

The China Factor in Pakistan's Geo-economic Tilt

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journals.sagepub.com/home/isq**Muhammad Jahanzaib¹ and Zahid Shahab Ahmed^{2,3}** 

Abstract

In 1947, the establishment of Pakistan was accompanied by a profound security dilemma, particularly concerning its relationship with India, a dynamic that continues to significantly influence its foreign policy trajectory. Historically, Pakistan's focus on state security has driven its alliances, notably with the United States and, more recently, with China. The dual objectives of achieving security through economic development have become increasingly pronounced in the context of Pakistan's deepening partnership with China, especially as evidenced by the substantial investments made in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Since the inception of CPEC in 2015, Pakistan has actively sought to leverage this initiative to provide landlocked Central Asian Republics with critical access to maritime routes via the Gwadar Port. Confronted with numerous challenges, including a severe economic crisis, Islamabad is progressively recognizing the necessity of prioritizing geo-economics over traditional geopolitical considerations. This pivot aims to capitalize on its strategic location to foster economic growth through enhanced trade and connectivity, which is largely dependent on the partnership with China. This study undertakes an in-depth analysis of archival data from both primary and secondary sources to explore this phenomenon. This study argues that Pakistan's foreign policy increasingly reflects an embrace of geo-economics, driven by a combination of domestic factors and China's pronounced emphasis on the geo-economic potential of CPEC. While Pakistan asserts a commitment to prioritizing geo-economics, its relationship with China remains influenced by enduring geostrategic considerations, particularly in relation to India.

Keywords

Pakistan, foreign policy, geo-economics, geopolitics, China

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Introduction

Pakistan's foreign policy is shaped by a range of factors, including ideational factors, strategic considerations, domestic politics, regional and global trends. Historically, Pakistan's foreign policy was driven primarily by geo-strategic considerations, but the state also aimed to achieve its security through economic development (Ahmed & Akbarzadeh, 2023). By forging cooperation with many countries, for example, China and the United States, Pakistan has been trying to enhance its economic development and security vis-à-vis India. As national interests are not stagnant, so is the case of foreign policy drivers that transform over time. While India remains a key threat to state security, Pakistan suffers from multiple crises including the economic meltdown. While Jaspal (2022) claims that geo-economics has become a key feature of Pakistan's foreign policy since the start of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in 2015, there is no empirical study available to examine how and why geo-economics has become a key goal of Pakistan's foreign policy. Focusing on security and economic development, Pakistan's foreign policy now emphasizes on leveraging its geographical location by being a part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that aims to revive the ancient Silk Road (Shah, 2020). Therefore, this research is timely to understand how and why geo-economics has gained prominence in Pakistan's foreign policy since CPEC's initiation and the degree to which this new direction is influenced by Pakistan's relationship with China.

For several decades, Islamabad aims to achieve greater connectivity with energy-rich Central Asia and now feels that this goal is more achievable because of the BRI. Before BRI, infrastructural constraints and geopolitical tensions hindered such ambitions. The BRI, with its focus on infrastructure development, trade connectivity and regional cooperation, presents a strategic shift. The initiative includes significant investments in rail, road and energy projects across Central Asia, facilitating access to the region's abundant energy resources and expanding regional markets (Manish & Behera, 2021). Furthermore, enhanced information and communications technology (ICT) connectivity within the BRI framework addresses previous challenges related to infrastructure deficits, promoting economic integration and development goals (Kunavut et al., 2018). Thus, the BRI's infrastructure and technological advancements present a stark contrast to the pre-BRI era, offering a tangible pathway for Pakistan to achieve greater connectivity with Central Asia. Hence, there was a greater emphasis on geo-economics at the heart of Pakistan's first National Security Policy (NSP) and its 'Vision Central Asia' policy, which was produced in 2015 (GOP, 2022; MOFA, 2022a).

Geo-economics has gained popularity, although there is not a consensus on what it means. First, it is often viewed in connection to geopolitics and therefore regarded as the application of economic instruments to further geopolitical goals. Second, geo-economics is viewed as a strategy involving the use of economic tools of statecraft and geography to benefit through international economic

cooperation (Hussain, 2022). Geo-economics is generally understood to be the interaction of international economics, geopolitics and strategy. Scholars therefore view geopolitics and geo-economics as interrelated concepts (Luttwak, 1990; Scholvin & Wigell, 2018); both concepts are interdependent and can influence each other, for example, the nexus between the two is noticeable through economic sanctions imposed on any country. Sanctions are often used as a tool of geopolitical pressure, but they can also have a significant impact on the geo-economic landscape through restrictions on trade and financial transactions. Another example of the correlation between geopolitics and geo-economics can be seen in strategic infrastructure projects by some countries (Luttwak, 1990). The construction of transportation infrastructure, such as highways, railroads and ports, can have both geopolitical and geo-economic implications. As such projects can enhance a country's connectivity and competitiveness, but they can also be used for expanding geopolitical influence. The BRI is a prime example of strategic infrastructure projects that have both geopolitical and geo-economic implications (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2022). The United States' 'pivot to Asia' is another example of how geopolitics and geo-economics are intertwined as Washington aims to gain more influence in the Asia-Pacific (Forough, 2022). Similarly, India's 'Neighborhood First Policy' is influenced by its geo-economic and geopolitical goals because India wishes to enhance its economic relations with its immediate neighbors in South and Southeast Asia to counter China's influence that has grown significantly since the start of the BRI in 2013 (Aryal, 2021; Pattanaik, 2022).

