



Navigating Great Power Rivalry Through Defence Posturing: Pakistan's Strategic Balancing in the US–China Competition (2013-2025)

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ABSTRACT

The escalating strategic rivalry between the United States and China has led to increasing systemic pressures on smaller and middle powers, especially those in the Indo-Pacific strategic region. The aim of this study is to review the strategic balancing by Pakistan in U.S.-China competition during 2013-2025 using Neoclassical Realism theory. It proposes that changes in the distribution of power among states create external pressures and constraints, but these pressures do not automatically determine state behaviour; rather, domestic factors such as civil–military relations, state institutions, elite perceptions, and political structures mediate how states respond. In the study, great power U.S.-China competition generates systemic pressure on Pakistan as external factor that is defined as independent variable, civil-military relation is the intervening variable that mediates the external systemic pressure and Pakistan's strategic balancing is the dependent variable that translate Pakistan's foreign policy. The study is a mixed-methods longitudinal case-study design, which involves quantitative analysis of defence-expenditure trends, frequency of military exercises with alliances in the Indo-Pacific and arms transfer to rival blocs, a qualitative analysis that includes process tracing, content analysis, and information from official documents and relevant scholarly literature. The results of the study revealed that the overall military expenditure profile of the US remained strong as compared to China, however, the rate of military spending growth and military modernization is accelerated in China, leading to an increase in strategic competition and remained exerting systemic pressure. These pressures were greatly mitigated by domestic civil–military relations, which were characterized by military institutional autonomy, civilian de-assertiveness, continuity of strategic policy, and military participation in the process of security decision making. Further, the study exposed how Pakistan balanced its relations with great power by maintaining issue-based cooperation with the United States and building a comprehensive strategic defence partnership with China to achieve strategic autonomy and national security interests as much as possible. The study recommends that Pakistan's foreign policy should be pragmatic and a flexible one, security cooperation should remain continued in functional mechanisms with the USA while simultaneously comprehensive defence cooperation with China.

Introduction

One of the hallmarks of the modern international security landscape is the heightened strategic competition between the United States and China. The competition has grown more intense since 2013 and not just in terms of trade and diplomacy or technological advance, but also regarding defense spending, force modernization, deployment, strategic deterrence and power projection in the region. Meanwhile, there has been growth in both military power of China and USA, the trends of military resource growth and military priorities are very different. The USA still has an impressive overall military edge, with China building up its military strength, especially in the Indo Pacific. Thus, the shift in military costs becomes a valuable observable measure of the shifting balance of military power and the intensity of U.S.-China military rivalry. The importance of the competition is not limited to the bilateral relationship as the military balance of the great powers change the strategic situation of the smaller and middle power countries. China's economic growth has also allowed it to significantly enhance the military capabilities when compared to other major powers (Robertson & Sin, 2017). Robertson (2024) reveals that China's real military spending has increased significantly faster than U.S. military spending in the longer term (Robertson, 2024). The developments suggest that the military aspect of the U.S.-China rivalry cannot be evaluated solely based on the absolute amount of defence spending, but rather by the rate of growth in the military budget that reflects the dynamic of the accumulation of military resources and the associated evolution of relative military capabilities.

This new military dynamic puts pressure on other countries, especially those in and around the Indo Pacific region. In the process of rising great power tensions, secondary states are becoming more uncertain of the future power distributions, security assurances, alliance formations, and regional stability. It has been suggested in the literature that such pressures may be limiting the strategic independence of smaller and middle powers and force them to rethink their defence configurations and alliances with the outside world. Christie et al. (2023) show how military expenditures are correlated with choices of strategic alignment in the Indo-Pacific, such as balancing, hedging, and bandwagoning (Christie, 2023), while Korolev (2019) suggests that more intense competition between the United States and China may limit the space for smaller states to pursue strategic equidistance between the two great powers (Korolev, 2019). Pakistan is an important case study in examining these dynamics. It is at a strategic location, with a long-standing security tie with the United States, a growing defence relationship with China, and a continual regional security issue, thus directly in the influence of U.S.-China rivalry. The overall reaction to the system, however, is not solely definable in terms of the shifting of distribution of power internationally. The domestic institutional arrangements, such as civil-military relations in strategic decision-making, also influence its foreign and security policy.

In this context, this study has explored the strategic balancing of Pakistan in the U.S.-China contest in the period of 2013-2025. It regarded U.S.-China military and defence competition as an independent variable, measured by the Budget Expenditure Growth Differential; systemic pressure as the external mechanism derived from the relative change in military power. Civil-military relations as an intervening variable, mediates that pressure and Pakistan's strategic balancing is dependent variable, and explain that how Pakistan is simultaneously involved with both Washington and Beijing in strategic relations and is progressively strengthening its defence ties with China. The study therefore fills a significant void in the existing literature which has tended to treat U.S.-China military competition, Pakistan's civil-military relations and Pakistan's relationship with the two great powers as three separate issues.

Literature Review

U.S.-China Military and Defence Competition generates 'Systemic Pressure' for other countries such like Pakistan. The literature then suggests that the U.S.-China military competition might not just be a battle between the two countries' military spending, frequency of military exercises with alliances in the Indo-Pacific and arms transfer to rival blocs. Instead, it's a larger-scale effort to modernize forces, advance technology, compete with adversaries and project power in the region. According to the U.S. Department of Defense, China is the primary "pacing challenge" for U.S. defence planning, and its continued modernization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is closely being watched for its development of relevant capabilities to bolster China's position in the Indo-Pacific (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024). Christie, Buts, and Du Bois review the military spending and security-alignment decisions in the Indo-Pacific, specifically addressing three types of responses to the U.S.-China competition: balancing, hedging, and bandwagoning. They include 12 countries: Australia, Cambodia, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam) between 2003 and 2020. The authors particularly focus on whether there is a relationship between military-expenditure patterns and various security-alignment options with China and the United States (Christie, 2023). While analyzing the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia, Korolev observes that the rise of China-U.S. competition in the region has given rise to greater systemic tension for smaller powers and notes, when great-power competition intensifies, smaller powers can struggle to achieve relative equidistance from both powers and to maintain simultaneous engagement with them (Korolev, 2019). The literature consequently conceptualizes the military spending growth differential between the United States and China as an operational indicator of systemic pressure. This is an example of a longer-term competition rather than a short-term reaction to a single crisis. The main implication of the literature is thus that military aspect of U.S.-China competition generates systemic pressure especially in Indo-Pacific region that forces regional states such as Pakistan to constantly re-evaluate their defence needs and security alliances.

