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PAKISTAN BETWEEN THE U.S., CHINA, AND INDIA: BALANCING, HEDGING, AND MANAGED DEPENDENCY

Mian Masood Tariq[1] & Ayesha Shafique Abbasi[2]

[1]Department of Defence and Strategic Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.
Email: masoodtariqqq@gmail.com

[2]Department of International Relations, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad.
Email: aishaabbaasi2002@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how much strategic autonomy Pakistan can gain and keep while the US and China compete. It uses ideas from structural realism. It also uses research on hedging, much of it drawn from Southeast Asia. Instead of treating autonomy as a slogan, the article treats it as something you can measure along a scale. In that frame, it argues that Pakistan's balancing is aimed at India. It is not aimed at the wider great power rivalry. The study says that US moves toward India have changed the game. In the past, Pakistan had room to bargain because others disputed where it should stand. Now that dispute has shrunk. As a result, Pakistan's outside balancing is narrowed to one main great power partner. The article then turns to hedging. It says Pakistan hedges through work with the IMF and through a multi-vector approach to foreign ties. It calls this hedging intentional. But it argues the effort does not match the level of reliance tied to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. In short, the hedging handles problems that show up. It does not fix the underlying setup that creates dependence. The conclusion links several limits that feed each other. The paper points to economic weakness and debt stress. It also notes that US pressure is more punitive than persuasive. It adds Chinese expectations. It keeps returning to the India issue as a driver. Together, these factors keep Pakistan's options tight. The article wraps up with a clear judgment. Pakistan's actions fit managed dependency more than strategic autonomy. Even with nuclear weapons, strong geography, and years of maneuvering, the state's freedom of action is still constrained by the structure around it.

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Corresponding Author Mian Masood Tariq

Email: masoodtariqqq@gmail.com

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Introduction

The overall nature of the international system is changing around one underlying structural point: namely, increasing competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China. The growing dispute between the U.S. and China, which started in the early 2010s on issues of trade imbalances and currency manipulation, has been transformed into an all-encompassing competition in the economy, technology, military, and ideological arenas. This contest is not simply a fight between two big powers: In the neorealist tradition, it is a shift in the distribution of capabilities at the top of the international system, which has ramifications down the hierarchy, forcing secondary and peripheral states to reassess how to secure and maintain their security and economic stability (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979). The pressure to select, or refuse to select, has become the core of the foreign policy of states that are at major geographic and strategic crossroads of this competition.

Precisely such an intersection is Pakistan. Located on the fault lines of the Sino-American conflict along which it is playing out, Pakistan borders China and Iran, is adjacent to India and Afghanistan and is close to the Persian Gulf via its Arabian Sea coastline. It's at the same time the seat of China's Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI) China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and a state that has a seven-decade history that includes security cooperation with the United States, albeit a turbulent one (Kux, 2001). This double bind puts Pakistan amongst the countries where the main analytical question of the day – how can a weaker state maintain agency when it's surrounded by great powers is not theoretical, but political and existential.

This is a philosophical approach which underlies this article: strategic autonomy, which means that a state is able to identify and pursue its national interests without being subsumed by the interests of any one foreign power. But strategic autonomy does not imply an attitude of neutrality or isolation – it is about preserving choices, about being able to manoeuvre, diversify partnerships, refuse alignment and so on. This research reviews how much Pakistan has accomplished or plausibly can achieve in terms of strategic autonomy in the context of structuring of U.S.–China competition. It suggests that Pakistan has adopted two complementary approaches of balancing in security and diplomacy and hedging in economic and diplomacy but operationalises both these approaches in the face of harsh and cumulative restrictions, thus limiting the autonomy that Pakistan can truly exercise.

Research Questions

The principal question is: To what extent can Pakistan achieve and sustain strategic autonomy through balancing and hedging within the structure of U.S.–China competition?

The subsidiary questions are as follows. First, what are the specific balancing and hedging strategies that Pakistan employs in the security, diplomatic, and economic domains, and how coherent are they as an integrated grand strategy? Second, how have the deepening of CPEC and the simultaneous deterioration of Pakistan–U.S. relations altered Pakistan's structural room for

manoeuvre? Third, what domestic, external, and regional constraints limit the effectiveness of Pakistan's autonomy-seeking behaviour? Fourth, given these constraints, what realistic policy options remain available to Pakistan to preserve such autonomy as it possesses?

