

Foreign Policy Preferences in an Era of Global Polycrisis: Evidence on Public Support for Strategic Autonomy in Asia

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Abstract

The compounding of economic, security, health, and climate shocks that scholars have termed the global polycrisis has reshaped how ordinary citizens across Asia perceive their countries place in an increasingly contested international order. This study examines the determinants of public support for strategic autonomy — the preference that one's country should retain independent decision-making capacity rather than aligning fully with any single major power — focusing on Pakistan as a case study of a middle power situated at the intersection of great-power rivalry and acute polycrisis pressures in Asia. Drawing on Hedging Theory and the revisionist public opinion tradition in foreign policy analysis, the study proposes that perceived global polycrisis severity, great-power rivalry threat perception, and economic interdependence vulnerability positively predict public support for strategic autonomy, while trust in multilateral institutions exerts a negative effect. National identity salience is theorized as a mediating mechanism, and media exposure to geopolitical news as a moderating condition. A quantitative cross-sectional design was employed, with primary data collected from 850 respondents across Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, and Peshawar using a structured five-point Likert questionnaire. Data were analyzed through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), with bootstrapping procedures used to test mediation and moderation effects. Results indicate that great-power rivalry threat perception is the strongest positive predictor of support for strategic autonomy, followed by perceived polycrisis severity and economic interdependence vulnerability, while trust in multilateral institutions is negatively associated with such support. National identity salience partially mediates these relationships, and media exposure to geopolitical news significantly strengthens them. The study contributes to foreign policy analysis by integrating polycrisis scholarship with hedging theory and public opinion research, and it offers policy implications for Pakistani policymakers and, more broadly, for governments across Asia seeking to understand mass-level foundations of strategic-autonomy preferences in a fragmenting global order.

Keywords: Global Polycrisis; Strategic Autonomy; Public Opinion; Great-Power Rivalry; Hedging; Foreign Policy Preferences; Asia

Research Highlights

- Examines Pakistani public support for strategic autonomy amid the global polycrisis and rising great-power rivalry in Asia

- Uses an SEM-based survey with 850 respondents from Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, and Peshawar
- Great-power rivalry threat perception is the strongest predictor of public support for strategic autonomy
- National identity salience mediates polycrisis-related threat perceptions and strategic-autonomy preferences
- Media exposure to geopolitical news moderates the impact of threat perceptions on public opinion

Introduction

The years following the COVID-19 pandemic have been described by scholars as an era of 'global polycrisis' — a condition in which economic, geopolitical, ecological, and public-health shocks interact and amplify one another rather than unfolding as discrete, sequential crises (Tooze, 2022). Where earlier generations of foreign policy analysis treated crises as bounded events with identifiable beginnings and ends, the polycrisis framework emphasizes entanglement: a debt shock in one region interacts with an energy shock elsewhere, which in turn interacts with intensifying great-power rivalry, producing cascading effects that outstrip the capacity of any single government to manage independently (Janzwood & Homer-Dixon, 2022).