As far as the erstwhile literature on Pakistan's foreign policy/affairs is concerned, most of it focuses on India and pending disputes like Jammu and Kashmir (Ahmed & Bhatnagar, 2007; Ahmed et al, 2019; Jan & Ahmed, 2022). The focus on India is evident even through the scholarship that has focused on Pakistan's policy towards and role in international and regional organizations, such as the United Nations, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) (Ahmed & Bhatnagar, 2008; Ahmed et al., 2019; Jan & Ahmed, 2022) exists. Pakistan has long viewed India as a major security threat, and this has influenced its foreign policy in several ways, including its alliances with other countries and its approach to issues such as nuclear weapons and terrorism (Sattar, 2019). Owing to its animosity with India, Pakistan has often sought relations with powerful countries, for example, the United States. The relationship with the United States has also been motivated by Pakistan's dual national interests of economic development and military modernization (Amin, 2010). Mostly the literature has focused on Pakistan's relations with some countries and not on how some factors, such as ideational, economic and political, shape the country's foreign policy. A recent study focusing on ideological influence on Pakistan's relations in the Muslim world argues, 'pan-Islamism has been pragmatically used by Pakistan, especially within the OIC [Organization of Islamic Cooperation], for not just ideological reasons but also for material and diplomatic gains' (Ahmed & Akbarzadeh, 2023, p. 1). This study aims to improve an understanding of Pakistan's foreign policy by focusing on

how its domestic dynamics, such as the economic meltdown, and relations with China are responsible for a tilt towards geo-economics.

Pakistan's foreign policy has been the subject of extensive academic and policy research. The literature argues that Pakistan's foreign policy is driven by a complex interplay of internal and external factors, including regional and global power dynamics, domestic politics, economic interests and security concerns. A key driver of Pakistan's foreign policy is its geopolitical location as it is at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East. The strategic significance and Pakistan's national interests have often pushed it towards alliances with the United States, for example, during the Afghan-Soviet War, and currently with China through CPEC (Rana, 2022a). But these relations have not only been influenced by geostrategic and geopolitical dynamics as Pakistan has been trying to achieve its other key national interests, such as economic development, through trade, investment and energy security. Another important driver of Pakistan's foreign policy is its domestic political landscape. The military has traditionally played a dominant role in shaping Pakistan's foreign policy, particularly in relation to security and defence matters (Smith, 2020). However, civilian governments have also sought to shape Pakistan's foreign policy agenda, particularly through economic diplomacy and regional cooperation (Islam & Ejaz, 2022). Lastly, security concerns are a key driver of Pakistan's foreign policy, particularly regarding relations with India and Afghanistan. As Ahmed and Bhatnagar (2007) argue, Pakistan's foreign policy has been shaped by its security concerns, which have been largely driven by its hostile relations with India and instability in neighboring Afghanistan.

Analysis in this study is based on archival data comprising primary and secondary sources. In terms of primary data, this research relies on proceedings of Pakistan's National Parliament, media briefings from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), speeches by relevant officials, and civil and military elites. As this study is particularly interested in China's influence on Pakistan's foreign policy, our data cover the period from the start of CPEC in 2015–2023. Empirical data and official claims serve as two critical pillars for analyzing the shift in Pakistan's foreign policy towards a geo-economics orientation. While official claims provide insight into the government's stated priorities and intentions, empirical data offer a ground to assess the actual implementation and outcomes of these policies. As is clear from the scope of this research, it does not focus on developments before the start of CPEC or 2015. This is a research limitation as geo-economics would have been an influential factor in Pakistan's foreign policy prior to that. We are making no claim that CPEC has compelled Pakistan to focus on geo-economics, but it certainly has led to Islamabad prioritizing geo-economics. Another limitation is due to the nature of data as we rely on official sources, for instance, speeches and press releases, whereby officials and policymakers often say things that might not represent the official policy of the state. We tackle this challenge through triangulation by looking at multiple sources.

To examine the shift in Pakistan's foreign policy towards a geo-economics orientation, this article employs a multi-dimensional framework that integrates qualitative analysis of policy documents, official statements and tangible outcomes

of economic diplomacy. This framework allows us to distinguish actions and policy choices that are distinctly geo-economics-oriented from those driven primarily by traditional geopolitical considerations. The key indicators of this framework include (a) Examination of Pakistan's national policy documents, such as the NSP and Vision Central Asia policy, which explicitly articulate the prioritization of economic security and regional connectivity. This analysis helps identify stated objectives that emphasize economic development, infrastructure projects and trade connectivity as central to Pakistan's foreign policy strategy; (b) Analysis of public statements by key Pakistani officials and diplomatic engagements that emphasize economic cooperation, investment and infrastructure development projects, particularly those related to CPEC. Such statements and engagements serve as indicators of a strategic emphasis on geo-economics; and (c) Evaluation of tangible outcomes of economic diplomacy, including trade agreements, foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows, infrastructure development projects and regional connectivity initiatives. This component assesses the practical realization of geo-economics-oriented policies and their impact on Pakistan's foreign relations and economic landscape. By employing this framework, this study can discern patterns and policy choices that qualify as geo-economics-oriented based on their focus on leveraging economic tools for geopolitical gains, enhancing economic security and prioritizing economic over military means in achieving foreign policy objectives. This approach distinguishes geo-economics from traditional geopolitics, which has historically emphasized military and strategic dominance.

This article begins with an overview of Pakistan's foreign policy since 1947. This follows the analysis of how various factors influence Pakistan's foreign policy. Then this research moves to the crux of this article by examining how Pakistan's relationship with China and partnership under the BRI have influenced Pakistan's increasing preference for geo-economics in its foreign policy.

Historical Perspective

Since its founding in 1947, Pakistan's foreign policy has undergone significant changes. Under various civil and military governments, a few variables, such as its strategic position, security concerns, economic interests and ideological commitments, have influenced its foreign policy and foreign relations. Pakistan's foreign policy has significantly transformed in recent years to one of multi-alignment and a stronger emphasis on economic interests with a focus on the country's location. The state has worked to maintain a balance in its relations with the United States, China and other major countries. It has also emerged as a vital participant in regional economic projects, such as the BRI, which calls for China to use CPEC to improve connectivity with Central Asia. Pakistan continues to prioritize more interaction with the Ummah (Muslim community) despite being originally dismayed by the Muslim world's cool reception to its pan-Islamism (Ahmed & Akbarzadeh, 2023).