The hypothesis is that Pakistan is trying to achieve strategic autonomy with an economic dependency, a security alliance and the gravitational forces of international power politics albeit a balancing act between the US and China and hedging activities across various diplomatic and economic realms, but in an end state of affairs it can't be a strategic autonomy and thus Pakistan's paradoxical behaviour can be termed as constrained or managed dependency instead.

Literature Review

This study not only aims to address a range of analytical gaps in the existing literature on Pakistan's foreign policy but also review the vast literature that already exists on the same topic. Much of the literature can be either of two categories. The first focuses on Pakistan primarily in terms of relations with one attractive external partner – either the U.S. in the vast literature on the failed partnership (Haqqani, 2013; Kux, 2001; Markey, 2013) or China in the emerging literature on the 'all-weather' partnership and CPEC (Small, 2015). This one-liners framing is a kind of rich one empirically, but it is a poor picture in terms of the framework of relations and this is what is most central in this contemporary period that the behavior of Pakistan towards any of these powers is dependent on relation with the other power and external from it cannot be understood. The second camp sees Pakistan as a pivot or frontline state that fulfills the interests of the great powers at its behest: this underplays the very real but limited autonomy enjoyed by the Pakistani policymakers.

Another gap is the theory components. Goh (2005, 2007), Kuik (2008, 2016) and a host of other studies have evolved the notion of hedging as indicated in the title of this section and Southeast Asian states' attempts to evolve their strategies, between China and the United States, have gone over a long period; however, it has been applied thinly and sporadically to the case of Pakistan. When strategic balancing and hedging are introduced in the South Asian context, they often tend to be descriptive terms, rather than analytically distinct concepts with well-defined observable consequences. They shed far too little light on what conditions under which the autonomy of a state slips into dependency and on what mechanisms this autonomy becomes its opposite.

Theoretical Framework

In Waltz's (1979) conception, neorealism assumes an anarchic international system, functionally equivalent states differentiated mainly from their relative capabilities and a distribution of capabilities in the international system polarity that drive state behavior. If this is true, the justice of states must have as its motivating force the necessity of their own self-preservation. Mearsheimer's "offensive variant" takes this logic one step further, positing that great powers also driven by uncertainty over one another's intentions will seek to maximize relative power, with the

upshot being that intense competition between a rising China and a status-quo United States is structurally more likely than contingent (Mearsheimer, 2001). In the context of this research neorealism's major thesis is that Pakistan's strategic opportunities are limited by a distribution of capabilities which it cannot influence. In this framing, the U.S.-China contest is an endemic contextual reality that Pakistan must react to rather than an environment where it can exert influence.

This is where the concept of hedging lies between balancing and bandwagoning (Schweller, 1994). The hedging writing, largely an outgrowth of studies of SE Asia, refers to the practice of secondary states, which do not decidedly choose one great power over the other, but instead hedge all their investments, tailoring each in a partial and sometimes contradictory manner, in order to maintain some options and to insure against the uncertainty of which power will succeed (Goh, 2005; Kuik, 2008). Kuik suggests the multi-faceted nature of hedging as pursuing simultaneous returns and risk-contingency measures, that is, an economic engagement with an emerging power while also maintaining security ties against it (Kuik, 2016). But hedging, institutional-wise, is simply a way of not deciding. Its viability is dependent on strategic ambiguity, which in the face of increasingly defined and stiffer competition by great powers would become more difficult.

Methodology

The inquiry is organized by three complementary techniques. To uncover the path-dependent dynamics of Pakistan's ties with the U.S. and China and structural continuities and inflections influencing current behaviours, historical analysis will be employed. The other is policy analysis, which involves analyzing the different strategic choices, official stance and behavior of the Pakistani decision makers in security, economic and diplomatic fields and judging their coherence and effectiveness from the perspective of autonomy. The third is qualitative content analysis of official statements, policy documents and the secondary and scholarly literature, allowing the reconstruction of the declared rationales of Pakistani strategy, and triangulation with observed outcomes, which explicate the gap between the declaration of autonomy and the fact of dependency at the heart of this article.

