



Pakistan's Middle Power Diplomacy In a Multipolar World: Balancing Between China and the West

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ABSTRACT

The shift from a unipolar to multipolar world order has impacted the strategic thinking of states, especially middle powers. Pakistan in this regard is a complex yet insightful case study. Pakistan sits at the epicenter of several geopolitical contestations. It lies between China and Western interests which makes it an ideal candidate for proxy wars. This allows countries to project power without risking direct confrontation, which preserves international relations. Power projection while attempting to save face has been termed strategic hedging and Pakistan's evolving foreign policy exemplifies this through middle power diplomacy. This paper assesses her policies incorporating western ties, especially with the US and EU, alongside growing Sino-Pak relations. It argues that she is trying to maintain balance between Beijing's tightening grip and Western actors using multilateral platforms for global economic engagement as well as playing geopolitics through Pakistan's geostrategic location. Through active participation in these forums, Pakistan has adopted a blend of alignment with de facto independence driven by realism towards global political trends. This paper follows Pakistan's diplomatic shifts from the Cold War to today using secondary sources. It employs middle power theory to explain reasons for Pakistan's participation in initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its role in global organizations such as the UN and OIC, along with balancing its position during global conflicts. The research aims to address the gap in existing literature by analyzing Pakistan's foreign policy through a coherent theoretical lens. It claims that despite facing politically volatile and economically strained conditions, Pakistan is framing its policies more akin to those of middle powers dealing with intricate global dynamics.

Introduction

Over the last few decades, the world's political systems have changed greatly. The United States dominated other countries' affairs and had one-sided control in a global unipolar system after the Cold War. This is slowly changing to a contested multipolar system with more than one powerful country having global influence, where emerging economies and regional powers started gaining importance too. As things start to change on a global level, the strategies and actions taken by states—especially middle power countries—have shifted as well. These countries might not have enough resources to change the entire system, but are influential when it comes to determining what happens in their parts of the world, resolving disputes between states, spearheading multilateral cooperation initiatives, and supporting alliances. The phrase "middle power" means countries that do not have sufficient military or financial resources to control other nations, but still have significant impact through diplomacy, coalition-building, and active participation in international organizations. Soft power and middle acts as both peace builders around the world while also serving as a stabilizer. WorkflowProcessors.com write experience links Rather hacking ooth intimidation reasonable control. Countries frame efforts as essential strategy but whiel engaging multiple partners to ensuers balanced hedging strategy. Focused on relating primary reason sure crossed borders global integrated describes important activism looks below Apart postura definition comes courtyard factor. In this regard Pakistan serves exact case study example aligned positioned aspiring midrange popular centers functioning pulsating region challenges shaped multi layered volatile contoured topography offered. Pakistan is still trying to define its part in the multipolar order and attempt brings both opportunities and limitations. From a geopolitical perspective, Pakistan lies at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East for trade which makes it economically beneficial. Not only does this position gives it important access to critical trade routes and energy corridors, but it also subjects Pakistan to the turbulence of regional rivalries along with global power shifts. Additionally, as a state with nuclear capability, paired with having a growing population, large military force, and significant cultural influence in the Muslim world allows Pakistan to have considerable geopolitical significance. Even with such advantages, there are chronic challenges like political conflicts, weak economy, and unstable government institutions. Historically, Pakistan's foreign policy has shifted between aligning with major powers. It was a key Cold War ally of the United States and later became a close partner of China. However, Pakistan tries to balance its relations with other countries, which is an intricate approach when compared to Turkey's foreign policy characterized by engagement with Western and non-Western powers simultaneously. With the Belt and Road Initiative, China's growing strategic partnership with Beijing is highlighted through CPEC (China Pakistan Economic Corridor). At the same time, Islamabad has maintained functional but cautious ties with Western countries like the United States or European Union in