Early on, Pakistan's partnership with the United States helped to form its foreign policy as it looked to strengthen its security to resolve its India-related problems. Pakistan joined the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). Because of that, Pakistan received economic and military assistance from the United States, which aided in the development of its military infrastructure and capabilities. During this time, Pakistan's foreign policy was firmly pro-Western with a heavy emphasis on state security (Sattar, 2019). From 1958 to 1971, Pakistan's foreign policy was influenced by both internal and external influences, such as its military doctrines, Cold War dynamics and concerns about regional security. It was distinguished by close ties with the United States for its military modernization and economic growth. Pakistan maintained cordial relations with its major neighbor, China, despite being entangled in a security partnership with the United States (Janjua, 2021).

From 1971 to 1979, Pakistan's foreign policy underwent a significant shift away from the West and towards the Ummah. This was mainly caused by Pakistan's disintegration in 1971, after which Islamabad felt that the West was not a trustworthy partner; therefore, Pakistan withdrew from SEATO (Ahmed & Akbarzadeh, 2023). This period was marked by the rise of pan-Islamism and the emergence of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) (Ahmed & Akbarzadeh, 2023). The separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971 served as a significant catalyst for the resurgence of pan-Islamism in Islamabad. Then, Pakistan's emphasis on pan-Islamism was more strategic than ideological, as it aimed to broaden the country's economic and financial prospects and capitalize on the opportunities available in Saudi Arabia and other Arab states (Ahmed & Akbarzadeh, 2023).

Pakistan's relationship with the United States was strained until the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Before that, Pakistan was under US sanctions because of its nuclear program, which was launched by the Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto government during 1973–1977 (Taliaferro, 2019). US-Pakistan relations were further strained by the military takeover in Pakistan in 1977. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 had a significant impact on Pakistan's foreign policy, as the country once again became a key ally of the United States—this time to defeat the Soviet troops in Afghanistan. This period was marked by the militarization of Pakistan's foreign policy, with a focus on security and regional stability. Pakistan also sought to balance its relations with different actors in the region, including China and the Muslim world (Amin, 2010). To address its security challenges, Pakistan pursued a policy of strategic depth, seeking to establish friendly government in Afghanistan to counterbalance India. Pakistan's foreign policy from 1988 to 1999 was shaped by a complex blend of pragmatic realism and geopolitical manoeuvring, following the democratization process after General Zia-ul-Haq's regime and a period of economic growth. After Zia-ul-Haq's death in 1988, Pakistan transitioned to civilian rule, which led to the emergence of two alternating political governments: the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), both of which influenced the direction of the country's foreign policy in distinct ways (Sattar, 2005). In 1988, under the

PPP government led by Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto (1988–1990), Pakistan initiated talks with India to resolve the Kashmir dispute, signalling a policy of normalization with its eastern neighbor. However, these talks stalled due to domestic political turmoil and India's reluctance to compromise on Kashmir. During her second term (1993–1996), Bhutto continued to emphasize improving relations with the United States and Western countries, aligning Pakistan's foreign policy with global powers (Sattar, 2005). After the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1989, Pakistan, under both PPP and PML-N governments, pursued efforts for a political settlement in Afghanistan, aiming to establish a friendly regime in Kabul. This culminated in Pakistan's recognition and support of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, reflecting Islamabad's strategic desire to have an allied government in its western neighbor.

The PML-N government, led by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif during two non-consecutive terms (1990–1993 and 1997–1999), focused on enhancing relations with neighboring Muslim countries, including Iran, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, while maintaining ties with China. Sharif also prioritized regional economic cooperation, particularly through the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which was established in 1985 to promote economic collaboration. The PPP and PML-N governments, despite their differing foreign policy priorities, shared a broader goal of improving Pakistan's economic and strategic position in the region (Sattar, 2005). However, a major turning point in Pakistan's foreign relations came in May 1998, when Pakistan conducted nuclear tests in response to India's nuclear tests earlier that month. This decision, which demonstrated Pakistan's nuclear capabilities, strained its relationship with the United States, leading to the imposition of economic sanctions on both India and Pakistan by Washington. Despite these challenges, Pakistan continued to navigate its geopolitical landscape through a mixture of regional engagement and international diplomacy.

During General Pervez Musharraf's military rule from 1999 to 2008, Pakistan's foreign policy was significantly shaped by its alliance with the United States in the War on Terror. As a key non-NATO ally, Pakistan's close partnership with the United States profoundly impacted its diplomatic relations, particularly with neighboring India and Afghanistan (Tariq, 2019). While the relationship with India experienced periods of heightened tension, there were also moments of rapprochement, such as the Agra Summit in 2001. Although the summit did not yield a lasting breakthrough, for example, through an agreement, efforts to engage diplomatically continued, culminating in the initiation of the Composite Dialogue process in 2004 (Sattar, 2019). Also, while aligning with the United States in combating the Taliban, the Musharraf government pursued a policy of strategic depth in Afghanistan to secure Pakistan's long-term interests in any post-conflict settlement. This policy reflected Islamabad's desire for a friendly government in Kabul to mitigate security threats along its western border.

The country's foreign policy has always been heavily influenced by relations with the United States, particularly during the Cold War and the War on Terror. Despite Pakistan's historical status as a crucial ally of the United States, their relationship has experienced tension and mistrust at times. This has occurred for

several reasons, including divergent views on regional security, nuclear proliferation and human rights. Interactions with the Islamic world have had a big impact on Pakistan's foreign policy. Due to its ties with the United States and Saudi Arabia, Pakistan has not been able to fully grasp the potential of its connections with Iran (Ahmed & Akbarzadeh, 2018). This shows that the government has not been able to completely control its foreign policy. The country has sought to foster Muslim unity and cooperation, especially considering Israel and India's threats. Pakistan currently takes an active role in the OIC and lends support to Muslim liberation movements all over the world. In its interactions with different regional players like China and the Soviet Union (now Russia), Pakistan has also tried to keep things in balance. As its relationship with the United States faces challenges, for example, because of Washington's growing relations with India, Islamabad has gradually shifted towards hedging, which is noticeable through its relations with both the United States and China. In this regard, Siddiqi argues that 'Pakistan hedging strategy necessitates the avoidance of binaries in international politics, prioritization of economic gains and domestic political stability' (Siddiqi, 2022, p. 1).