Political instability has primarily affected the world's most impoverished and vulnerable nations (Raleigh et al. 2023). Stable political conditions are essential for keeping society together, assuring government legitimacy, fostering economic growth, and obeying the rule of law, but this instability hinders development. Political stability affects the success of such efforts (Ali et al., 2024). Government institutions need political stability to function. However, investors are apprehensive of investing in unstable regimes, which may discourage investment and hinder international trade. Political instability causes lawlessness and crime, which raises public anxiety. Addressing these issues requires a mature and stable political atmosphere (Agbo, 2023). A strong economy and stable governments go together, with "political instability" implying a government upheaval. Government instability affects policy, income disparity, corruption, poverty, health, and national and international safety (Liu et al., 2023). The partition of British India on August 14, 1947, created Pakistan, which has had a complex political history with critical events, advancements, and changes. Pakistan became a republic with a parliamentary system in 1956 after passing its first constitution (Akram, 2023). General Ayub Khan conducted the first military takeover in 1958 and ruled until 1969 when General Yahya Khan took over. East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) seceded in 1971 after the Bangladesh Liberation War, ending military rule. After the Bangladesh crisis, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto founded the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and advocated for social reforms, nationalization, and the 1973 Constitution. After a 1977 military coup, Zia-ul-Haq adopted a more conservative approach and supported the Afghan mujahideen in the Soviet-Afghan War. At his time, 1985 witnessed the first non-party elections. After Zia died in 1988, Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's daughter, held two non-consecutive terms as prime minister. General Pervez Musharraf assumed power in a 1999 military coup amid rising tensions with India during the Kargil conflict and ruled until 2008 (Naheed, 2023). After he departed, civilian rule resumed, and the PPP and PML-N, under Nawaz Sharif, alternated in power until 2013. Despite being re-elected in 2013, Nawaz Sharif was ousted from office in 2017 under military pressure. The 2018 general election saw Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) take power (Behera, 2018). Political volatility has persisted since 2018, notably under the PTI. Protests, opposition movements, military moves, and significant political scandals show this volatility. Political instability is highlighted by Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) protests that demand Prime Minister Imran Khan's resignation and accuse the government of economic ineptitude. The PTI-military relationship is also shifting due to economic

management and foreign policy conflicts (Rahman and Jan, 2023). This study examines the complex dynamics of political instability in Pakistan by examining regional instability, institutional fragility, and socio-economic and governance determinants. The study's central research question is: "How do crossborder tensions, cultural values, social dissatisfaction, economic hardships, and corruption influence political instability in Pakistan?" The study adopts a mixed-methods approach to address this question by integrating quantitative data from a large-scale population survey with qualitative input from key stakeholders.

For Asian states — many of which combine high trade openness, dense supply-chain integration, and proximity to intensifying United States–China strategic competition — the polycrisis has sharpened long-standing debates about alignment, hedging, and strategic autonomy (Kuik, 2008). Strategic autonomy, understood as the will and capacity of a state to make independent decisions on matters affecting its vital interests rather than being bound to the preferences of a single major power, has re-emerged as a central organizing concept in the foreign policy discourse of India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines alike (Menon, 2021).

While the strategic-autonomy debate has traditionally been analyzed at the elite and state level — focusing on the calculations of foreign ministries and heads of government — a growing body of foreign policy analysis argues that mass public opinion also shapes, and is shaped by, these strategic postures (Kertzer & Zeitzoff, 2017). Contrary to the older Almond-Lippmann consensus, which held that public attitudes toward foreign affairs were volatile and largely irrelevant to policy, revisionist scholarship demonstrates that public opinion on foreign policy is structured, reasonably stable, and responsive to identifiable threat perceptions (Holsti, 1992).

This study builds on that revisionist tradition by asking how ordinary citizens across polycrisis-affected Asian states form preferences regarding strategic autonomy. It draws on Hedging Theory, originally developed to explain the alignment choices of smaller Southeast Asian states toward a rising China (Kuik, 2008), and extends its logic from the level of state behavior to the level of individual attitudes. Just as governments hedge between major powers to maximize returns and minimize risk, the study proposes that individual citizens develop preferences for national strategic autonomy as a function of how severely they perceive the polycrisis, how threatening they judge great-power rivalry to be, how vulnerable they feel to economic interdependence, and how much they trust multilateral institutions to safeguard their country's interests (Koga, 2018).

The study further proposes that national identity salience — the extent to which citizens see their country's independent standing as central to their sense of collective identity — mediates the relationship between polycrisis-related threat perceptions and support for strategic autonomy, while media exposure to geopolitical news moderates this relationship by shaping the intensity and immediacy with which citizens process such threats (Kertzer & Zeitzoff, 2017). By integrating polycrisis scholarship, hedging theory, and public opinion research within a single empirical framework, this study offers a comparative, mass-level account of how the current era of compounding global crises is reshaping foreign policy preferences across Asia.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do perceived global polycrisis severity, great-power rivalry threat perception, economic interdependence vulnerability, and trust in multilateral institutions influence public support for strategic autonomy among citizens of Asian states?