counterterrorism, trade, and regional security matters. These dual alignments aren't just about reacting to changing situations or making the best of opportunistic chances. They embody a meticulous approach concerning foreign policy specifically aimed towards safeguarding national interests in light of an over complicated and volatile global structure. With both China and the West, Pakistan is trying to preserve its strategic autonomy while avoiding overdependence on one actor and simultaneously trying to increase its importance with multiple geopolitical factors. All of this aids in framing middle power diplomacy which has different types of states adopting varied approaches like strategic flexibility, institutional engagement, partnerships on varying issues, and within shifting contexts. Continued uncertainty induces. This paper presents the idea that Pakistan possesses traits linked directly to their actions as middle powers. The traits include pursuing multilateralism actively, attempting to construct a regionally responsible role, along employing soft power such as religious advocacy, peacekeeping missions, and climate change initiatives. Pakistan engages in those forums: United Nations (UN), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Islamic Organization cooperation OIC and other regional summits demonstrates intent aligned position as stakeholder shaping international norm alongside stabilization agenda for rest of region. Although Pakistan is not typically considered an emerging middle power like Canada or Australia, based off of a well-developed middle class, democratic institutions, stable political climate and foreign relations, the country does share some similarities. Pakistan's strategic diplomacy, regional aspirations as well as participation in global governance require more scholarly and policy-oriented focus. Thus, this research addresses gap in literature by applying middle power theory on non-Western Global South context broaden interpretation of middle power status beyond Western-centric paradigms. This paper also center on Pakistan-China bilateral relations alongside her ties with the West to analyze how new emerging middle countries deal with tensions caused by competition from larger nations. It seeks to illuminate the ways through which these states enhance their sovereignty and foster national development amidst constant changes in the international system centering on Pakistan's strategic hedging policies, pursuit of economic and energy security interests and attempts at orchestrating diplomatic relevance in a multipolar system. The conclusions drawn are important not just for comprehension of Pakistan's external relations but also serve to understand the role of middle powers from the Global South.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

1. Understanding Middle Power Diplomacy in Global Politics

Middle powers are defined less by material capabilities and more by strategies including norm entrepreneurship, multilateral participation, and regional influence. Canada and Australia, for instance, why middle powers depend their geopolitical clout on the promotion of liberal norms and global stability (Cooper, Higgott, & Nossal, 1993). Recently emerging middle powers tend to work different ways though.

As Jordan (2003) puts it, these countries usually come from the Global South are more likely pursue regional goals, shift alignments pragmatically with domestic instability, and realign during internal political turmoil. Emerging the middle power concept is a new one which stems from an ongoing change to global order ushered in by Murshad (2024) who applies strategic hedging – a key characteristic of newly framed middle powers – on the multipolar phase. This concept considers flexible multi-layered partnerships as means to boost autonomy while minimizing dependency on any single global player or power. Such foreign policy does not stem from ideology or loyalty to alliances but a smart blend of cooperation tempered by guarded approaches dominantly characterized the relationship dynamic.

2. Applying Middle Power Theory to Pakistan

Pakistan may not fit the mold of a middle power, but it has demonstrated some signs of this new classification coming into shape. Rizvi (2019) cited the South Asian nuclear balance and Pakistan's involvement in regional geopolitics as main indicators of leverage and influence. Ahmed (2017) analyzes Pakistan's activism within the OIC and later comments on its growing soft power via UN peacekeeping operations which signified a change in impact from former powers. Murshad (2024), interacting with superpowers like the U.S, China, the EU along with international financial institutions shows hedging for foreign policy since relations with these countries had been one-sided since 2001.

3. Literature Gap

Most scholars studying Pakistan's foreign relations pay attention to its bilateral relations with either China focusing on strategic cooperation through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) or with the West, especially the United States and the European Union centering on level cooperation for security, aid, and counterterrorism. While these viewpoints deepening understanding of Pakistan's external engagements, they overlook broader theories that explain the patterns and motives of its foreign policy. In particular relations with other countries and nations there seems to be a striking absence of literature considering Pakistan's global conduct in terms of middle power theory. It applies characteristics like diplomatic agility, coalition -building, selfish diplomacy and active multilaterally towards beyond Great powers. Small political units also define by this name middle power theory can definitely be used some classical approaches covering is still valid add observer lacking data regards these states' links rationally primarily object customary construction sector disregard not apply here policy. This approach exposes Pakistan's policies not as merely reactionary alliances or confined to concerns of regional security but demonstrate greater sophistication which relies desires enhancement assertive global influence void balance superpower one region. This research helps to fill Pakistan's middle power diplomacy void. It looks at how Islamabad tries to cope with global multipolarity by engaging various power centers, diversifying its alliances, and preserving some level of strategic autonomy. This paper illustrates that Pakistan does not purely react to regional dynamics or great power manipulation when formulating its foreign policy; rather, it seeks to remain relevant and resilient in an evolving global landscape. Therefore, it reconsiders the position of Pakistan in the international system

and emphasizes the country's emerging identity as a transitional middle power within the Global South.