Drivers of Pakistan's Foreign Policy

Pakistan's foreign policy is shaped by a confluence of historical, geopolitical and geo-economic drivers that reflect its strategic imperatives and national interests. These drivers can be categorized into three primary domains: security concerns, economic cooperation and regional dynamics.

Facing a security dilemma in connection to India since 1947, security has been central to Pakistan's foreign policy. The quest for strategic depth and the desire to maintain a balance of power in South Asia have significantly influenced Pakistan's alliances and partnerships (Tellis, 2008). Moreover, security dynamics in Afghanistan and the broader 'War on Terror' have also shaped Pakistan's foreign policy decisions, particularly its strategic ties with the United States (Fair, 2014). As a lower-middle income country, state security and economic development have been twin objectives for Pakistan as it has often viewed its economic security as crucial for increasing its traditional security (Ahmed & Akbarzadeh, 2023).

In recent years, Pakistan's foreign policy has increasingly incorporated geo-economic considerations, with economic development and connectivity emerging as pivotal drivers. CPEC epitomizes this shift, aiming to enhance infrastructure, energy cooperation and trade routes as a means to bolster economic growth and regional integration (Small, 2015). This geo-economics orientation seeks to leverage Pakistan's strategic geographic location to become a hub for regional connectivity and commerce. Pakistan's foreign policy is also influenced by its relationships with neighboring countries and regional powers. The dynamics of South Asian politics, particularly relations with India, Afghanistan and Iran, play a crucial role. Also, Pakistan's efforts to engage with Central Asian Republics and the Gulf states reflect a strategic intent to expand its economic and strategic depth.

The evolving partnership with China and the nuanced relationship with the United States further underscore the impact of regional and global power dynamics on Pakistan's foreign policy (Small, 2015). By understanding these drivers, it becomes evident how Pakistan's foreign policy is navigating the interplay between traditional security concerns and emerging geo-economic opportunities. This strategic recalibration aims to position Pakistan favourably within the regional and global geopolitical landscape while pursuing economic development and stability.

Geopolitics versus Geo-economics

The nuanced relationship between geo-economics and geopolitics in Pakistan's foreign policy landscape reflects a strategic blend of economic initiatives with geopolitical objectives. This intersection is particularly evident in how Pakistan leverages its geographical location, economic partnerships and infrastructure projects to navigate regional power dynamics and safeguard national interests (Cohen, 2011). The geo-economic strategies, particularly through CPEC, underscore Pakistan's attempt to translate its geopolitical significance into tangible economic gains, enhancing its regional influence and economic stability (Small, 2015).

Considering that geo-economics refers to the use of economic tools and instruments to achieve geopolitical objectives (Luttwak, 1990; Scholvin & Wigell, 2018), this article also aims to see how the two concepts are intertwined in Pakistan's foreign policy. In Pakistan, the nexus between geo-economics and geopolitics is quite evident. Pakistan is strategically located which makes it significant in terms of geo-economics and geopolitics in South and Central Asia. These dynamics play a role in Pakistan's foreign policy. According to Pakistan's MOFA, the country's geo-economic policy aims to utilize Pakistan's geostrategic location for regional connectivity, trade and attract foreign investment (MOFA, 2016). In another statement, MOFA claims that Pakistan's geo-economic objectives are to exploit its potential as a land and sea corridor linking South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East (MOFA, 2022b). As this is a shift since the start of CPEC, Salman (2016) claims that CPEC is a factor in Pakistan's geo-economic strategy. The development of the 'Vision Central Asia' policy by the MOFA also coincided with CPEC. The primary aim of this policy is to expand Pakistan's economic and political relations with CARs through trade and connectivity (MOFA, 2022a).

Since the implementation of this policy (Vision Central Asia) and CPEC, there have been numerous high-level meetings between the officials of CARs and Pakistan, and in those meetings, Pakistan has not only been promoting CPEC, especially the Gwadar Port, but also its geo-economic potential. After the Gwadar Port's operationalization in 2021, Pakistan has frequently made offers to CARs in terms of their seaport connectivity. Makhdoom Syed Murtaza Mehmood, Pakistan's Federal Minister for Industry, stated in 2022 that Pakistan was prepared to sell Kazakh goods to Gulf states via the Gwadar Port. Mehmood made this statement

during a meeting with Serik Zhumangarin, Kazakhstan's Minister of Commerce and Integration, in Astana (*The Astana Times*, 2022). Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, Pakistan's then foreign minister, travelled to Kazakhstan in July 2022. Zardari discussed Pakistan's 'Vision Central Asia' policy during this visit. While Pakistani authorities frequently refrain from referring to CARs as landlocked in such talks, Zardari did not. He [Zardari] highlighted Pakistan's aim to serve as a regional commerce hub by offering the quickest and most cost-effective transit route to its seaports to landlocked Central Asian Republics, according to a press release from Pakistan's MOFA (MOFA, 2022a). A trade pact akin to the one Pakistan has with Uzbekistan is also signed by Kazakhstan and Pakistan in 2023. This gives Kazakhstan the chance to conduct business through important seaports in Pakistan, such as the Gwadar Port (Kundi, 2023).

The ongoing emphasis on geo-economics is also reflected in Pakistan's first-ever NSP, which was originally conceived in 2014 but approved in January 2022 by the Imran Khan government. The policy states that 'the security of Pakistan is intertwined with the achievement of its geo-economic objectives', and emphasizes the need to 'foster an enabling environment for economic growth and development' (GOP, 2022). Emphasizing on Pakistan's national security, NSP also highlights the importance of enhancing connectivity, particularly through the development of infrastructure and transportation networks for trade. In 2015, Pakistan hosted the Heart of Asia Conference where issues of regional connectivity and economic cooperation were discussed (MOFA, 2015). In a speech delivered in 2017, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif, reiterated the government's commitment to geo-economics by saying that 'geo-economics should take precedence over geopolitics' (*Dawn*, 2017). He emphasized the need to promote regional connectivity and enhance trade, citing CPEC as a key example of Pakistan's efforts to achieve its geo-economics objectives. In 2017, CPEC was elevated to a 'strategic partnership' between Pakistan and China, highlighting the importance of the project for Pakistan's geo-economics and geopolitical objectives (MOFA, 2017). As a continuation of this policy, the Imran Khan government also kept promoting geo-economics. On 25 March 2021, Former Foreign Minister of Pakistan Shah Mahmood Qureshi stated that Pakistan had undergone a transformation and shifted its priorities from geopolitics to geo-economics (*Dawn*, 2021). Further, this approach was evident at the launching of NSP in January 2022 where geo-economics was a buzzword. This was reflected in the views of then the National Security Advisor, Dr Moeed Yusuf significance of 'NSP was centered around economic security while geo-strategic and geo-political imperatives also featured prominently in it to strengthen Pakistan's security and standing in the world' (*Dawn*, 2022). Further, the geo-economics is highlighted in the NSP:

