN nations with more focus on investment, trade and general economic collaboration. Moreover, it will also give more access to a vibrant and quickly expanding regional market by developing relationships with ASEAN countries would.

### **ANALYSIS**

The main aim of the study was to inquire how Pakistan navigate its strategies in Indo-Pacific and what are implication for Pakistan in balancing security challenges and opportunities. One may argue that the "Indo-Pacific" idea is a form of "strategic deterrence" developed by the United States, India, Japan and Australia under US leadership in an effort to offset China's rise. In reaction to China's perceived threat, the US created the "Indo-Pacific" concept, which exposes China's peaceful rise to the threat of hegemony and even serves as a realistic strategic deterrent.

Based on earlier discussion, it can be said that Indo-Pacific region's economic significance is characterized by historical conflicts, territorial disputes, competition between major powers and security issues. Pakistan due to its key location can handle all challenging issues through its participation in China-Pakistan commercial Corridor (CPEC), commercial links, regional diplomacy and fair approach to main economic powers. It is essential to comprehend these economic elements in order to appreciate Pakistan's place in the dynamic Indo-Pacific economy.

Pakistan faces both security challenges and economic opportunities as a result of Indo-Pacific dynamics. As the conflict between United States and China intensifies, Pakistan must balance its strategic ties with China, particularly through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), with its partnerships with the West. India's strategic alliances, regional military build-ups, and possible disruptions in maritime trade all raise security concerns. However, there are financial advantages to enhancing connectivity, attracting investment, and capitalizing on geopolitical shifts to improve its standing as a commerce and energy hub. Pakistan can maximize benefits while lowering security risks by implementing a sensible, doable plan that prioritizes diplomacy, strategic autonomy, and economic diversification.

In its foreign policy, Pakistan has always given priority to its immediate neighbors and has a long history of appreciating close ties with big international powers. Pakistan has failed to establish an official Indo-Pacific policy in contrast to a number of its regional counterparts. Pakistan must act quickly to create an Indo-Pacific policy in light of this environment. It will increase trade, strengthen regional ties, expand the nation's strategic options and enable it to adjust with shifting geopolitics. Pakistan will be able to take advantage of strategic and economic potential in Indo-Pacific region and successfully handle any new difficulties with such a policy. Pakistan must take the initiative and create a formal Indo-Pacific strategy (Azhar,

2024; Azhar, et al., 2022). In addition to plans mentioned above, several other nations including France, Canada, Germany, and Netherlands have also developed their own plans with varying degrees. These policies, which significantly affect the geopolitical and geo-economic climate of the region, represent the complex dynamics and interests of the countries in the Indo-Pacific.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the current Indo Pacific scenario, the ensuing recommendations are put forth to address the key challenges and opportunities.

The geo-strategic and geo-political location of Pakistan makes it a nucleus of regional geo-economics in terms of connectivity, trade and approach to other countries. Pakistan has the astounding geo-strategic location and can act as a bullseye (An established reference point from which position of an object can be referenced) from where three regions including East Asia (China), South Asia and Central Asia can take the economic coordinates.

Pakistan understands the value of keeping close relations with the United States as a nation. It is imperative that Pakistan act decisively to fortify this important relationship. Pakistan views diplomatic engagement as a crucial tactic because it encourages regular talks and open lines of communication that address issues and identify shared interests. Pakistan should also take a leading role in regional and international activities that support US interests, especially those pertaining to counterterrorism and regional stability (Azhar, 2024; Azhar, et al., 2022). Pakistan needs to look beyond aid and military partnerships with US, and leverage her strengths in promoting economic cooperation, trade, and investment opportunities. Despite obstacles, history teaches that effective diplomacy can overcome barriers in international relations. While the political climate is not in Pakistan's favor, navigating these challenges requires Pakistan to be adoptable and resilient when dealing with Pakistan's relation with United States.

Pakistan needs to learn from nations like Turkey and Indonesia, who, despite being Muslim majority countries, have used tourism to enhance their soft image. Nature has already blessed Pakistan with all kinds of terrain including beaches, plains, plateaus and world's highest peaks. The need to harness this in terms of travel packages that highlight Pakistan's vibrant bazaars, breathtaking scenery, and varied food can appeal to a range of tourists. In addition to natural sighting, Pakistan can include adventure, culture, and religion tourism as well. All this requires some pre-requisites, security being paramount among those. Social media's power should be used to boost tourism and improve Pakistan's soft image. Even though alcohol is banned in Pakistani culture, there are a number of Islamic countries in Middle East that have successfully incorporated non-Muslim travel choices while maintaining their identity as Muslim-majority countries. It is suggested that tourist zones may be established that offer controlled access to facilities like bars and liquor, exclusively serving tourists, while adhering to local customs and cultural norms is a neat solution. There should be string rules and regulations which include age verification procedures, specific operating hours and higher taxation rates within these zones. It may help to generate revenue

for local development of infrastructure and will also ensure responsible and culturally sensitive tourism.