Problem Statement and Research Gap

With the rising influence of multipolarity, Pakistan faces new challenges regarding its external relations. As a country situated at a geostrategic crossroads and possessing nuclear powers, Pakistan sits awkwardly between being a global hegemon or marginal actor. Still, scant attention is given to framing Pakistan within the middle power discourse. The crux of this challenge is managing China's increasing economic partnership with Islamabad against its historical security favors and financial assistance from Western countries. While these relationships are studied bilaterally, they do not attempt to weave together Pakistan's foreign policy as a coherent middle power strategy. Such lacking cohesion oversimplifies an under systematized view of Pakistan's strategic maneuvers in international relations politics and his diplomatic ambitions. In this paper, I apply middle power theory on Pakistan's foreign policy after 9/11 with an emphasis on hedging policies, active multilateral diplomacy, and autonomy seeking during high-stakes geopolitics showcasing stratum of uncertainty to address that gap.

Methodology

For this research, I opted for qualitative design and case study analysis to evaluate the foreign policy behavior of Pakistan from 2001 till now. The methodology utilizes only secondary data such as scholarly articles, policy analyses, and other official documents. Through qualitative content analysis, the research investigates prominent features in Pakistan's relations with diplomats which include former superpowers like US China, multilateral forums like UN OIC, and world banks. The selected duration contains many geopolitical important events like us-led war on terror, rise of China belt and road initiative, resurgence of multipolar rivalry competition etc. Limitations are centered around lack of primary sources within the secondary data framework that would provide additional insights into internal processes and policies within the organization. Despite this constraint however, a large number of varied sourced materials ensure adequate blended evidence strategy.”

Case Study: Pakistan's Balancing Act in a Multipolar Era

1. Post-9/11 Alignment with the West

After the September 11 attacks in 2001, Pakistan became an important partner for America in the War on Terror. Pakistan started giving America military support, intel sharing, and cooperation in Afghanistan during President Musharraf's reign. In turn, Pakistan received over \$30 billion in economic and military aid (Ali et al., 2024). This partnership improved combat relations for Pakistan while increasing the latter's

geopolitical standing. During this entire time, both countries had a strong sense of animosity towards each other. Tensions with Afghanistan mostly due to American involvement alongside drone strikes near Pakistan's tribal areas fueled anger on both sides—and then Osama was killed by an American raid in Abbottabad further added to the souring relationship that still boils beneath the surface today. Adding fuel to the fire was America's willingness to form stronger ties with India which really ticked off Pakistan. This explains why Pakistan practiced strategic hedging, working with the U.S. on counterterrorism while preserving other global options. Pakistan engaged an international monetary western institution like IMF and EU but resisted western controlled on Kashmir and nuclear issues. This partnership demonstrates Pakistan's intention to obtain security and financial support from the West without getting too reliant, adopting middle power diplomacy policy. Western partners lost trust in Pakistan, allowing China to steadily gain the reputation of Pakistan's most dependable strategic ally and economic partner. While there's been a Sino-Pakistani relationship since the early 1960s, it underwent transformational changes after announcing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in 2015 as a flagship project of Belt Road Initiative (BRI). CPEC promises over \$60 billion investments aimed at revamping Pakistan's infrastructure, energy, logistics sectors looking especially towards Gwadar Port. This alliance helped Pakistan to balance its foreign relations and cut down on how much they depended on Western countries. China has provided economic aid without any conditions, and defended Pakistan on international stages, especially concerning Kashmir. Furthermore, diplomatic relations have deepened with the joint production of fighter jets (JF-17 Thunder), sharing military intelligence, and conducting naval exercises together. Although heavily dependent on Chinese investment, Pakistan still holds some control in this partnership. For example, while China funds CPEC projects, Pakistan has been openly worried about the debt burden CPEC is accumulating and sought funding from Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Western monetary institutions to balance out their economic profile. The partnership with China demonstrates how Pakistan is attempting to hedge in strategic alignments illustrating Pakistan's instincts as a middle power seek to avoid being trapped by one single patron.