Economic security at the core of national security, emphasizing a geo-economic vision to supplement the focus on geo-strategy and recognizes that sustainable and inclusive economic growth is needed to expand our national resource pie. Achieving this will allow greater availability of resources to bolster both traditional and human security. The foremost aim of our foreign policy and military capability will remain peace and stability in the region and beyond, based on mutual respect and sovereign equality (GOP, 2022)

Rationale for a Geo-economic Tilt

It is important to understand the motivations behind this geo-economic preference in foreign policy. According to Jaffery (2022), the emphasis on geo-economics in NSP is because of Pakistan's changing strategic environment and the need to diversify its foreign policy options. However, for Pakistan, geo-economics is closely intertwined with geopolitics, given the country's geopolitical location and its historical ties with regional powers such as China and Iran (*Dawn*, 2022). Despite these efforts, Pakistan's geo-economics ambitions are likely to be constrained by its security challenges, including the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan and tensions with India (Ahmad et al., 2020). Moreover, Pakistan's economic ties with China, which are critical to its geo-economic strategy, have also come under scrutiny in recent years due to concerns about debt repayments and economic dependency (Younus, 2021). As in Table 1, Pakistan's economy has faced various ups and downs in the past two decades. The country experienced rapid GDP growth in the mid-2000s, but the global financial crisis of 2008–2009 had a significant impact on its economy. Afterwards, Pakistan's economy has struggled due to factors such as energy shortages, political instability and security concerns. Before CPEC, Pakistan's economy was facing significant challenges, including low economic growth, high inflation and a balance of payments crisis. However, the CPEC project has helped to boost Pakistan's economy, attracting billions of dollars in Chinese investment in infrastructure, energy and other sectors. Hence, Pakistan considers CPEC a game changer. The Long Term Plan for China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (2017–2030) between Beijing and Islamabad focuses on increasing its connectivity and economic competitiveness (GOP, 2017). China has been a major contributor to FDI in Pakistan since 2015, and this is reflected in the data in Table 1. In 2017, a UN report found an increase of 56 per cent in FDI in Pakistan due to CPEC investments (UNCTAD, 2017, p. 52).

The 'Long Term Plan for China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (2017–2030)' outlines a comprehensive vision for economic cooperation between Pakistan and China, focusing on infrastructure, energy, trade and industrial projects. Significant advancements have been achieved, especially in infrastructure development with key projects like the Karakoram Highway Phase II, the Lahore Orange Line Metro Train and the Gwadar Port expansion, enhancing Pakistan's connectivity and its trade facilitation capabilities. In the energy sector, the introduction of coal, solar and wind energy projects has substantially increased power generation by addressing energy shortages and promoting sustainability (CPEC Authority, n.d.). Despite these achievements, progress in trade and industrial cooperation has been uneven, impacted by bureaucratic and financial challenges, and the global economic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The development of special economic zones (SEZs) has encountered delays, hindering the plan's full realization. While CPEC has significantly contributed to Pakistan's infrastructure and energy sectors, overcoming existing challenges is crucial for fulfilling the comprehensive objectives of the plan. In the specific context of CPEC, the intricate blend of diplomatic agreements, implementation by Chinese state-owned

Table I. GDP and FDI of Pakistan—2002–2021

Year	GDP (Current in Billions of \$)	FDI (in Billions of \$)
2002	79.9	0.83
2003	91.76	0.53
2004	107.76	1.12
2005	120.06	2.20
2006	137.26	4.27
2007	152.39	5.59
2008	170.08	5.44
2009	168.15	2.34
2010	177.17	2.02
2011	213.59	1.33
2012	224.38	0.86
2013	231.22	1.33
2014	244.36	1.89
2015	270.56	1.67
2016	313.63	2.58
2017	339.21	2.50
2018	356.13	1.74
2019	320.91	2.23
2020	300.42	2.06
2021	348.26	2.10

Source: World Bank (2023) and Macro Trends (2023).

enterprises, and financial backing from Chinese state-owned banks complicates the application of traditional investment arbitration. The preference for bilateral negotiations and political risk insurance further underscores the evolving dynamics of China's role in shaping the geo-economic landscape of Pakistan (McLaughlin, 2023).

Pakistan's economic crisis has grown in recent years. Pakistan has been struggling with its balance of payments and its external debt, which stood at around \$130 billion at the start of 2023 (Islam & Ahmed, 2023). This has forced Islamabad to seek help from its key partners in the Gulf and China. China has been providing financial assistance to Pakistan primarily through loans and other forms of financing. In 2018, China provided Pakistan with a \$2 billion loan to help the country address its balance of payments crisis (Marlow et al., 2018). Similarly, in 2020, China again bailed out Pakistan as it agreed to immediately provide \$1.5 billion financing line to repay the \$2 billion Saudi Arabia debt (Rana, 2020). These loans are in addition to the financing provided by China through

CPEC. Pakistan's economic dependency on China has grown due to a combination of factors, including strained relations with the West and limited financial support from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In recent years, Pakistan's relations with the United States have deteriorated over a range of issues, including Pakistan's support for militant groups (Khan, 2018). Similarly, Pakistan's relations with Europe have been strained over human rights concerns and trade issues (The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization, 2021). These tensions have limited Pakistan's ability to secure financial support from Western countries and international financial institutions, such as the IMF (Rana, 2022b). As a result, Pakistan has been increasingly reaching out to Beijing. China is one of Pakistan's most important allies, and the two countries have developed a strategic partnership over the years. China's investment in CPEC has been a significant boost to Pakistan's economy (Khursheed et al., 2019), and it has the potential to transform Pakistan's economy and make it a significant player in the global economy. CPEC, a flagship project of the BRI, is a testament to the interplay between geo-economics and geopolitics in the region. As China already enjoys a certain amount of goodwill or soft power in Pakistan (Ittefaq et al., 2023), it is important to see how its economic influence influences Pakistan's foreign policy.