This question examines the direct impact of four polycrisis-related variables on citizens' preferences regarding their country's strategic autonomy.

RQ2: How does national identity salience mediate the relationship between polycrisis-related threat perceptions and public support for strategic autonomy?

This question investigates whether citizens' sense of collective national identity explains how

polycrisis-related pressures translate into strategic-autonomy preferences.

RQ3: Does media exposure to geopolitical news moderate the relationship between polycrisis-related variables and public support for strategic autonomy?

This question explores whether citizens who follow geopolitical news more closely exhibit a stronger relationship between threat perceptions and strategic-autonomy preferences.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the impact of perceived global polycrisis severity, great-power rivalry threat perception, economic interdependence vulnerability, and trust in multilateral institutions on public support for strategic autonomy in Asia.
2. To assess the mediating role of national identity salience in the relationship between polycrisis-related variables and public support for strategic autonomy.
3. To determine the moderating effect of media exposure to geopolitical news on the relationship between polycrisis-related variables and public support for strategic autonomy.

Significance and Rationale of the Study

This study contributes to foreign policy analysis, public opinion research, and the emerging literature on the global polycrisis by providing one of the first mass-level empirical examinations of strategic-autonomy preferences in Pakistan, a middle power whose foreign policy has long been shaped by great-power rivalry, debt dependence, and shifting regional alliances. By integrating Hedging Theory (Kuik, 2008) with the revisionist public opinion tradition (Holsti, 1992) the study bridges two literatures that have largely developed in isolation from one another — one focused on elite and state-level alignment behavior, the other on the structure and determinants of citizen attitudes. From a policy perspective, understanding the mass-level foundations of strategic-autonomy preferences is valuable for Pakistan's foreign ministry, diplomats, and political communicators seeking to calibrate foreign policy messaging in an era when public sentiment increasingly constrains and legitimizes state action (Kertzer & Zeitzoff, 2017). Pakistan's position at the crossroads of United States–China rivalry, its reliance on Gulf and Chinese financing, and its historical experience with non-alignment make it a particularly instructive single-country case for understanding how polycrisis-era pressures translate into mass-level foreign policy preferences elsewhere in Asia.

Literature Review

The concept of the global polycrisis has gained rapid currency in international relations scholarship since (Adam & Tooze's 2022) influential characterization of a condition in which disparate shocks interact such that their combined impact exceeds the sum of their individual parts. Building on earlier work by Morin and Kern and by European policymakers who used the term to describe overlapping migration, financial, and political crises in the 2010s, (Janzwood & Homer-Dixon, 2022) and Lawrence, Janzwood, and Homer-Dixon formalize the polycrisis as a combination of interacting systemic risks capable of producing cascading, mutually reinforcing failures across social and economic systems. For developing and middle-income Asian economies, this entanglement of shocks compounds long-standing vulnerabilities related to debt, trade dependence, and energy security, and has intensified public and elite anxiety about over-reliance on any single external power (Tooze, 2022).

Hedging Theory provides a foundational account of how states positioned between competing major powers respond to such uncertainty. (Kuik, 2008) defines hedging as a strategy distinct from pure balancing or band wagoning, in which smaller and middle powers pursue mixed policies that preserve maximum diplomatic and economic flexibility while avoiding overt alignment with any single great power. Subsequent work has extended and refined this concept: (Goh, 2005) traces the

origins of hedging behavior among Southeast Asian states responding to a rising China; Lim and Cooper reassess the logic of alignment choices in East Asia; (Koga, 2018) applies the concept to Japan's evolving foreign policy strategy; and (Korolev, 2019) demonstrates that the space available for hedging narrows as system-level power asymmetries intensify. (Kuik, 2021) further shows that weaker states' hedging behavior is shaped as much by domestic political legitimization needs as by external power dynamics, while (Jones & Jenne, 2021) situate hedging within the broader grand strategies of Southeast Asian states.