Strategic Autonomy

Strategic autonomy is a term that is more commonly proffered than analyzed and must be disciplined for analysis. Strategic autonomy at its simplest means the authority to develop and implement national security and foreign policies that reflect, rather than those of another state. In this sense, decisional independence is not a consequence of the material capability as such, but rather a property of the decisional independence of the state, in the sense that the freedom of choice depends on the capabilities of the state resources and on the dependence that the state created.

There are a number of conceptual differences that further clarify the definition. First of all, there is a need to uncouple autonomy from sovereignty. Despite having some formal attributes (recognized borders, a seat at the United Nations, trappings of independence), a state can be deprived of substantive strategic autonomy by its need to rely on external patrons (Lake, 2009). What is at stake is not sovereignty but "autonomy" of Pakistan. Second, autonomy shouldn't be equated with neutrality or isolation. Autonomy is not a process of avoiding relationships, but it is one of being able to establish and withdraw from relationships on one's own conditions. In principle, a heavily aligned state can be autonomous if and only if it has freely chosen and freely revisable its alignment; indeed, a nominally unaligned state can be non-autonomous if its freedom of choice and/or revisability has effectively ended. Third, autonomy should not be thought of as a binary but as a continuum. States have autonomy in various fields, and over time. A state may have a lot of autonomy in projecting its image in its diplomacy, and yet have lost autonomy in its economy; in some contexts it may have a lot of autonomy, but in others it may not have much.

It is this final point that is very important, not only for the understanding of the sources of Pakistan's autonomy, but also for the understanding of the present state of erosion of Pakistani autonomy. In the Cold War era and during the post-9/11 period, Pakistan's alignment was hotly disputed, and this dispute was used by Pakistan as a source of resources and leverage. The inability of the Pakistani state to force a debate around the issue of alignment is indeed the major structural challenge of the present day: neither can the United States now compete for Pakistan's alignment, as in India it has found a more valuable partner against China, nor does China need to worry about it anymore, because this alignment has been secured so completely that it does not need to compete for it. However contested a state might be, when alignment is resolved, the leverage created by contestation dissipates, and so too does one of the key sources of autonomy.

U.S.–China Global Competition

It is the geography of the competition, which makes Pakistan structurally important. The contest is Indo-Pacific in maritime aspect and Eurasia in Continental aspect and Pakistan is at the Indo-Pacific/Eurasia juncture. Gwadar port on CPEC is a deep sea port which will provide China a potential foothold on the Arabian Sea and a node point through which it can project influence in the Indian Ocean bypassing the vulnerable Malacca chokepoint (Garlick, 2018). That means part of the value Pakistan has for China also leads to the problem; as it also makes Pakistan susceptible to a situation in which there is a competition which it didn't manufacture and it can't control. In neorealist language, it is a structure that is "given" and Pakistan must find a way to "respond" to it.

Pakistan–China Strategic Partnership

Pakistan and China are partners with a relationship, according to both sides, that is "higher than the mountains, deeper than the oceans and sweeter than honey." Such talk conceals more than it reveals. This is more than just a sentimental tie-up, it's a long-term intersection of interest and the very fact of its longevity is what sets it apart from the last minute resemble and smiley deals Pakistan has with the U.S. However, as this section argues, at the same time, as the partnership has

been deepened with CPEC, Pakistan's strategic position vis-à-vis India is made stronger while at the same time it is made weaker in the overall sense since it has only vested one great power in Pakistan's interests.

But it is those very features that make CPEC beneficial for Pakistan which are the ones that erode its autonomy. The financing of the corridor has saddled Pakistan with outside debt, payable in foreign currency, the service burden of which has been a constant drain on the economy. Pakistan's infrastructural and energy future has been tied with the hands of the Chinese, and the functionalities of contracting, equipment, maintenance and financing is not something that can be changed, very easily. The strategic proximity CPEC entails has also provided China with a direct interest in Pakistan's domestic stability and policies, including its projects and citizens, with Chinese concerns about the security of their projects and nationals, especially in Balochistan, where Baloch insurgency is active and the southern part of the CPEC passes through. The short answer is that for a long time now the relationship has been mutually dependent, with an increasing impact on domestic governance in Pakistan and hard to disengage.