The China Factor

The growing relevance of the interplay between geopolitics and geo-economics has become increasingly central to international relations, particularly for lower-middle income countries seeking to enhance their economic and political standing on the global stage. Pakistan is a notable example, where geopolitical and geo-economic considerations have profoundly shaped its foreign policy decisions. A pivotal aspect of this dynamic is CPEC, which forms the cornerstone of Pakistan's strategic partnership with China. With CPEC, China has solidified its position as a major actor in Pakistan's foreign policy, emphasizing geo-economics to advance regional connectivity and economic development. CPEC, a 3,000-km-long network of highways, railways and pipelines, is designed to improve connectivity between China's western Xinjiang region and Pakistan's Gwadar Port, facilitating more efficient trade routes (MOFA, 2021a). Beyond enhancing Sino-Pakistani ties, CPEC holds broader implications for regional connectivity, particularly with Central Asian states like Uzbekistan, which seeks to leverage the corridor for access to the Arabian Sea via Gwadar (MOFA, 2021a). Furthermore, Russia has identified CPEC as a platform for enhancing Eurasian connectivity, as evidenced by discussions on energy cooperation, such as the North-South gas pipeline with Pakistan (Haque, 2021). These engagements highlight CPEC's capacity to expand Pakistan's economic and strategic relationships, extending its influence beyond the China-Pakistan axis and contributing to broader regional and global integration.

To examine the China factor in Pakistan's foreign policy, several key studies illuminate China's enduring relationship with Pakistan, its strategic implications, and the dynamic interplay between geopolitical considerations and mutual

economic interests. Barnds (1975) provides a historical overview of the continuity in China's policy towards Pakistan, noting the stability of relations amidst changing international conditions and Chinese foreign policy shifts. This historical perspective underscores the strategic importance of Pakistan to China as a consistent ally in South Asia, despite the fluid geopolitical landscape (Barnds, 1975). Strom (2018) explores the legal frameworks facilitating Chinese investments in Pakistan, emphasizing the BRI and CPEC as pivotal to deepening bilateral economic ties. This analysis highlights the legal and policy measures both countries have adopted to promote and protect Chinese investments, reflecting the geo-economic underpinnings of their partnership (Strom, 2018). Duchâtel (2010) examines the security dimension of China-Pakistan relations, particularly in the context of terrorism and regional stability. The study suggests that while China seeks to protect its interests, including the safety of Chinese nationals and investments in Pakistan, the relationship's contributions to regional security are limited and ambiguous (Duchâtel, 2010). Amir et al. (2018) analyze China's strategic interests in Pakistan from a regional perspective, asserting that the bilateral relationship is driven by mutual political, economic and strategic interests. This study further underscores the geopolitical calculus behind China's engagement with Pakistan, particularly as a counterbalance to India's regional influence (Amir et al., 2018). These studies provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted China factor in Pakistan's foreign policy, highlighting the blend of historical ties, strategic security concerns, legal and economic frameworks and regional geopolitical dynamics that define the Sino-Pakistan relationship.

CPEC is estimated to bring around \$62 billion worth of Chinese investment to Pakistan (Afzal, 2020). Struck by security problems and facing a serious economic meltdown, Pakistan wholeheartedly accepted the offer from China to join the BRI. While CPEC has been labelled as a major opportunity for Pakistan to spur its economic growth and development, it has also raised a few concerns over its strategic implications with reference to the rivalry between China and India (Sacks, 2021). This section aims to explore the influence of Pakistan's relationship with China on its preference for geo-economics in its foreign policy.

At its start, CPEC became controversial in Pakistan and beyond. Then CPEC was a subject of debate in Pakistan's parliament as some members expressed concerns regarding Pakistan's sovereignty and economic interests as well as questioned which Pakistani region was going to benefit more from the Chinese investments (Hillman & McCalpin, 2020). While a round of discussions and changes in the original CPEC plan resolved those domestic concerns, there remain external doubts on CPEC and its geostrategic significance for China and Pakistan. The government of Pakistan has been trying to counter this criticism by projecting CPEC's significance for Pakistan's economy. In November 2020, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi stated that CPEC is a 'game-changer' for Pakistan's economy and that it has the potential to create thousands of jobs and boost Pakistan's economic growth (*The Express Tribune*, 2020). Qureshi continued by saying that China has consistently supported Pakistan during its most trying moments and has invested significantly in the country's economy. CPEC is vital

for Pakistan's economic development, according to the country's foreign minister, and Islamabad appreciates its relationship with Beijing. Similarly, on 24 July 2021, State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that Pakistan was China's 'most reliable friend' and that the two countries had a 'common destiny' (MOFA, 2021b). In a statement released in July 2021, the MOFA of the People's Republic of China (PRC) claimed that Pakistan and China had an 'all-weather strategic cooperative partnership' founded on 'mutual trust, mutual benefit, and mutual support' (MOFA, 2021a). The declaration also recognized China and Pakistan's collaboration on regional and global challenges, including the fight against terrorism and the peace process in Afghanistan, as well as their ongoing support for one another on subjects of mutual importance.