3. Multilateral Engagement and Norm Promotion

Pakistan's role in multilateral diplomacy is considered one of the defining aspects of its middle power strategy. As one of the largest contributors to UN peacekeeping operations in the world, Pakistan has dispatched over 200,000 personnel to more than 40 missions since 1960. Frequently cited by Islamabad as proof of responsible global citizenship and constructive contribution towards global peaceful cohabitation (Rizvi, 2019), such commitments certainly qualifies Pakistan as a nation which desires for global peace. Besides the UN, she has been leading advocacy within the Organization of Islamic cooperation (OIC) for Palestine and Kashmir being Muslim causes. Recently, coupled with the OIC, Pakistan has dominated calls against Islamophobia spearheading resolutions at the UN General Assembly. Through soft power strategies paired with religious diplomacy, her ability to muster coalitions demonstrates desires to influence international debates. Actively participates in Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) embracing it since gaining full membership in 2017. To her constituents, SCO is viewed

as a counterbalance to NATO and G7 presumed dominated by the West. Pakistan's participation in these multilateral forums highlights fundamental characteristics associated with middle powers: seeking to shape international standards through supranational frameworks rather than through military unilateral might.

4. Financial Dependency and Strategic Restrictions

Even with some diplomatic efforts, Pakistan's foreign policy remains deeply tied to the country's long-standing economic dependency. Like all countries that debt financially with banks on the International Monetary Fund, Pakistan has approached them for a set of bailout packages over twenty times since its independence, the latest one being in 2023 where they tried stabilizing their depleting reserves alongside controlling inflation. Every single time they approach the IMF however, set rules restrict subsidy cuts along with tax reforms which limit Pakistan's first fiscal sovereignty as well as its ability to diplomatically maneuver Pakistan has literally no choice but to choke on what is handed out to her by the Fund Association. For example, even when there are deepening ties between China and Russia, Pakistan continues to be under immense pressure because of western economy backed anti-terror financing institutions like Financial Action Task Force (FATF). FATF undermines financial autonomy and showcases an illusionary freedom that doesn't exist. Regardless of this notion of dependency there still seems to control their weakening economy by trying to widen their range of donors and supporters like trades without linking aid especially with States that are part of GCC, together with new Turkish allies along with Korea brings a strategic foresight reducing dependence at once strengthened er support from other Middle Powers situated Southwards across Global regions

5. Mediation in the Afghan Peace Process

As a middle power, Pakistan's diplomacy in the Afghan peace process stands out as one of its foremost interventions. By receiving Taliban leaders and fostering intra-Afghan dialogues, alongside mediating between U.S.-Taliban talks, Pakistan made significant contributions towards the Doha Agreement of 2020. Regardless of how Pakistani diplomacy has been viewed historically in light of Afghanistan's issues, it is noteworthy that both Washington and regional players acknowledged Pakistan's mediation with some degree of approval. This practical response indicates a change in strategy for Pakistani diplomacy—shifting from passive alignment with larger states to active mediation aimed at conflict resolution. These norms include Pakistan's call for an Afghan government that represents all ethnic groups, its insistence on non-interference from outside powers, its appeals to international bodies to financially support Afghanistan reconstruction aid, along with Republican middle power conduct focused on promoting stability while managing conflicts around the world.

6. Strategic Branding During International Crises

Concerning other countries and global events like Russia's invasion of Ukraine or the Israel versus Gaza Strip conflict, we see how else Pakistan's image is changing

diplomatically. Here they took the neutral stance: carefully abstaining from voting against Moscow at the UN and quietly trying to do business with them by acquiring energy deals and simultaneously maintaining relationships with their Western NATO counterparts not openly siding with anyone. In the Israel–Gaza conflict, Pakistan has publicly condemned Israel while calling for the UN and OIC to take action and has expressed support for Palestine without getting directly involved militarily or politically. These responses illustrate how Pakistan tries to keep its moral credibility intact devoid strategic relationship compromises—a hallmark of middle powers.

7. Expanding Regional Outreach: Russia, Central Asia, And ASEAN

In Southeast Asia, Pakistan was able to expand foreign relations beyond China and the U.S., developing ties with Russia and Central Asia quite more actively like with energy talks at SCO. Islamabad's eastward pivot is evidenced by military exchanges with Russia along other activities. Pakistan also advanced transport cooperation by opening up central Asian connectivity routes through the Pakistan-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan railway project. Islamabad deepened links with ASEAN sanctions trade agreements and enhanced diplomatic missions along defense exchanges. All of these are aimed at diversifying partnerships in response to realignments to boost global standing, reflective of multilateral impulses dominant in middle power theory.