So the strategic rationale behind the partnership for Pakistan is double-edged. The CPEC and the overall partnership improve Pakistan's strategic position vis-à-vis India, further solidifying the entente that now makes it difficult for India to develop a strategy against Pakistan, and give an economic boost that helps Pakistan minimize its dependence on western and Gulf funding. However, in the overall context of U.S.-China rivalry, the partnership limits Pakistan's choices since it clearly commits Pakistan to the rising power at a time when the established power wants allies against China. This relationship as a means of strengthening its security autonomy vis-à-vis India undermines its desire for strategic autonomy vis-à-vis the great powers in general. This is the core contradiction of Pakistani policy towards China and will not be resolvable within the parameters of the relation.

Pakistan–U.S. Relations

The partnership has entered a structural downward trend in the modern era, due to two developments that are converging. The first is the American pullout from Afghanistan – the main reason for the operation of the partnership. As the American troops withdrew from the region, Pakistan's significance as a logistical supply route and a possible partner in combating terrorism came to be undermined, and so did the treaty-like nature of relations between the two countries. The second, and more momentous, is the American strategic opening up of India as a counterweight to China (Markey, 2013). This is the structural turning point of Pakistan's situation. America has essentially excluded India's adversary Pakistan while packing in Quad, defence deals and tech transfer deals and made India a strategic partner. This is strategically unacceptable for Pakistan, as it means its far-flung ally, is becoming its neighbour's ally and this certainly strengthened Pakistan's China pivot.

In this way, the deterioration of the Pakistan-U.S. ties should not be viewed as merely a result of some amateurish diplomacy but instead as a result of the U.S.-China competition as a whole.

Enmeshed in the American side of this competition, India has ruled out balanced relations between Washington and Beijing that Pakistan's autonomy strategy calls for. With one of the powers aligning with Pakistan's major adversary, Pakistan does not have the luxury of playing Santa between the two powers. This is the stark truth of the situation that Pakistan's balancing and hedging policies have to be tested.

Pakistan's Balancing Strategy

Some analysts have misinterpreted Pakistan's balancing behaviour by using the framework of the Southeast Asian states where they ask the questions that whether Pakistan balances against China or balance against the United States? This framing takes the wrong idea of Pakistan's act of 'balancing'. According to Walt's (1987) balance of threat theory, states balance against the most threatening state and for Pakistan, its adversary is not one distant great power, but rather the other, i.e., India. Using the above uniqueness of the situation, it can be concluded that the location of India, its conventional and nuclear strength, the history of war with Pakistan and its attitude of hostility makes it the inevitable reference point of Pakistan's existence. In fact, Pakistan is on a different balance vis-à-vis India and the entire Pakistan strategic posture and balance with both great powers is based on this. This is the essential ingredient in explaining the apparent contradictions in the behavior of Pakistan.

From the perspective of foreign policy, the bedrock change of the modern era is Pakistan's external balancing from one that involves both U.S. and China to one that is almost exclusively directed toward China, which stems from the logic of structure outlined above. Pakistan, as long as the United States had an interest in engaging Pakistan or keeping some kind of equidistance in dealing with the India–Pakistan dyad, they could play this balancing game and get some support from both. With the United States on India's side, the American connection for the balancing of India broke down and Pakistan's external balancing shrank to its remaining great power ally. That is not a free choice as the autonomy literature would imagine but it is a narrowing of options, which is structurally compelled. The reason is that Pakistan balances against India (via China), as otherwise it would have its balancing partner on the other side.

The critical point of analysis is that Pakistan's balancing strategy, being coherent in the energy of its strategy on the state of India, but has the inadvertent effect of reducing Pakistan's autonomy with regards the regional balancing imperative. Pakistan has thus geared its entire strategic posture to the direction of balancing India, and it now has to place its sole dependence on China to achieve this balance in the regional dimension. The balance against India is paid for by relying on China. The compromise is logical from the point of view of security in the short term, and is problematic from the perspective of autonomy, the core issue of the present study, and it sets up the tension that Pakistan's hedging strategy tries – with varying degrees of success to resolve.