Similar arguments have been made by Pakistan's military and civil elites concerning CPEC, relations with China and geo-economics. Speeches and statements made by important officials, as well as civil and military elites, demonstrate China's influence over Pakistan's foreign policy choices. For instance, Pakistan's former Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa remarked in a speech in March 2021 that China's emergence as a major world power is a reality and that Pakistan views China as a 'time-tested friend and a strategic partner' (Inter-Services Public Relations, 2022). General Bajwa went on to say that China and Pakistan have cooperated to fight terrorism and that both states share a goal of regional peace and stability. The significance of Pakistan's relationship with China has also been emphasized by the civilian leadership of Pakistan. Imran Khan, a former prime minister of Pakistan, claimed in a speech in May 2021 that China and Pakistan had an exceptional relationship and that China has consistently supported Pakistan during trying times. The former prime minister added that defence and security cooperation is also a part of Pakistan's relationship with China, in addition to economic collaboration (Khan, 2021). These assertions demonstrate Pakistan's strong emphasis on its relationship with China.

These changes in Pakistan's foreign policy cannot be looked at in isolation from the country's relations with China and CPEC. Chinese leaders and officials have consistently emphasized on geo-economic potential of Pakistan in bilateral exchanges. Chinese President Xi Jinping, in a meeting with Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, emphasized the importance of CPEC for regional connectivity and praised Pakistan's geo-economic potential as a hub for trade and commerce. Chinese officials have referred to Pakistan's geo-economic potential and the importance of CPEC for regional connectivity (Prime Minister Office, Board of Investment, 2022). This dynamic is also noticeable in a joint statement issued by China and Pakistan following a meeting between Xi Jinping and Imran Khan, 'Both sides agreed to further deepen the China-Pakistan all-weather strategic cooperative partnership and the construction of the [CPEC], and turn it into a hub of regional connectivity and a platform for trans-regional development' (MOFA, 2022c). According to Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan Nong Rong, 'Pakistan is a key partner in China's Belt and Road Initiative' and CPEC is an important component of this initiative (Awan, 2021). During a meeting with

Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi emphasized the importance of CPEC for Pakistan's economic development and regional connectivity (MOFA, 2021b). In their bilateral exchanges with Pakistan, Chinese officials have often highlighted the importance of CPEC for Pakistan's economic development and regional cooperation (MOFA, 2021b).

As Pakistan's relations with China grow, there is an increasing emphasis on the geo-economic and geopolitical drivers of this relationship. Pakistan's economic dependency on China has made it an important player in geo-economics (Miller, 2022). China is Pakistan's largest trading partner, and the two countries have a strong economic relationship (MOFA, n.d.). China's investment in CPEC has been a significant boost to Pakistan's economy (Khursheed et al., 2019). While CPEC has played a key role in terms of boosting Pakistan's GDP, the project is not without its challenges. Pakistan's complex geopolitical environment, plagued by political instability, security loopholes and regional conflicts, poses significant risks to CPEC's success. Moreover, the project has sparked concerns about sustainability, transparency and the potential for China to use the project for strategic leverage in the region. These challenges highlight the need to balance geo-economics with geopolitics in Pakistan's foreign policy objectives. Pakistan's economic dependency on China has also created other foreign policy challenges as the United States continues to have serious concerns on the strategic implications of CPEC (Khalid, 2021). Also, India opposed CPEC because it goes through the disputed Jammu and Kashmir territory in Pakistan and views CPEC as a potential threat to its own strategic interests (Rajagopalan, 2022). In response to media queries regarding the participation of third countries in CPEC, the Official Spokesperson, Shri Arindam Bagchi, stated the following:

We have seen reports on encouraging a proposed participation of third countries in so-called CPEC projects. Any such actions by any party directly infringe on India's sovereignty and territorial integrity. India firmly and consistently opposes projects in the so-called CPEC, which are in Indian territory that has been illegally occupied by Pakistan. Such activities are inherently illegal, illegitimate and unacceptable, and will be treated accordingly by India (MEA, 2022)

Differentiating between geo-economic strategies and standard economic policies is pivotal for understanding the depth of Pakistan's shift towards a geo-economics-oriented foreign policy. Geo-economic strategies are characterized by their explicit design to leverage economic tools and geographic significance for achieving geopolitical objectives, such as enhancing national security, exerting influence or altering the strategic behavior of other states (Luttwak, 1990). Standard economic policies, conversely, primarily aim at domestic economic goals like growth, employment and stability, without a direct and intentional focus on influencing geopolitical dynamics. To delineate this distinction within the context of Pakistan's foreign policy, this article examines the strategic underpinnings and objectives behind economic initiatives, particularly those associated with CPEC. The 'geo-economic' tilt in Pakistan's policy is evidenced

by initiatives that extend beyond the realm of internal economic development to serve broader strategic aims, such as regional connectivity, access to energy resources and forging strategic alliances. For instance, the development of the Gwadar port under CPEC is not merely an economic project aimed at enhancing Pakistan's trade capacity. It is also a geo-economic strategy intended to solidify China-Pakistan relations, extend China's influence in the Indian Ocean, and provide Pakistan with a strategic counterbalance to India's naval dominance (Small, 2015). Similarly, Pakistan's Vision Central Asia Policy, which seeks to expand trade and connectivity with Central Asian Republics, goes beyond economic integration to position Pakistan as a central player in the region's geopolitics (MOFA, 2022a).

While standard economic policies focus on internal development and welfare, Pakistan's geo-economic tilt is marked by the strategic use of economic initiatives to achieve broader geopolitical aims. This distinction is crucial for assessing the extent of Pakistan's orientation towards geo-economics, as it underscores the deliberate integration of economic actions within its foreign policy strategy to influence regional and global power dynamics. The complex web of geopolitical alliances, particularly the close military and economic ties with the United States and Saudi Arabia, has constrained Islamabad's ability to independently navigate its foreign policy. Due to the influence of its key economic partners, Pakistan's has not been able to meet the full potential of its economic relations with Iran. The BRI and CPEC offer a new paradigm that could potentially shift Pakistan's policy orientation towards geo-economics, emphasizing economic connectivity, infrastructure development and regional cooperation. The economic implications of CPEC for the Greater Middle East, including enhanced market connectivity and investment opportunities, suggest a move towards a more geo-economic-driven foreign policy. However, geopolitical challenges, such as the Iran-US standoff, highlight the persistent constraints on Pakistan's foreign policy agility (Hussain, 2020).