Although hedging theory has been developed primarily to explain state-level alignment behavior, the underlying logic — a preference for retaining independent decision-making capacity rather than becoming dependent on a single external patron — closely parallels the concept of strategic autonomy as it has developed in the Indian and broader Asian foreign policy discourse. (Menon, 2021) traces the evolution of India's pursuit of strategic autonomy from Cold War non-alignment to contemporary multi-alignment, arguing that the capacity to act independently on matters of vital national interest remains central to how policymakers and citizens alike understand their country's international standing. Similar debates about strategic autonomy and non-alignment recur across Pakistan, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines as each navigates competing pressures from the United States and China (Kuik, 2021).

The extension of these state-level concepts to individual attitudes is supported by revisionist public opinion scholarship. Where the earlier Almond-Lippmann consensus held that mass publics possess volatile, unstructured, and largely inconsequential views on foreign affairs, (Holsti, 1992) demonstrates that public attitudes toward foreign policy are considerably more structured and stable than this pessimistic view suggests, particularly when threats are salient and repeatedly reinforced through media coverage. Page and similarly argue that aggregate public opinion on foreign policy issues tends to move in predictable, rational directions in response to changing international circumstances rather than shifting erratically. Kertzer and Zeitzoff advance a 'bottom-up' theory of foreign policy attitudes, showing that citizens' foreign policy preferences are structured by underlying dispositions — including threat sensitivity, identity attachment, and information exposure — that operate analogously to the strategic calculations made by state elites.

Threat perception of great-power rivalry constitutes a particularly salient driver of foreign policy attitudes in the current period. As US–China strategic competition has intensified, citizens across Asia increasingly perceive their countries as caught between competing spheres of influence, a dynamic that echoes (Walt's ,1987) classic account of how perceived threat, rather than raw power alone, drives alignment behavior among states. Economic interdependence, meanwhile, has historically been theorized as a stabilizing force in international relations, yet in a polycrisis context in which supply chains, energy markets, and financial systems are subject to sudden disruption, high economic interdependence can also be perceived as a source of vulnerability rather than security, reinforcing rather than reducing demand for policy autonomy (Kuik, 2008) Trust in multilateral institutions represents a countervailing force in this framework. Where citizens retain confidence in the capacity of international organizations such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, or regional bodies to fairly represent and protect their country's interests, the perceived necessity of unilateral strategic autonomy may be correspondingly reduced (Putnam, 1988). National identity salience and media exposure further condition these relationships: citizens for whom national identity is a central component of self-concept are more likely to translate threat perceptions into support for independent foreign policy positions, while frequent exposure to geopolitical news is likely to heighten the salience and immediacy of great-power rivalry and polycrisis-related threats, thereby amplifying their effect on strategic-autonomy preferences (Kertzer & Zeitzoff, 2017).

Research Gap Statement

Despite substantial literatures on hedging behavior, strategic autonomy, and public opinion on foreign policy, three important gaps remain. First, a level-of-analysis gap exists: hedging theory has been developed almost exclusively to explain state and elite behavior (Kuik, 2008), while its applicability to mass public attitudes remains largely untested empirically. Second, a contextual gap is evident, as most public opinion research on foreign policy attitudes has focused on Western, and particularly American, publics (Holsti, 1992) leaving the structure of foreign policy attitudes among Asian publics comparatively underexplored. Third, a temporal gap remains, since the specific configuration of overlapping shocks that scholars now term the 'global polycrisis' (Tooze et al, 2022) postdates most existing survey-based foreign policy attitude research, meaning that the effects of this particular crisis constellation on strategic-autonomy preferences have not yet been empirically documented. This study addresses these gaps through a quantitative, mass-level investigation of Pakistani public opinion during the current polycrisis period, offering a single-country case study with broader relevance for understanding foreign policy attitude formation across Asia (Korolev, 2019).