Pakistan's Hedging Strategy

The initial tool of Pakistan hedging is economic diversification which involves attaining multi-source of finance, investment and trade other than China. This is most evident in Pakistan's ongoing dependence on the International Monetary Fund. The recurrent IMF programmes, which are financed mostly by the United States and western dominated institutions, have acted as a counterweight to Chinese financing, by offering balance of payment facilities and some fiscal credibility, which is not present in Chinese bilateral terms. So paradoxically, the economic ties between Pakistan and Western sponsored financial architecture remain alive though the military-strategic ties with the West have weakened; the IMF tie serves as a hedging measure thus leaving a Western door open. But this takes two forms: the first is IMF conditionality, which puts its own brakes on Pakistani policies (Vreeland, 2003); the second is the periodic necessity for bailouts, which is itself a measure of the fragility that halves Pakistan's room for manoeuvre.

Overall, Pakistan's hedging strategy is both real and purposive and with a degree of success. It has spread the financing base of Pakistan, maintained good relations among conflicting camps, and maintained degree of flexibility in diplomacy. However, the main analytical finding of this section is that, Pakistan's hedging activities are not enough to balance the structural dependency concentration. The hedging measures palliative and supplementary, manage only the symptoms of dependency and do not change the basic structure of dependency. The Gulf states offer temporary financial succour but not a development model; the IMF offers liquidity at the cost of conditionality; the middle-power partnerships offer a diplomatic angle – but nothing strategic to replace the Chinese relationship. None of these hedging vectors stand anywhere close to the extent and/or intensity of dependency on China that CPEC has created. In sum, Pakistan's hedging takes place on the edge of its unchanging strategic stance. It helps to smooth the rough edges of dependency without breaking it apart.

Domestic Constraints

The first and most important limitation in the country is fragility of the economic system in Pakistan. Pakistan historically has followed an unsustainable and unbalanced path: periods of growth driven by increased consumption often followed by borrowing from abroad and remittance inflows are followed by sudden and significant balance of payment constraints, forcing compression. Lack of a broad based and elastic export sector focused on low value added goods like textiles, a state that has been poor at getting its own society to invest, and a chronically low tax-to-GDP ratio, are also symptoms of a state that has been persistently unable to extract resources from its own society (Lieven, 2011). This is a question of structure and is directly related to autonomy. The state which is unable to fund its own development on the basis of its own resources must resort to external finance and it is here that the search for external finance is the main route of dependency. One thing is clear that the dependence of Pakistani economy on Chinese loans/funds under CPEC and Gulf parallel payment deposits and on International Monetary Fund (IMF) programmes is not a step in isolation, rather it is a manifestation of one root cause, which is an economy unable to function on its own, unable to be self-reliant.

The second domestic limitation, which is closely linked to the former, is fiscal and debt distress. Today, debt obligations swallow a considerable part of Pakistan's foreign exchange earnings, and leave the government perpetually short of external resources to cover its import bill along with repayment of debts. In Pakistan, the fiscal imprint of the balance of payments crisis is that it happens again and again, with the IMF being called into play. Such debt distress and its implications on strategic autonomy are quite deep and have various effects. In the most straightforward sense a state in chronic need of rollovers and bailouts is a state whose policy decisions are open for reviewing and approval by its creditors. The strings that the IMF's programmes impose on countries — in this case the fiscal, subsidy and exchange-rate measures are a direct expression of external preference, and a sacrifice of economic-policy autonomy, that are the cost of solvency (Vreeland, 2003). There are, of course, less obvious but more fundamental impacts, in that the debt burden for the financial loans from China for CPEC puts a pressure on Beijing to be consulted on fiscal policy decisions made by Pakistan (Small, 2015). The transmission, from domestic fiscal weakness to external strategic constraint, occurs through debt—in both Western-institutional and Chinese forms. A state which has so much debt at so many places can't refuse to anybody.

External Constraints

The first is an external constraint in the form of the change in character of pressures from the United States. Even at the peak of America's engagement, Pakistanis resented it but it was also during these times that Americans invested in the relationship (assisted, attended, and stake in Pakistan's stability). It's because the modern type of American pressure isn't tied to such investment that it's more corrosive. But the United States is no longer competing for Pakistan's allegiance, after removing itself from Afghanistan and aligning itself with India; and as a result engagement is now more of a punitive than an inducement sort, whether in the form of 'conditionality' applied to financial flows, or a form of diplomatic isolation that comes from the diminished strategic value of Pakistan or a form of leverage that the United States has over the international financial institutions that Pakistan relies on. The caveat here is very subtle, but quite important. The US is no longer able to provide Pakistan with the resources or the strategic relationship which might balance China, but the US does have enough influence ~ not only in the IMF but also into Pakistan's access to the western markets and capital ~ to impose costs on Pakistan and to create difficulties for Pakistan in making choices. Pakistan is thus facing a foreign power which can bind it without enticing it – which is worse than either of two conditions from the perspective of autonomy – being bound or being lured into binding partnerships.