Civil–Military Relations and Pakistan’s Foreign Policy

A large pool of literature has pointed to civil–military relations as one of the key factors influencing the domestic political system and foreign policy of Pakistan. Rizvi (2000) has contributed a valuable historical and institutional analysis of the political importance of the Pakistani military, which enabled it to enter a powerful space of state decision making and remain influential in foreign, security and domestic policies (Rizvi, 2000). A similar study is conducted by Shah (2014) who also suggests that the political role of the Pakistan Army and its influence cannot be analyzed in a purely formal constitutional manner (Shah, 2014). South Asian political development has been placed in the context of the broader conflict between democratic institutions and authoritarian ones (Jalal, 1995), and by Huntington's (1957) classic civil-military framework, the theme and importance of civilian control and professional military organization are highlighted (Huntington, 1957). In the case of Pakistan, this view is useful for the understanding of how military professionalism and unity can coexist with significant political influence in a situation where civilian institutions are relative weak. The political importance of the Pakistani military emerged as a part of the Pakistani State's efforts to find external security and international support (Haqqani, 2005). Hence, the military cannot be divorced from Pakistan's geopolitical context, especially regarding relation with India and the geopolitical importance of its relations with the United States and China (Haqqani, 2005). Beyond the political dimension, Siddiqua (2007) focuses on the military's economic interests and organizational autonomy in an attempt to expand the civil–military literature (Siddiqua, 2007). Fair (2014), on the other hand, highlights the importance of the Pakistan Army's strategic culture, threat perceptions and institutional preferences in the formulation of national security policy. She contends that the Army's historical knowledge and security concepts about India and the region have helped sustain specific strategic prepositions (Fair, 2014). These studies collectively point to the fact that the analysis of foreign and security policy of Pakistan is incomplete without the consideration of external power balances and domestic institutional arrangement, especially the autonomy and influence of the military; is an important mediating factor.

Civil–Military Relations as a Mediating Mechanism

The Neoclassical Realist literature lays the theoretical foundation between systemic pressures and the local political institutions. Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell (2016) make a case that international systemic conditions do not lead to automatic foreign-policy reactions but instead have impacts on state foreign policy through intervening variables at the domestic level (Ripsman, N. M., Taliaferro, J. W., & Lobell, S. E., 2016). Their conception assigns analytical salience to the state's institutions, domestic political developments and the perceptions of elites, and the state's ability to translate external pressures into coherent policies.

This proposition is particularly applicable to Pakistan. From Pakistan's literature, it is obvious that external security threats come through a political system in which the military has a high degree of institutional autonomy and influence over matters of defence, intelligence, nuclear policy, and larger security decision-making. Thus, new shifts in the international distribution of power may not engender immediate or uniform policy reactions. Rather, systemic pressures are understood in the context of domestic institutional structures (Rizvi, 2000; Ahmed, 2012; Fair, 2014).

Pakistan’s Security and Defence Balancing

The study of Pakistan's foreign policy has become more nuanced over the years, and it is now widely acknowledged that Islamabad had a dual policy towards Washington and Beijing, and had been gradually deepening relations with China's security establishment in particular. The Pakistan's policy does not seem to be a simple and straightforward example of a transition from the United States to China, but rather a differentiated version of strategic balancing, with the two relationships playing different security and strategic role (Jamali, 2026).

The defence literature shows a gradual shift in Pakistan military dynamics with two big powers. The military training, the support of existing platforms, the cooperation in counter-terrorism and the security engagement with the United States are still relevant areas of relations, while the activities of China turned into the key direction of interest in the military field, especially in the area of major weapons purchases, cooperation with the defence industry, military modernization and the transfer of technology. The literature in the study defines the development as shifting from a relatively diversified external defence relations to an increasingly non-exclusive, but asymmetric partnership with China (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024)

Synthesis and Research Gap

Even though abundant literature exists to explain each of the components of the present study, these streams are often discussed individually. Research on U.S.-China competition is mostly focused on shifts in military balances, while research on Pakistan focuses on civil–military relations, strategic culture, military autonomy, and U.S.-China relations with other major powers. One such underdeveloped domain is the causal nexus between the rise of systemic pressure by the U.S. – China competition, and Pakistan's internal civil–military setup, and the resulting balancing behaviour over the 2013–2025 period.

In the present study, this is addressed by combining these three dimensions in an analytical relationship. The literature justifies considering U.S.-China military and defence competition (the relative military capabilities and strategic posture of the two great powers is an external factor) as the independent variable i.e. systemic pressure. Civil-military relations are an intervening variable as these pressures are mediated and filtered by the domestic institutional structure in Pakistan. Lastly, Pakistan's strategic balancing is the dependent variable, which is measured by defence cooperation, military modernization, and ongoing U.S.- and China-Pakistan relations and engagements. This approach combines both of these two theories, and is consistent with Neoclassical Realism, which holds that the outcomes of foreign policy are the result of the interaction between systemic pressure and domestic intervening mechanisms.

Methodology

Methodologically, it uses a mixed-methods longitudinal case-study design, incorporating qualitative process tracing and quantitative analysis of longitudinal indicators. Pakistan is being analyzed as a longitudinal case study in its entirety from 2013 to 2025, while including sub-cases that represent major strategic turning points like the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the suspension of United States security assistance in 2018, the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, and other significant events that impacted Pakistan's strategic environment. This design allows for causal analysis within the individual case as well as temporal comparisons of the two major policy episodes.

The qualitative approach uses process-tracing to uncover the causal mechanisms that connect systemic pressures, domestic constraints and foreign policy behavior at pivotal moments. It is accompanied by elite interviews with academia and military officials, foreign policy practitioners and strategic analysts, and qualitative content analysis of official policy documents, parliamentary debates, national security and foreign policy statements, and diplomatic dialogues. The qualitative techniques used in this research allow for an analysis of the interpretation of the pressures that external factors placed on the decision makers, and how those pressures were turned into strategic choices.

The numbers and facts aspect of the study validates the qualitative analysis and examines trends over time from 2013 to 2025. The study also proposes special measures to understand the evolution of foreign policy of Pakistan overtime. It is statistically analyzed, takes trends over time into account and is more reliable because of this and is checked with theory. This assists in obtaining a better understanding of the situation and makes the study more reliable. By doing this, the study can provide a more detailed understanding of Pakistan's foreign policy and how it's changing.