China's rise as a global economic and military power has acted as a pull factor in terms of its relationships with many lower-middle income countries, including Pakistan, which historically has enjoyed good relations with the United States. Pakistan has received financial and military support from China, and the two countries have cooperated in military drills. Their shared strategic objectives, such as combating terrorism and advancing regional stability, have boosted relations between China and Pakistan. China and Pakistan have been strategic allies for many years, and in recent years, their military cooperation has intensified. International observers have paid close attention to the combined military drills and weapon exports between the two states in this context. Shaheen-IX, a combined air exercise between China and Pakistan, which took place in China in December 2020, is an illustration of their military cooperation. To improve the interoperability of both air forces in battle situations, the exercise included fighter aeroplanes, transport aircraft and early warning aircraft from both countries (Jamal, 2020). The production of JF-17 fighter jets jointly by China and Pakistan is another area of collaboration. China and Pakistan collaborated to create the JF-17, a lightweight, single-engine, multirole combat aircraft, in the early 2000s.

To produce and export the JF-17 to countries like Nigeria and Myanmar, the two countries have continued their partnership (Brimelow, 2022). Pakistan has received a substantial number of guns and other military equipment from China. China is said to have given Pakistan two Type 054A/P frigates, two of the most technologically advanced vessels in the area (Liu, 2021). In addition, China has been supplying Pakistan with other weaponry like the VT4 main battle tank and the CH-4 drone (Inter-Services Public Relations, 2020; Liu, 2022). China and Pakistan have demonstrated their military cooperation by participating in joint drills, producing the JF-17 fighter plane and delivering armaments. These actions have reinforced the strategic cooperation between the two countries, which has drawn the attention of international observers.

Pakistan and China have had a close relationship since the 1950s. China has provided Pakistan with both economic and military assistance, and the two countries have cooperated on a range of issues, including infrastructure development, trade and defence. Khan (2021) argues that Pakistan's close ties with China are due to several factors, including China's economic growth, the BRI and China's support for Pakistan on the international stage. These factors have provided Pakistan the ability to gain access to the Chinese market, attract investment and strengthen its negotiating position internationally. Pakistan's dependence on China is not new. China has established itself as a go-to source of aid and investment for many poor countries due to its status as an emerging global power. The breadth and depth of Pakistan's reliance on China, however, is remarkable. It is challenging for Pakistan to chart an independent path given its heavy reliance on China for both its economy and security. Pakistan's foreign policy has mostly been determined by its geographical location and security concerns, making it vulnerable to security threats from its neighbors, particularly India. Pakistan's leaders frequently prioritized short-term gains over long-term strategic goals, resulting in the country's inconsistent and confusing foreign policy (*Pakistan Today*, 2023; Taylor, 2021).

Overall, a complex interaction of historical, economic and strategic factors is to blame for Pakistan's reliance on China. Although Pakistan has benefited from China's support in many ways, Pakistan must carefully weigh the dangers and advantages of this partnership in order to protect its long-term strategic interests. With CPEC serving as the focal point of their strategic alliance, the China factor has grown to be a significant influence on Pakistan's foreign policy. China's close links to Pakistan on the political, military and economic fronts have various ramifications for the country's domestic politics, as well as its interactions with other states in the region and beyond (Khan, 2022). Even while CPEC has generated controversy and prompted questions about its potential strategic effects, Pakistan's close relations with China are expected to continue to influence the country's foreign policy choices in the years to come.

Media briefings by Pakistan's MOFA, parliament proceedings and speeches by relevant authorities and civil and military elites all reflect China's influence over Pakistan's foreign policy choices. CPEC, which has been hailed as a game-changer for Pakistan's economy and a significant factor in the bilateral relationship. The evidence suggests that China has a significant and probably continuous

influence on Pakistan's foreign policy choices. Between 2015 and 2022, Pakistan's reliance on geo-economics has reportedly maintained to be a significant component of its foreign policy and national security strategy. The state's efforts to strengthen regional ties, attract foreign investment and promote economic growth and development serve as evidence of this. These government sources emphasize the importance of geo-economics in Pakistan's foreign policy and national security strategy. The country's geo-economics vision prioritizes regional connection, economic integration and investor attraction in order to achieve its economic objectives. Geo-economics is given increasing priority in Pakistan's national security strategy and bigger foreign policy objectives. As noted by MOFA and other official sources, Pakistan's geo-economic goals are closely interlinked with its geopolitical objectives, reflecting the country's strategic location at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East.

Conclusion

As this research argues, there is a correlation between geo-economics and geopolitics in shaping Pakistan's foreign policy, particularly in the context of its relationship with China through CPEC. This research aimed to answer the following questions: How has geo-economics emerged as a central focus in Pakistan's foreign policy following the initiation of CPEC, and what factors have contributed to this shift? To what extent has Pakistan's evolving foreign policy orientation been shaped by its strategic relationship with China, particularly within the framework of CPEC and BRI? These questions were addressed by examining Pakistan's evolving economic strategy. CPEC, a key element of the BRI, has played a key role in Pakistan's foreign policy shift towards geo-economics, as the state seeks to leverage its strategic location to enhance connectivity and economic integration with South and Central Asia.

Pakistan's geostrategic position offers both opportunities and challenges. While it presents an advantage for economic engagement, it also exposes the country to external geopolitical pressures, such as the balancing act between its alliances with China and the United States. The dual focus on geo-economics and geopolitics is evident in Pakistan's efforts to strengthen regional ties, diversify its economic partnerships and reduce dependency on any one country, as seen in the 'Vision Central Asia' policy and the emphasis on regional connectivity. Moreover, the country's engagement with China through CPEC represents a broader shift in Pakistan's foreign policy towards economic diplomacy, seeking to transform itself into a regional economic hub. However, this shift does not eliminate the need to navigate complex geopolitical landscapes. Pakistan must carefully manage its relationships with major powers and regional actors to protect its strategic interests while maximizing the economic benefits of CPEC. This research demonstrates that Pakistan's foreign policy shows a growing tilt towards geo-economics. The pursuit of economic development, particularly through CPEC, is not isolated from broader strategic concerns, as Pakistan continues to balance economic goals with geopolitical realities.

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