The other outside factor—which may seem counterintuitive—is related to China, Pakistan's main ally. CPEC partnership is getting deep, on one side strengthening Pakistan to counter India and on the other hand giving rise to certain expectations of the Chinese which is limiting the autonomy of Pakistan. However, Beijing's significant presence of financial involvement in CPEC brings up a serious and legitimate question of the security of its nationals and CPEC projects especially regarding the insurgency in Balochistan and general weakness of Pakistan's domestic

security (Small, 2015). In terms of Chinese concern this would translate to their expectations in regard to Pakistan's security policies, its military expenditure on the defence of the security corridor and how it manages the areas through which the corridor passes. Apart from the security issues, the granting of loans by China also creates an expectation in the minds of China that Pakistan will take serious care of its fiscal policy and prefer Chinese loans. But the important analytical issue to be noted isn't that these expectations do not amount to direct coercion, it is that hanging on Chinese largesse, it's not that easy for Pakistan to say "no" to these expectations. No debtor lightly can disregard the preferences of a creditor upon whom the debtor's growth depends. Unlike the United States, which has pressured Pakistan, China does not need to do so since the nature of the relationship provides a way for Pakistan to make choices that are already in line with China's wishes.

Another external constraint is the India factor; it is imbued with all the other factors which get magnified in its influence. The most significant change in Pakistan's external surroundings is its Asian Champion's rise – economic, military, and political and diplomatic – and its newfound convergence with security partner USA (Markey, 2013). There are multiple ways in which the constraint works. India's weight expands the power gap that Pakistan has to deal with, more resources have to be dedicated to its security and a greater reliance on the Chinese to do this. India's association with the U.S. has precluded (as has been proven) great power balance. The relative importance of Pakistan on the diplomatic forums gets lowered with the rise of India's diplomatic stature, leaving Pakistan to lose its autonomy in the diplomatic aspect. The India issue is not just an 'along with other things' sort of an outside threat; it is a condition, a principle of the structuration of Pakistan's threat perceptions, and an external force to all the other forces. India's existence after all, limits Pakistan's autonomy; it is India, which makes Pakistan dependent on China and it is China, which makes Pakistan see the need to balance India. Thus, the India factor is the keystone of the whole external constraint structure.

Analysis

Plotting Pakistan on the continuum of autonomy, the result is a solid verdict. Yet, Pakistan has some autonomy to maneuver its way in the confined area of its survival, thanks to its nuclear deterrent and some diplomatic autonomy through hedging. Thus, in more important and far-reaching aspects of its economic and strategic development course, its autonomy is heavily restricted, limited by its narrowly defined realm of dependence that it cannot escape, by the lack of any balancing option and its subordination in its region's security strategy. The actions of Pakistan (in the context of this governing hypothesis) can, rather be described in terms of managed dependency, and not true strategic autonomy. It conducts itself within the ceremonies of autonomy; it screens from seeing its relations, it plies with a variety of partners, it preaches about balance, it delicates against "choosing," and so on, yet the essence of autonomy—as manifested in the power to alter its fundamental orientations—has largely vanished.

The final part of the hypothesis, suggesting that a managed dependency, rather than real independence, would be a better description of Pakistan's behaviour, is confirmed by the fact that

the components are confirmed. Pakistan does the alms of autonomy and has given up its essence in the important areas. The hypothesis is thus supported completely. We note here the significance of this result in the literature as well. The interpretation of Pakistan as a 'most likely' case for secondary state autonomy in the circumstances of being a 'strategic state' by virtue of its nuclear weapons, its strategic geographic location and its long experience of strategic manoeuvre, hence the finding that even Pakistan's autonomy is so severely constrained seems to bear an implication beyond the case itself. The obverse of this disciplinary mechanism is the effect of a state structure which can't be avoided by the weaker states – which makes the expectations of the more optimistic literature of "hedging" at best questionable, and the neorealist argument that capabilities distribution restricts choices of weaker states should receive strong support (Waltz, 1979). Thus the case in Pakistan supports the structural approach in the context of this empirical study and at the same time outlines the role of agency as a 'genuine' one, but with limitations it cannot cross.