Contribution of the Study

This study contributes theoretically by extending Hedging Theory from the level of state behavior to the level of individual political attitudes, and by integrating it with the revisionist public opinion tradition in foreign policy analysis. Empirically, it contributes one of the first comparative, SEM-based assessments of strategic-autonomy preferences across South and Southeast Asian publics, incorporating both a mediating psychological mechanism (national identity salience) and a moderating informational condition (media exposure to geopolitical news). From a policy perspective, the findings offer practical insight for foreign ministries, political communicators, and multilateral organizations seeking to understand the mass-level currents that increasingly shape, constrain, and legitimize state-level strategic-autonomy postures in an era of compounding global crises.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical traditions: Hedging Theory, as developed in the small-state foreign policy literature, and the revisionist tradition in public opinion and foreign policy analysis. Hedging Theory, most fully articulated by Kuik (2008), holds that states positioned between competing major powers pursue mixed strategies designed to maximize returns and preserve maximum future flexibility while avoiding the risks associated with full alignment or full confrontation. Kuik (2016, 2021) further shows that hedging behavior reflects not only external power calculations but also domestic political and identity-related considerations (Koga, 2018). In this study, the logic of hedging is extended from the level of state strategy to the level of individual political psychology: just as states hedge to preserve strategic flexibility, individual citizens are theorized to develop preferences for national strategic autonomy as a function of how threatened they feel by great-power rivalry, how severely they perceive the current global polycrisis, how economically vulnerable they feel to external dependence, and how much confidence they place in multilateral institutions to safeguard their interests (Korolev, 2019).

The revisionist public opinion tradition, associated principally with Holsti (1992, 2004) and Page and Shapiro (1992), provides the second theoretical pillar. Contrary to the earlier Almond-Lippmann consensus, which portrayed mass publics as holding unstable and largely irrelevant views on foreign affairs, revisionist scholarship demonstrates that public attitudes toward international affairs are considerably more structured, coherent, and responsive to real-world events than previously assumed. Kertzer and Zeitzoff (2017) extend this tradition through a bottom-up model in

which foreign policy attitudes are structured by underlying dispositions — including threat sensitivity and identity attachment — that behave analogously to the strategic calculations of state elites, providing theoretical justification for treating national identity salience as a mediating psychological mechanism in this study.

The framework further draws on (Putnam's, 1988) two-level game logic to situate mass public opinion within the broader interaction between domestic politics and international bargaining: where trust in multilateral institutions is low, the domestic 'win-set' of policy options acceptable to citizens narrows toward more autonomous, self-reliant postures, whereas high institutional trust widens the range of internationally cooperative options considered acceptable at the domestic level. Together, Hedging Theory and the revisionist public opinion tradition provide a coherent theoretical foundation for understanding how global polycrisis conditions translate into mass-level preferences for strategic autonomy, mediated through national identity and moderated by geopolitical media exposure.

Conceptual Framework Description

The conceptual framework of this study identifies four polycrisis-related determinants of public support for strategic autonomy (Korolev, 2019). perceived global polycrisis severity, great-power rivalry threat perception, economic interdependence vulnerability, and trust in multilateral institutions. Perceived global polycrisis severity captures citizen's assessment of the extent to which overlapping economic, security, health, and climate shocks threaten their country's stability (Janzwood & Homer-Dixon, 2022). Great-power rivalry threat perception reflects citizens sense that competition between major powers, particularly the United States and China, creates risks for their country (Walt, 1987) Economic interdependence vulnerability captures the extent to which citizens perceive their country's trade and financial linkages with major powers as a source of exposure during global shocks (Kuik, 2008). Trust in multilateral institutions reflects citizens' confidence that international organizations will fairly protect their country's interests (Putnam, 1988).