Multiple primary and secondary sources have been used in order to ensure the triangulation and analytical robustness. Primary evidence is based on official government publications, parliamentary proceedings, foreign policy statements, bilateral agreements and interviews with key stakeholders. Secondary sources include internationally recognized trade, defence and economic-related databases as well as policy institute and international organization reports and scholarly literature. Multiple sources contribute to the validity of causal conclusions.

Military and Defence Posturing

Strategic competition between the United States and China is playing out at the military-defence level in the form of growing military competition, force modernization, increased military deployments and shifting defence cooperation. The developments are a sign of the militarization of strategic competition between both sides, who want to strengthen their deterrence, maintain their strategic influence and ensure a favourable regional and global balance of power. Hence the military dimension of systemic pressure is measured, using measurable indicators, which reflect changes in the relative distribution of military capabilities and in the strategic environment. The military spending growth gap between the United States and China, the number and size of Indo-Pacific military exercises and arms transfer to opposing strategic partners are among the indicators.

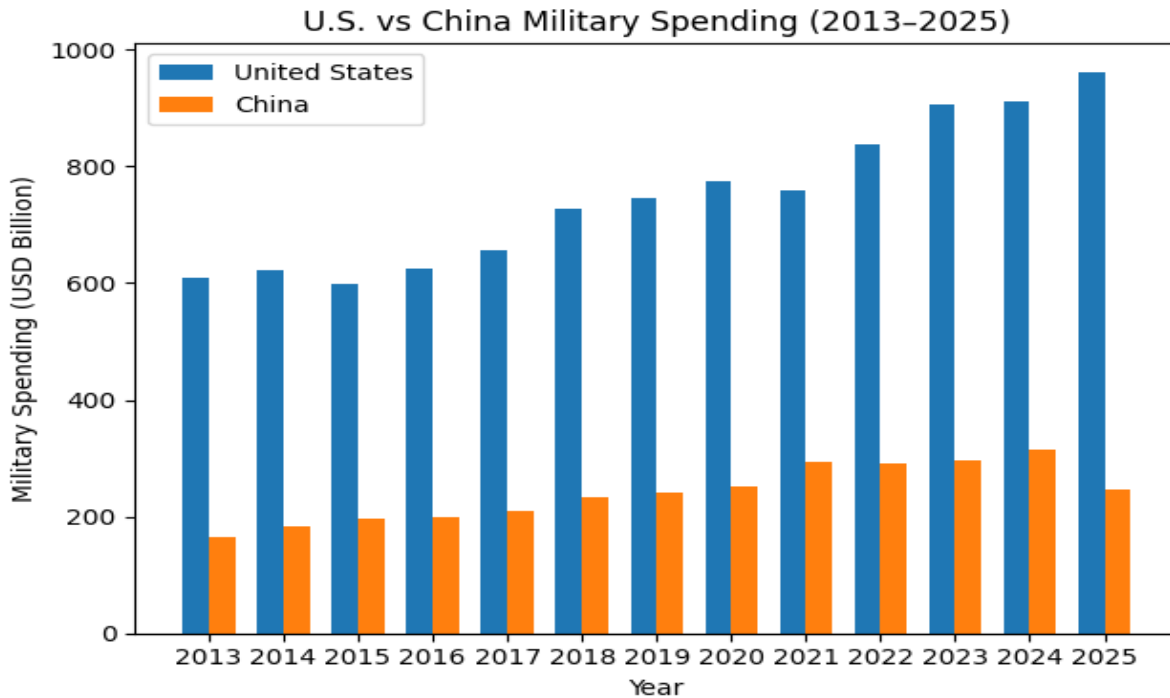
These together give tangible proof of the degree, duration and development of military rivalry between the two powers. An increase in defence spending shows a corresponding increase in military capability and modernization; military exercises indicate readiness to operate, coordination of allied forces and strategic signaling and arms sales show attempts to deepen the security relationship and boost regional influence. As such, these indicators operationalize the military aspects of U.S.-China strategic competition by measuring the evolution of systemic military competition from 2013-2025. These changes were seen as the systemic pressure that subsequently influenced the overall external security landscape in which states in the region including Pakistan developed their defence and security policies. In turn, the military aspect of systemic rivalry is operationalized as follows:

Military Spending Growth Differential

Military spending by the states is broadly utilized as a sign of their protection priorities that provided resources for military modernization, technological advancements, readiness to operate and strategic plans. Continuous defence spending raises can allow the government to enhance the size and capability of its defence forces, acquire new sophisticated weapons, conduct research and

development, beef up its force projection and deter an opponent. The defence budget is a crucial part of the military dimension of all military powers. Comparative military expenditure is regarded as a tangible and measurable indicator of military power distribution and change in military balance between the major powers in the international arena (Xiao, 2025; International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025). The longitudinal analysis of growth difference in military spending during 2013 to 2025 by the United States and China indicated the escalating strategic rivalry between them. Defence spending has also been increasing over the past decade and, amid increasing geopolitical tensions, Defence spending is a significant measure of systemic military competition (Tian, 2024).

Figure 1: Comparative Military Spending of the United States and China (2013-2025)

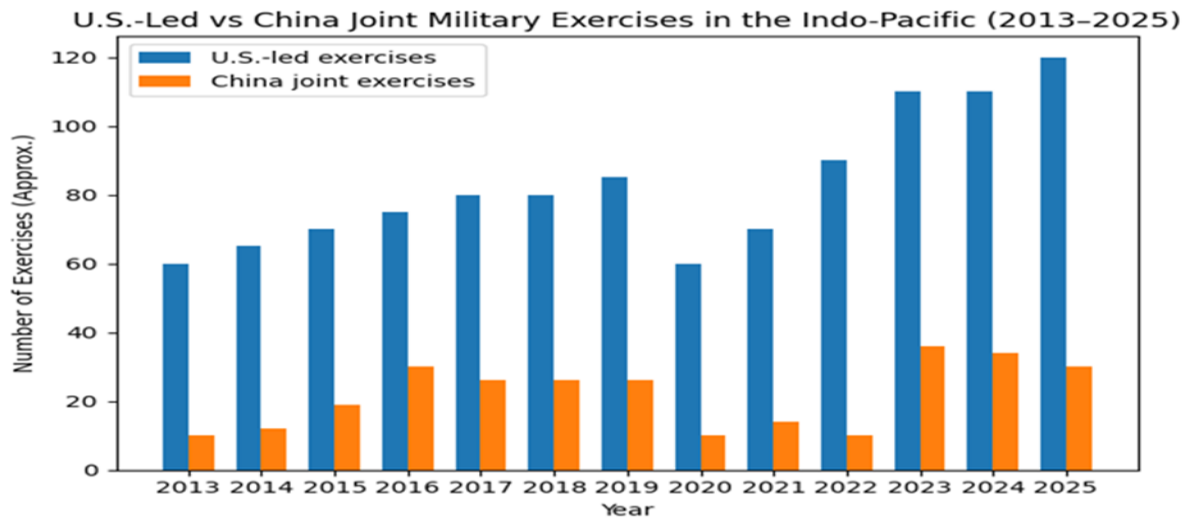


Source: Compiled by the author from (Tian, 2024).