Policy Recommendations

The first and basic one is about domestic basis. The strongest and the only real strengthening of their autonomy lies in the strengthening of this foundation because the deepest source of constraining autonomy of Pakistan is its weakness in the economic and institutional dimensions. If there be a Pakistan, which got development at the hands of its own resources, which was able to broaden its export base and increase its capability to extract revenue, which achieved fiscal sustainability and was less dependent on bailouts from outside Pakistan, then by that very fact it would increase its strategic autonomy, as the dependency would be less, through which external constraint enters. This advice is not "run for the hills and take cover" but one of foundation laying: while the structural setting may not be changed, the weaknesses in Pakistan's situation, and thus its susceptibility to the environment, may be changed in principle.

The second recommendation has to do with the handling of the Chinese connection. Neither would the uncritical course of further courting China nor the impractical and self-damaging option of seeking a break be befitting of Pakistan's most valuable strategic asset: the strategic partnership with China. On a practical level, this means trying to make sure that the CPEC and related loans are used for productive economic activity in Pakistan as opposed to adding more obligations on the balance sheet, and ensuring that within the CPEC, as much Pakistani policy space as possible is maintained consistent with their dependence, and that it is sustainable in the interest of the Pakistani economy. The focus is not to undermine an enduring and worthwhile partnership but to make sure that the depth adds to the reinforcement instead of more entrapment of Pakistan.

The final recommendation deals with strategic management of the India relationship which is the fulcrum of the whole constraints' arena. Since Pakistan's reliance on China comes from its need to balance India, the decreasing intensity of the India threat, through the stabilisation of the bilateral relationship, which decreases the risk of a conflict between the two, would lead to relaxation in the balancing imperative and thus soften Pakistan's reliance on China. Application

of this recommendation is the most challenging of all the suggestions to be put into practice, due to the nature of the India–Pakistan rivalry and the limitations that a Government may face in realising its pursuits of accommodation. In principle, however, it is also the recommendation that has the highest potential for increasing the autonomy of Pakistan as it tries to get out of the straitjacket created by the other recommendations. Indeed, even a very limited and cautious stabilisation process of the relationship with India, without any illusion, would serve to enlarge the strategic autonomy of Pakistan much more than all the manoeuvre or gyrations in the great power coordinates would do, since it would relieve the security dilemma against which Pakistan's autonomy is now set.

Conclusion

The main idea is fully expressed with accuracy. Pakistan is indeed a true and a strategic state with a determined and genuine approach towards achieving strategic autonomy as a middle power state, and implements a range of balancing and hedging options for itself. But the independence it can achieve is structurally limited – it has a legitimate independence, albeit confined within the limited sphere of survival, and it has real independence but its maneuverability around the diplomatic sphere is being increasingly curtailed, and it is extremely limited in the economic and strategic areas which will define its future course. This is not the fault of any contingencies in the craftsmanship of the Pakistani state, but a result of a mutually reinforcing framework of domestic, external and regional constraint in an international environment in which great-power rivalry that is growing in intensity is actually reducing the room for manoeuvre of secondary states.

The impact is more than just in Pakistan. In the literature on the hedging theory, the agency dimension is emphasised (Kuik, 2016), but as Pakistan's history shows, this dimension is real but not unlimited, and as great power relations grow more competitive and scope for strategic ambiguities decrease, the agency will be constrained. The Pakistani case is thus a cautionary example of the dilemmas weaker states find themselves in when they look into the promises of competition between great powers at the same time, one great power is entrenching its ally's capability in relation to their main enemy and another great power is maintaining their dependence. Strategic autonomy is neither a mirage in Pakistan's case nor is it the kind of independence that its rhetoric boasts of. A limited and conditionally autonomous autonomy under a set of limits under which statecraft can intervene and help make smaller but cannot change and that boundedness is the essential truth behind Pakistan's role in contest between the U.S. and China.

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