Findings and Discussion

Pakistan has a unique foreign policy strategy that seeks to portray the country as a middle power in the international arena. As a country located between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, Pakistan has tried to use its geostrategic position to both balance relations with global powers and project regional influence. Its behavior increasingly conforms to the theoretical approach of middle power diplomacy, particularly through “hedging”—the strategy of maintaining diversified relationships in order not to be dependent on any single power bloc. For example, Pakistan retains a longstanding security partnership with China through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC); however, it has also cautiously sought engagement with other global players like the US, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and even regional rivals such as India for limited partnerships on some mutual interests. Additionally, Pakistan actively participates in international organizations like United Nations (UN), Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in which he works harder to amplify issues such as Islamophobia and climate change contesting other extended terrorism countering policies. His consistent participation in UN peacekeeping missions further illustrates his aspiration for acceptance as a responsible member of the international community.

All of these dreams and goals aside, a fully developed middle power for Pakistan is hindered by some fundamental problems. These include: ongoing political insecurity within the country, internal institutional weaknesses, and underlying economic instability. Long term strategy is hindered due to shifts in policy caused by recurring government formations, civil-military conflict, and a lack of orderly governance. In addition, aid dependency—especially from China, IMF or Gulf States—greatly limits international

policymaking autonomy. Such vulnerabilities usually place Pakistan in a foreign policy position that is reactive and responsive to acute challenges instead of visionary driven proactive foreign policy maneuvers which focus on structural frameworks Pakistan requires geopolitically facing Islamabad over deep-root core problems. In any case, the available information indicates that it is best to think of Pakistan as a still developing middle power—an actor undergoing change with aspirations outpacing its current capabilities but existing in a more grounded context of realpolitik regarding its strategic environment. It is trying to manage the fluid complexities of a multipolar system through cautious diplomacy, attempting to sidestep great power rivalries while advancing national objectives. In some ways, Pakistan's foreign policy balances ambition tempered by restraint, both craft the resulting policy under internal constraints and external forces. If Pakistan improves its institutional capacity and consolidates its domestic stability, it can assume greater responsibility in shaping regional and global politics. Still, how far the country is likely to get will depend on whether it manages to turn strategic geography into influence through consistent diplomacy and comprehensive development.

Conclusion

The evolution of foreign policy in Pakistan over the last 20 years illustrates how it is gradually adapting to the behavioral patterns of emerging middle powers. Instead of being entirely confined to security issues and regional animosities, Pakistan is adopting a more multidimensional foreign policy. This shift can be seen by looking at the diplomatic hedging strategies adopted, increased participation in multilateral institutions, as well as pragmatic alliance building with diverse global players. Such preparations have allowed Pakistan to sustain its strategic relevance in international relations diplomacy without fully aligning itself with any single global power—this embodies the middle power diplomacy hallmark. Fundamental revolving around Diplomatic hedging has enabled Pakistan to sustain these benefits economically. For instance, while deepening the longstanding strategic economic partnership with China through initiatives like CPEC, Pakistan has also tried engaging with the US even with counter-terrorism and Afghanistan conflicts straining relations. At the same time, it enhanced relations not only with Russia but also Turkey and Gulf countries projecting itself as a flexible grappling player that aids in navigating a complex geopolitically shifting world. This balanced strategy enables Reliance Pakistan has been active in the multilateral forums like the United Nations, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Contributing to global peacekeeping missions, advocating for climate justice, and fighting Islamophobia showcases Pakistan's efforts to wield soft power. These steps reflect an intention to create a foreign policy persona based on responsible internationalism, one more hallmark of middle powers. Despite making some strategic moves, Pakistan's aspirations as a middle power are still held back due to domestic issues like political instability, economic reliance, and weak institutions. These challenges Pakistan faces undermines its ability to regularly achieve desired outcomes internationally and damages the credibility of its strategic initiatives. Still though, there is an increasing resemblance in Pakistan's foreign policy behaviors and those of other emerging middle powers from the Global South who seek influence without having to dominate in a multipolar world. This paper adds to the international relations literature by

using middle power theory in the context of a non-Western, developing country. It shows that this is not limited to Canada and Australia; it can also be applied to Pakistan. Other researchers should look into countries like Indonesia, Brazil, or South Africa so that we can learn about the different ways middle powers from the Global South approach international relations. From a policy-making perspective, dealing with internal weaknesses is more important in enhancing Pakistan's strategic independence and global influence.

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