The figure shows that the military expenditure gap has been significantly high over the study period, suggesting that China's military expansion did not remove the structural imbalance in military power. Such a disparity would persist because the United States still has far greater global military force projection power, military infrastructure around the world and larger commitments of military support to its allies, while China has focused its military investment on regional military capabilities, especially in the Indo-Pacific region.

Frequency of Military Exercises with Alliances in the Indo-Pacific

Military exercises are measured by the annual number, scale, and complexity of major Indo-Pacific military exercises that are led by the U.S. and China between 2013 and 2025. The frequency of exercise, the inclusion of allied forces, and the complexity of the exercises offer overt metrics of the military aspect of U.S.-China strategic rivalry as a systemic Pressure for other countries. Military exercises are among the most visible display of states' military operational readiness, cohesion of its allies, its military force projection capabilities, its force deterrence signals, its military interoperability, and its military strategic intent. As more and more multinational exercises are performed, their levels of complexity increase, which suggests greater military competition. Joint and combined military exercises with regional allies, although variable from around 60 to more than 120 exercises per year, were a consistent feature of U.S. military operations. These activities utilized a wide-ranging partnership, including Japan, the Philippines, Australia, Indonesia and Thailand, and were supported by regular, high-level exercises like Balikatan, Cobra Gold, Super Garuda Shield and Talisman Sabre (Associated Press, 2025; Karmini, 2025). In the wake of COVID-19 disruption in 2020-2021, there were sharp rebounds in the levels of exercise participation within the United States, with estimates that by 2025 the United States would be participating in some 120 Indo Pacific exercises each year, with many exercises being multinational and focused on interoperability, readiness, and coalition warfighting (Lynch, 2020; Reuters, 2025). From an analytical perspective, the frequency of military drills is an operational parameter of military rivalry as pressure from the U.S.-China strategic rivalry. It captures changes in strategic environment outside Pakistan (operational military competition, alliance cohesion, signaling of deterrence and force projection) and not the reaction to those changes. A comparison of the frequency of U.S. and Chinese military exercises in the Indo-Pacific region is shown in Figure 2 from 2013 to 2025.

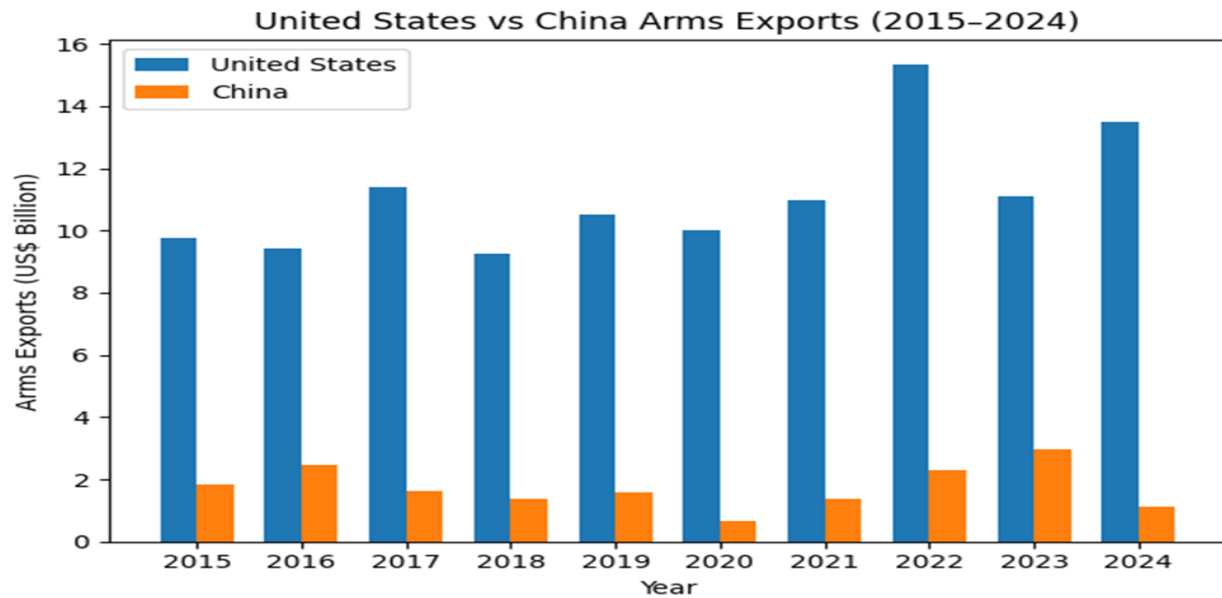
Figure 2: Comparison of U.S.-led regional military exercises and China's joint exercises in the Indo-Pacific, 2013–2025.

Source: Compiled by the author from (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2024; International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024; U.S. Department of Defence, 2026);

Figure 2 illustrates the scale of military exercises conducted in Indo-Pacific region by the United States and China and their substantial difference. Whereas China steered less exercises with few countries, reflecting its closed alliance network. After 2015, its activity increased notably and around 2023, reached its peak. In 2020, the temporary decline corresponded with disturbances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. After 2022, the renewed increase exposed strategic intensified competition. Overall, trends empirically validate the frequency of military exercises as an operational indicator of the military dimension of the United States and China strategic rivalry as systemic pressure. These developments transformed the external strategic environment and therefore intensified the military dimension and generate systemic pressure for other countries.