Pakistan should emphasize her involvement in regional organizations. One notable regional organization that Pakistan is a part of is South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The conflicting ties between India and Pakistan, however, have stopped SAARC from reaching its full potential. These conflicts have hampered the organization's ability to effectively address regional issues and promote collaboration among its member states. According to Dr Hassan Ashfaq (2022), a new regional organization called "South Asian Economic Cooperation Organization (SAECO) Plus One" is being proposed with People's Republic of China to address Pakistan's inadequate presence in Indo-Pacific region. Other members may also be included which are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Maldives as members<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, if Bhutan and India also show interest, they may also take part as observers. The primary objective of SAECO Plus One will be to foster enhanced economic cooperation, promote regional development, facilitate trade and investment, and collaborate on various areas such as energy, agriculture, science and technology, Special Economic Zones, Blue Economy, Social Sector Development (SDGs), culture, environment, and climate change, Higher and Vocational Education, Urban Development, water resource development, and Think Tank exchanges. This initiative aims to address the challenges faced by the less functional SAARC and provide a platform for meaningful regional cooperation.

The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) is a group of ten countries that Pakistan can work closely with in West and Central Asia to boost trade. These ECO countries have a lot of energy resources and opportunities for growth and investment. Unlike the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), ECO doesn't have political issues hindering trade. The only challenge is that Iran faces international sanctions. ECO includes mainly Muslim-majority nations with a history of trade, making it a promising region for business. To make ECO more effective, member countries should focus on stronger economic ties, making trade easier, and improving infrastructure like roads and energy projects. Simplifying trade procedures, lowering trade taxes, and having similar rules can help trade within the region. Investing in projects that connect countries, especially in transportation and energy, can improve connections and create economic growth. Regular discussions and cooperation among member countries are crucial for reviving ECO and strengthening economic partnerships.

Enhancing Pakistan's national security in light of U.S.-Indo ties and Indo-Pacific policies involves diversifying and strengthening strategic partnerships with major global and regional powers. Deeper engagements with nations like Russia, China and Turkey are pivotal. While initiating dialogue with Russia may seem challenging due to trust issues, it can begin with diplomatic talks and confidence-building steps. Identifying shared interests, such as regional stability and counterterrorism is crucial. Encouraging Track II diplomacy, cultural exchanges and

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<sup>1</sup> Hassan Ashfaq Dr, interview by author, Islamabad, February 25, 2022.

people-to-people interactions can bridge trust gaps. Gradual progress and mutual cooperation can pave the way for stronger engagement.

It is pertinent to mention that Central Asian republics do not view Pakistan as a significant trade partner. Aside from a shared religious identity, limited commonalities unite Pakistan and the Central Asian States (CASs). For instance, despite Turkey's geographical distance from CASs, their shared cultural identities, origins and language create a close connection. CASs also prefer trading with Iran due to its established track record as a reliable partner, coupled with Pakistan's inability to position itself as a viable alternative. Furthermore, Pakistan has not effectively presented the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Gwadar Port as an attractive route and gateway for CASs to access warm waters. Now that Pakistan's government is making a shift toward geo-economics first, we may focus on strengthening ties with Central Asian States. Gwadar port can be offered as a lucrative incentive for trade of Central Asian Republics (CARs). However, this will require investing on infrastructure and roads to connect Gwadar with CARs. Rail network can be good alternative to already existing road infrastructure for bulk volume trade. Additionally, the security concerns in Baluchistan need to be addressed before any of Gwadar related plans can light of the day. Ultimately, a coordinated effort between Pakistan, Turkey and China holds significant potential to sway CARs' preferences in favor of Gwadar Port.

China is a critical partner and close companion of Pakistan. Therefore, as a major global power, China should balance its hard and soft power by utilizing its political, diplomatic, economic and military force. China should prioritize low-intensity military activities including international humanitarian and disaster relief military diplomacy while simultaneously developing long-term planning in order to avoid challenging the status quo. Second, in order to protect its interests overseas, China might set up private security companies like Blackwater USA as supplemental forces. These companies would act as a deterrent and help avert future wars. Finally, but just as importantly, China's foreign policy is closely tied to India, the powerful resident in Indo-Pacific. China must work closely with Indo-Pacific's stakeholders, including the South Korea, United States, Japan, Indonesia, Australia, India and Pakistan.

## CONCLUSION

Pakistan is like many times before, at crossroads for her national security. The balancing act required between her strategic partner China, and global power US, particularly in light of evolving dynamics of Indo-Pacific will both bring immense opportunities as well as great challenges. If history has taught Pakistan anything, it is to avoid being part of any great power rivalry. Pakistan needs a multi facet approach to address her national interests. First is to keep making her ties with China stronger, as well as start of long term friendly diplomatic ties with Russia. These ties will give Pakistan a security buffer in the changing alignments of US in Indo-Pacific region. Second is to double down on diplomacy and participate in regional projects while looking for peaceful ways to solve the regional disputes. In order to survive

economically today, Pakistan must collaborate with nations across the Indo-Pacific area. A major part of this is utilizing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Pakistan can improve her security by achieving economic stability. Pakistan's needs to chart a course that balances her own interests while it navigates through the security concerns of big powers in Indo-Pacific by cultivating alliances, engaging diplomatically, seeking economic opportunities and supporting peace.

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