Arms Transfer to Rival Blocs

Arms transfers to competing blocs are calculated based on SIPRI data on arms export shares by country, dominant patterns of major recipients, and on trends in conventional arms transfers between 2013 and 2025. Arms transfers are an important indication of military posturing that involves defence-industrial capability, strategic partnerships, commitments to alliances, military interoperability and projecting military influence abroad. The direction, volume and destinations of arms transfers suggest geopolitical realignment and competitive security dynamics, giving a tangible marker for the military dimension of the U.S.-China strategic rivalry as a systemic pressure. Figure 3 show the comparative share of arms exports from the United States and China during the study period. It captures the changes in strategic defence partnership, alliance reinforcement, military influence, and defence-industrial competition, leaving out responses from Pakistan to changes in its external strategic environment. The United States was a dominant exporter in the early 2010s, frequently exporting about one-third or more of the world's arms transfers, such as to Middle Eastern countries, NATO partners, and Asia. China's arms export footprint was relatively smaller and more regionalized, South and Southeast Asia being the major destinations of arms exports to Pakistan. This period established a benchmark for the U.S. global influence on defence and the start of China's quest to build its defence industrial base (Tian, 2024). Between 2016 and 2019, arms sales to the U.S. allies and Indo-Pacific partners also continued to rise. SIPRI figures show that U.S. arms exports increased by some 17% from 2014-18 to 2019-23, further consolidating the U.S. position as the leading exporter. On the other hand, China's global market share stayed small at less than 7% for most of this period, with the majority of its exports going to Pakistan and other regional partners with high demand for cheap and less sophisticated systems (Tian, 2024). The beginning of the large-scale war in Ukraine in February 2022 was an important turning point. The U.S. arms export market has grown and the United States is the largest supplier of major conventional arms, accounting for almost 43% of the global market in the 2020-24 period compared to the previous five-year periods. Most significantly, this escalation was fueled by significant deployments to NATO members and Ukraine, enhancing allied defence capabilities. In the meantime, China's contribution to global exports decreased slightly, its arms sales continued to be largely directed towards close allies, including Pakistan, with a majority of Chinese weapons exported to this country during this timeframe (Tian, 2024). The comparison of arms export trends in the USA and China is shown in Figure 3. Data for 2013-2014 is not available in the WDI report extract and data for 2025 is not available at the time of writing (World Bank, n.d.).

Figure 3: Arms Exports (2015-2024) (US\$ billions) are shown for the United States and China**Figure 3: Compiled by the Author from (World Bank, n.d.; George, 2025)**

Overall, the evidence presented above suggests that global dynamics of arms transfers were a tangible component of the U.S.-China military rivalry. The two power's contrasting export strategies illustrated the growing military competition and the external strategic changes which occurred between 2013-2025.

Civil-Military Relations

Civil-Military Relations (CMR) are the most pivotal internal factor of Pakistan's Foreign and Security Policy. The military has become the strongest pillar of the Pakistan state, determining the state's strategic priorities, threat perceptions and alignment particularly vis-à-vis with India, Afghanistan and major powers since the time of Pakistan's independence (Rizvi, 2000). Despite the democratic transition, the military's institutional autonomy, coupled with weak civilian control, has given it the freedom to implement a continuation policy in the field of security in accordance with its own goals and ideas (Haqqani, 2013). Consequently, strategic decisions, particularly in the area of alliances, counterterrorism cooperation and nuclear policy, are sifted largely through the military's prism and not those of elected leaders (Fair, 2014). This imbalance in institutions limits policy flexibility and reduces the ability of the state to shift external policies as per the international environment, which has been brought out in multiple observations made in relation to Pakistan's security state and civil-military relations (Rizvi, 2000; Fair, 2014; Haqqani, 2013). This form resembles the "security-dominated state structure" in which the national identity and the state's engagement with the outside has been shaped mainly through strategic or military ones as opposed to economic or diplomatic ones (Jalal, 1995; Cohen, 2004).

Historical Dominance of the Military in Pakistan's Political System

This military dominance in Pakistan's political system has been a historical phenomenon and not recent. Since Independence in 1947, weak political institutions, the frequent occurrence of security problems with India and lack of stable civilian government allowed the armed forces to become the primary arm to keep the country safe and to make key decisions about the country's security. (Rizvi, 2000). The military operations in 1958, 1977 and 1999 entrenched the military's political relevance and bolstered its status as the primary provider of national stability and external security (Haqqani, 2013). This eventually transformed Pakistan into what has been termed a praetorian state by many scholars, wherein the army is not only a defence institution but also the major political player with a close watch on and high influence in the formulation of the national agenda (Rizvi, 2000; Cohen, 2004).

Then this legacy of colonial rule was the presence of a powerful military-bureaucratic structure that had been passed down from British India where a strong military-bureaucratic establishment was established with the emphasis placed on ordering and securing the country rather than building democratic institutions (Jalal, 1995). Failure of the civilian governments to build stable political institutions further entrenched the civilian-military dichotomy in times of crisis (Talbot, 2012). Huntington (1957) has a useful term for this phenomenon, "objective control failure," in which the civilian institutions are weak and cannot effectively monitor the armed forces (Huntington, 1957). The military also built up its institutional power as it developed extensive commercial enterprises and corporate organizations that provided it with economic independence and political power within the state over time (Siddiqi, 2007).

These historical developments took place before the study period (2013-2025) but had created the institutional frameworks which remained effective and shape Pakistan's domestic political process throughout the period of the study.

Civilian Weakness and Military Institutional Autonomy

An outstanding feature of Pakistan's civil–military relations is the continuing military imbalance in the country. Since 2008, democratic governments have held formal constitutional power, but so far civilian institutions have been poorly equipped institutionally, politically, and organizationally, to effectively monitor and control national security and foreign policy. (Shah, 2014) As part of this difference, the military has established very professional command structures, separate intelligence systems and even has direct control over the security policy institutions and the military planning of defence policy (Fair, 2014). Thus, the military has maintained a significant degree of institutional independence in the wake of multiple democratic changes.

During the study period (2013-2025), civilian weakness and military institutional autonomy continued to be the two key features of the domestic political system in Pakistan. First, governance indicators on the international forum have consistently pointed to Pakistan's relatively weak performance on Government Effectiveness and Political Stability, indicating that the civilian institutional capacity and governance remain strong in government deficits (World Bank, 2024). These governance shortfalls hampered the capacity of elected governments to design and execute their national security and foreign policies on their own.

Second, the existing institutional processes imply that the military had significant operational discretion in defence planning, intelligence liaison and in the decision-making process on national security matters. The COAS was also a regular member of various high-level meetings and forums related to internal security, economic security, Afghanistan and military affairs involving India–Pakistan issues with the members of the National Security Committee (NSC), reflecting the institutionalized position of the army in the highest-level security forum of Pakistan (Government of Pakistan, 2013-2025; Shah, 2014). This sustained involvement was a sign of extending the policy formulating process beyond the traditional civilian ministerial domain.

Third, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) also remained as the country's main intelligence agency tasked with the coordination of counterterrorism activities, evaluations of regional security and intelligence assistance in implementing foreign and security policies. Further the involvement of ISI in national security issues reinforced the role of the military establishment in the institutional control of both domestic politics and external relations (Abbas, 2005; Fair, 2014). In addition, while parliamentary committees on defence and national security were still active during the period of the study, independent evaluation shows that the civilian oversight of defence institutions and strategic planning as well as that of intelligence agencies remained relatively weak. A chain of major defence and national security decisions is made outside of a detailed parliamentary examination (Shah, 2014; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2023).

Last, and not least, successive civilian government has needed military assistance during political unrest and national security situations – such as the political protests in 2014, the political transition in 2017–2018, and the constitutional and political crisis in 2022. This continued institutional influence over decision-making and the lack of civilian independence in policy decision-making favoured the military establishment (Waseem, 2006; International Crisis Group, 2022).

Impact of Civil–Military Relations on Pakistan's Foreign and Security Policy

The dominance of military and the institutional ineffectiveness of civilian governments have had a tremendous impact on Pakistan's foreign and security policy. Civilian governments have not set policy independently, but have tended to do so within the confines of the institutions that have been established by the military. In the end, the strategic direction of Pakistan has been quite consistent across the successive civilian governments particularly regarding India, Afghanistan, counterterrorism policies, nuclear deterrence and relations with major powers (Fair, 2014; Shah, 2014).

Neoclassical Realism would view these patterns as a reflection of the role of domestic institutions in shaping foreign policy action to dilute systemic pressures. Instead of reacting to the international systems as they change, Pakistan's strategic balancing has been mediated by the domestic institutional setup that is dominated by the Pakistani military establishment. As a result, Pakistan's foreign policy balancing act between the United States and China has not merely been shaped by the shifting nature of the distribution of power internationally, but also by the continuing impact of civil–military relations on Pakistan's national decision-making process.

Security and Defence Balancing

Security and defence balancing is the major indicator of the balancing behaviour of the Pakistan as dependent variable in the present study. On the one hand, building on the neoclassical realist framework used in previous chapter, this indicator turns to the nature of Pakistan's security and defence policy making in response to the external systemic pressures operating under U.S.-China strategic rivalry, and, on the other hand, domestic intervening variables conditioning the nature of its security and defence policies.

Pattern of Defence Cooperation with The United States and China

The defence relationship with the United States and China is used as the first observable metric of Pakistan's security and defence balancing activity during the period 2013–2025. This measure analyses the trajectory of Pakistan's defence relation with the USA and China in the period 2013–2025, to see how Islamabad was balancing her defence relations with the external neighbours in the changed security context. Instead of any single defence cooperation between the USA or China, Pakistan opted for a pragmatic and interest-based policy that maintained functional defence cooperation with USA and gradually promoted comprehensive defence cooperation with China. The changes in these defence ties had a direct impact on Pakistan's ability to build the capacity of its defence sector, broker a new external security environment, facilitate military modernization, and minimize reliance on one particular defence partner. This pattern brings out the aspect of security and defence balancing in Pakistan's strategy which involved shaping defence cooperation in such a manner that it maximizes security and strategic autonomy, protects national security interests and provides flexibility for a more complex international security landscape.

In general, the analysis suggests that Pakistan's defence cooperation was of a selective nature and not exclusive. The presence of functional defence relations with the United States and comprehensive defence partnership with China is indicative of Pakistan's security and defence balancing policy as the country's defence relations with major powers were managed pragmatically and flexibly with an aim to maximize national security interests, diversifying external defence partnership, creating military capability and maintaining strategic autonomy while maintaining bilateral relations with both major powers.

Military Exercises and Defence Diplomacy

The second observable indicator of Pakistan's security and defence balancing behavior is military exercises and defence diplomacy in 2013–2025. This measure explores the use of bilateral and multilateral military drills, high-level defence exchanges, military dialogues, and defence diplomacy with the United States and China as Pakistan seeks to balance its external security ties in the context of rising strategic competition between the United States and China. Instead of depending on just a single strategic partner, Pakistan resorted to military exercises and defence diplomacy as additional means to build operational readiness, interoperability, strategic communication and ensure security balance with both the great powers. The shifting nature of the conflict, in this regard, offers a concrete yardstick of Pakistan's maintenance of strategic flexibility while safeguarding the country's national security interests.

Pakistan engaged in military exercises and defence diplomacy with the United States and China during 2013–2016, but the nature and purposes of these were different. Military cooperation with the United States remained strong with its major thrusts being on counterterrorism, professional military exchanges, and on regional security which will be carried out in the context of the Afghanistan mission. (Kronstadt, 2016; U.S. Department of Defense, 2015). At the same time, Pakistan was also holding regular, high-level military dialogue, naval cooperation, the Shaheen series of air force exercises and the Warrior series of counterterrorism exercises with China, underscoring the increasing depth of the China–Pakistan strategic partnership (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2016; Inter-Services Public Relations, 2016). These parallel wars illustrate the fact that Pakistan was continuing to engage in military interaction with both powers, albeit with a gradual development of operational cooperation with the Chinese.

Pakistan's military ties with the United States reduced in 2017–2020 in the wake of the faltering relationship and the withdrawal of most of the security assistance offered by the United States in 2018. However, contacts and professional interactions between the militaries, as well as discussions about Afghanistan and regional stability, persisted (Kronstadt, 2019; U.S. Department of Defense, 2019). In the same time frame, Pakistan significantly escalated defence diplomacy and military exercises with China, leading to high-level visits between military leaders and greater cooperation between institutions under the All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2019; Inter-Services Public Relations, 2020), and through increasingly complex military drills like Shaheen, Warrior, and bilateral naval exercises. The developments indicated that Pakistan did not wish to phase out the military cooperation with Washington, but wanted to boost military diplomacy and operational cooperation with China.

Pakistan has been tied up with the United States in military engagements, although only on a selective basis, by hosting professional military exchanges, conducting counter-terrorism engagements and holding talks on regional security since U.S. troops withdrew from Afghanistan. (Congressional Research Service, 2023; U.S. Department of Defense, 2023). Meanwhile, military exercise and defence diplomacy with China continued to build up on a regular basis of joint military drills held between army, air force and navy and frequent high-level strategic consultations and institutional defence cooperation. (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025; Inter-Services Public Relations, 2024). The ongoing nature and escalating complexity of these engagements strengthened Pakistan's defence relationship with China and ensured that Pakistan continued to have functional military linkages with the USA on matters of mutual strategic concern.

The facts are that Pakistan did not end its military cooperation with the U.S. and did not depend 100% on China. Rather, it shifted military drills and defence diplomacy to in step with the new strategic realities, selectively engaging Washington and gradually building up military and diplomatic contacts with Beijing. In this distinction of involvement, Pakistan began to develop military capabilities, strengthening strategic ties, broadening external security relations and securing a strategic autonomy from the ups and

downs of U.S.-China strategic rivalry (Congressional Research Service, 2023; International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025; Inter-Services Public Relations, 2024).

Arms procurement diversification

The third observable indicator of Pakistan's security and defence balancing behaviour for the time frame of 2013-2025 is arms procurement diversification. This measure evaluates Pakistan's diversification of procurement of major conventional weapons systems, involving the acquisition of the weapon systems from the United States and China as well as enhancing the local defence industry. Pakistan began to diversify its arms procurement policy with a gradual shift from a sole reliance on the outside supplier to cater to the changing security threats, technological requirements and geopolitical situation. There is, therefore, an observable marker in the pattern of arms procurement in terms of Pakistan's attempts to improve military modernization, limit strategic reliance on a single arms supplier, increase defence self-reliance, and maintain strategic autonomy through diversified defence partnerships with the outside.

In 2013-2016, Pakistan's defence cooperation with the United States was limited, as acquisition of new combat platforms was not a major priority, but merely an effort to sustain military capabilities. U.S. cooperation focused on the maintenance and modernization of Pakistan's F-16 Fighting Falcon force by supplying them with spare parts, logistics support, pilot training, precision-guided munitions, and sustainment packages, in line with previous agreements (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2016; U.S. Department of Defense, 2015). On the other hand, China's defense imports were robust despite ongoing cooperation in the production and delivery of JF-17 Block I/II 'Thunder shark' fighters, support for F-22P 'Zulfiqar' class 'frigates', purchase of LY-80 (HQ-16) 'medium range air defence' system, 'FM-90' short range air defence system, and various missile, radar and electronic warfare systems. (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2026; International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2016). Meanwhile, Pakistan Aeronautical Complex made efforts for building in-house defence production capacity, including Joint production of JF-17, which helped in developing Pakistan's in-house aerospace production capacities. (Pakistan Aeronautical Complex, n.d.). These procurement trends suggest that Pakistan remained viable with defence cooperation with the United States, but gradually increased defence procurement from China as well.

The Pakistani arms procurement policy came under a more pronounced shift towards China between 2017 and 2020 with the suspension of most security assistance from the U.S. in 2018. In this time, the Pakistan did not purchase any major combat platforms and bilateral defence cooperation was mostly limited to maintaining current F-16 aircraft and their logistical support (Congressional Research Service, 2023; U.S. Department of Defense, 2019). In contrast, Pakistan significantly increased defence imports from China, such as the acquisition of the VT-4 main battle tanks, Wing Loong II armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), SH-15 155 mm truck mounted howitzers and ordered the Type 054A/P guided missile frigates, and also developed and produced the JF-17 Block III fighter aircraft, which further bolstered Pakistan's local defence industrial strength (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2026; International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2021). These purchases gave Pakistan a massive boost in conventional military strength in the land, air and sea and also helped in minimizing reliance on the western countries for defence supplies. The changing tactics of procurement was indicative of Pakistan's policy of making up for the reduction in U.S. defence assistance with long-term defence industrial cooperation with China.

Pakistan's arms buying continued to diversify in 2021-2025 and its main supplier stayed China. The U.S. agreed to sustain and modernize Pakistan's F-16 force, covering such items as logistics support, secure communications, navigation systems, secure software, and training; the U.S. fell short of sending Pakistan major new weapons systems (Congressional Research Service, 2023; U.S. Department of Defense, 2023). Conversely, China has exported a number of high-end conventional military equipment systems such as Type 054A/P guided missile frigate, HQ-9/P long-range air defence system, JF-17 Block III fighter aircraft, J-10CE multirole fighter aircraft, more VT-4 main battle tanks, advanced PL-series air-to-air missiles, naval sensors, radar systems and technology transfer for the production of indigenous defence equipment (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2026). SIPRI estimates that between 2020 and 2024, China was the biggest supplier of major weapons to Pakistan (81 per cent of all major arms imports) (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2026). However, Pakistan had tried to diversify its arms purchases and to make progress in the indigenous production of arms and equipment while also continuing limited defence sustainment cooperation with the United States. This procurement approach improved military modernization, but did not lead to a situation of complete reliance on the external supplier.

Counterterrorism and regional security cooperation

The fourth observable measure of Pakistan's security and defence balancing behaviour during 2013-2025 is counterterrorism and regional security cooperation. This measure analyzes the extent of Pakistan's security cooperation with Pakistan and China in combating terrorism, Afghanistan instability, security of Pakistan's borders, intelligence coordination and regional security issues. By adopting a pragmatic approach, Pakistan maintained useful counterterrorism relations with both major powers while steadily building up its comprehensive regional security coordination with China. The changing trend of cooperation demonstrated Pakistan's resolve to

fight against terrorism, to bring stability to the western frontier, to develop strategic economic projects, to foster peace in the region and to protect Pakistan's national security interests in the context of regional and international security landscape.

During 2013-2016, Pakistan remained engaged with the USA in the fight against terrorism, exchanges of intelligence, military-to-military meetings, border security cooperation and consultations regarding Afghanistan upon the withdrawal of planned NATO fighting forces from Afghanistan. Bilateral cooperation predominantly centered on trans-border terrorism, in particular the fight against Al-Qaeda and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and the two governments had strategic dialogue on regional stability and the Afghan peace process (Congressional Research Service, 2023; U.S. Department of Defense, 2015).

At the same time, Pakistan greatly enhanced its counterterrorism and regional security cooperation with China. During the Seventh Round of Pakistan–China Counterterrorism Consultations in Beijing in April 2013, both sides expressed their eagerness to enhance cooperation in the areas of intelligence, counterterrorism, protecting the safety of Chinese nationals and investments, and strengthening bilateral and multilateral security dialogue in response to the current security environment in Afghanistan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). Meanwhile, during that time Pakistan, China and Russia launched the Trilateral Dialogue on Afghanistan, in which they emphasized the need for Afghan-led reconciliation process and emphasized regional security, counterterrorism and anti-narcotics measures through multilateral platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). The events reflect Pakistan's efforts to strike an appropriate balance between regional security cooperation with China and maintaining counterterrorism ties with the United States.

After most U.S. security assistance was suspended in 2018, Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts with the United States shifted to be more selective between 2017 and 2020. While bilateral defence relations worsened, both sides did conduct intelligence sharing, military dialogue, and diplomatic engagement on Afghanistan, regional stability, and counterterrorism, as well as supporting negotiations towards the Doha peace process (Congressional Research Service, 2023; U.S. Department of Defense, 2019).

In 2021, American and NATO troops pulled out of Afghanistan, and Pakistan adjusted its counterterrorism and regional security policies in response to the changing landscape in the region. Pakistan has selectively participated in U.S. dialogue, military relations, professional military education, and regional cooperation on security in response to the threat from Afghan-based terrorists (Congressional Research Service, 2023; U.S. Department of Defense, 2023). Meanwhile, Pakistan and China beefed up their strategic security relationship through regular high-level contacts and pledges. Both sides agreed to adopt a zero-tolerance approach to terrorism, condemned any terrorist attack against the Chinese or Chinese infrastructure facilities in Pakistan, and expressed willingness to expand bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the field of counter-terrorism, and called upon the Afghan interim authorities to take visible and verifiable actions against terrorist groups coming out from the Afghan territory (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024). Cooperation also extended in the areas of border security, intelligence sharing etc., in protecting the CPEC and regional diplomacy over Afghanistan, in a bilateral manner. The developments illustrate that Pakistan continued to pursue a pragmatic approach with the United States regarding security cooperation and strengthen China as its key long-term security partner in the region.

Conclusion

The study investigated Pakistan's strategic balancing between the great power i.e. USA and China through neoclassical framework during 2013-2025. It theorized U.S.-China defence and military competition that generated systemic pressure on other countries including Pakistan to influence their foreign policy, measured through military expenditure growth difference, frequency of military exercises with alliances in the Indo-Pacific and arms transfer to rival blocs, while dealing civil-military relations as domestic intervening variable to mediate said pressure and Pakistan's strategic balancing as dependent variable to formulate foreign policy. The study concluded that the escalating U.S.-China defence competition generated a complex environment for Pakistan, stressing to maintain relations with both superpower while protecting its defence benefits and strategic autonomy.

The empirical analysis illustrated that although the U.S. expended more on defence and had superiority over China in terms of military expenditure but the later maintained the continual expenditure growth to modernize its military. Such scenario exerted systemic pressure on Pakistan to recalibrate its defence needs, external partnership and diplomatic choices. However, Pakistan's response was not a senseless reaction to this pressure in the global power distribution. Instead, systemic pressure was translated through domestic constraints including institutional structure, civil-military relations in foreign and security policymaking.

The study concluded that Pakistan followed a differentiated and a pragmatic strategic balancing. It sustained issue-based defence cooperation with the USA and progressively asymmetric defence partnership with China, particularly in technology transfer, military modernization, defence production and strategic cooperation. Thus, Pakistan's strategic balancing cannot be considered as a complete bandwagoning with either power rather it demonstrated a flexible form of strategic balancing worked out to keep defence interests, diversify external security relations and sustained strategic space between intensifying great power rivalry. Overall, the finding favoured the central theme of Neoclassical Realism that global systemic pressure affects foreign policy outcomes through internal political and institutional intervening mechanism.

Policy Recommendations

The conclusion of this dissertation put forth that strengthening the domestic capacities and implementing diverse external partnerships are key to balancing. In addition to diplomatic adaptability, strategic autonomy requires internal state energy, which calls for institutional coherence, economic resilience, technological upgrading and equated engagement with the international community in Pakistan's future policy trajectory.

The Government of Pakistan must ensure that foreign policy is kept pragmatic and interests based and must not be based on the exclusive dependency of any major power. Within the framework of ongoing U.S.-China strategic rivalry, Pakistan needs to focus on being 'strategically flexible' and hopeful to foster mutually beneficial ties with various stakeholders while keeping the foreign policy trajectory in alignment with its national security and development goals. There needs to be a greater degree of coordination among political leadership, security institutions and policymaking institutions to maintain consistency and future foresight.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs must increase its diplomatic outreach and deepen its strategic partnership with China while taking fresh steps in building up a constructive relation with the United States, European countries, Gulf countries, Central Asian countries, ASEAN countries, Türkiye and other emerging countries. There is a need to give greater emphasis to economic diplomacy, investment promotion, diversifying trade, technological cooperation and strategic communication to ensure that Pakistan's position gets a boost on the global stage while minimizing the reliance on individual countries. Building up more robust institutional structures to analyze and design geopolitical policies would also enhance Pakistan's capacity to effectively cope with the changing dynamics of geopolitical affairs.

Modernization, self-reliance and balanced security cooperation must be the core of Pakistan's defence policies. Pakistan should sustain defence cooperation with China on defence capability building and production, including military technology, as well as opportunities for security dialogue, professional military exchanges, counterintelligence cooperation and confidence building, with other international partners. A higher proportion of investment in indigenous defence industry, cyber technology or new technologies and promotion of defence innovation would strengthen national security autonomy, minimize strategic vulnerabilities.

Resilience must be a core focus while building Pakistan's strategic autonomy in economic terms. Policymakers should pursue sustainable economic reforms focused on fiscal stability, decreasing external vulnerabilities, improving public institutions and increasing the competitiveness of the industries. The economic strategy should emphasize the expansion of export markets, diversified foreign investments, better productivity and increased regional and global value chain integration of Pakistan. On the other hand, Pakistan needs to foster greater economic ties with western nations, the Gulf economies, East Asia, and other foreign investors while enjoying the benefits of Chinese investment, such as the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

It is important to strengthen the investment in research and development, digital infrastructure, artificial intelligence, cyber security, higher education and advanced manufacturing in Pakistan as technology is playing important role to respond and deliver the country's aggressive geopolitical competition. Development of indigenous technological capabilities will enhance the economic competitiveness, which will be a source of increased flexibility for foreign policy decision taking.

Last but not least, Pakistan must persist with a policy of dialogue, confidence building exercises and multilateral engagement for the promotion of peace in the region. Maintenance of strategic mistrust in South Asia and the importance of cooperative mechanisms will continue to be crucial in addressing the problems of security. Pakistan's strategic balancing approach will be more sustainable if it is backed by robust institutions, economy, technological capacity and diverse foreign relations. Pakistan will be able to secure strategic autonomy and effectively deal with the strategic challenges in the future, with the help of these foundations.

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