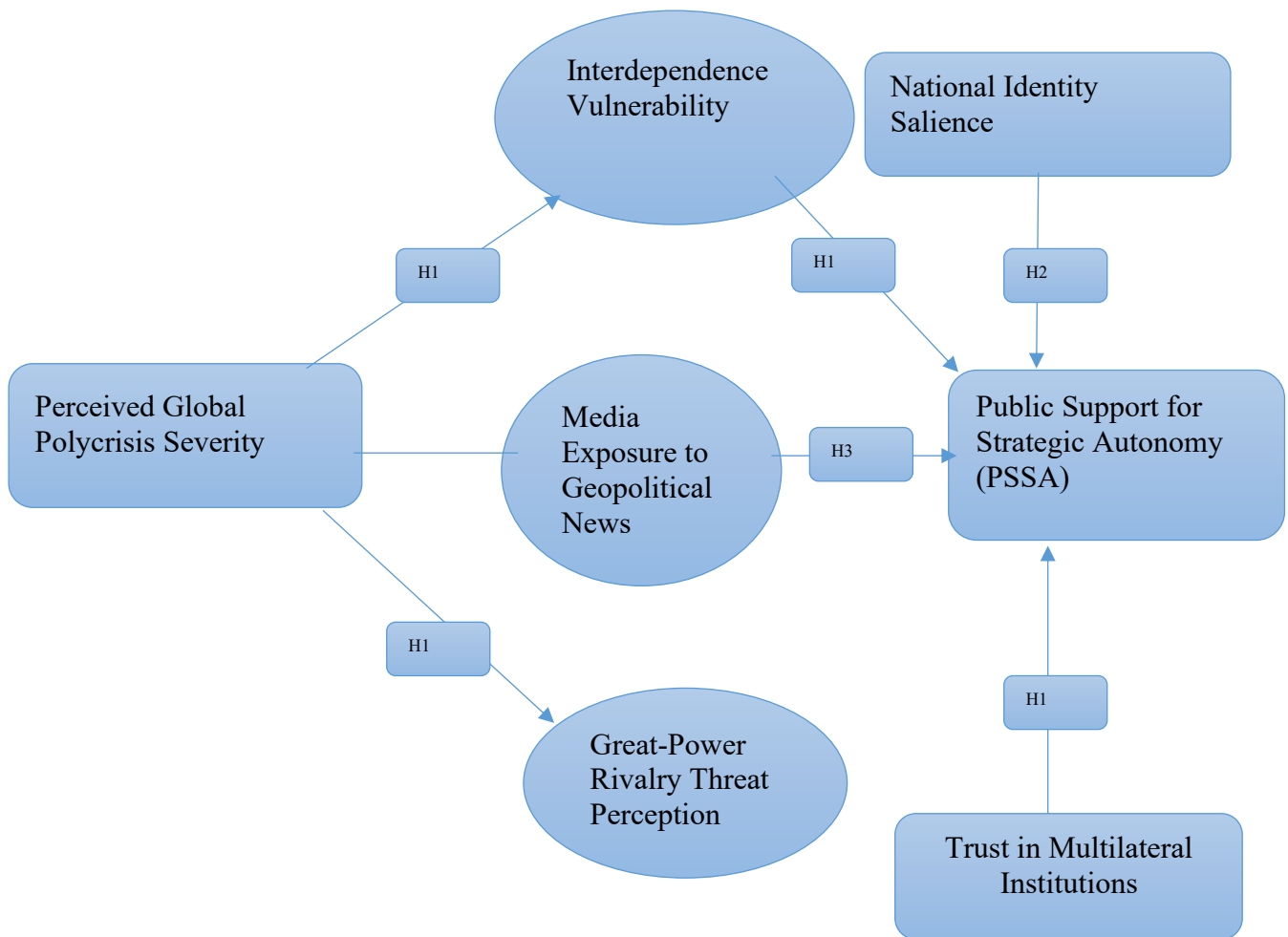


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Source: Author's work.

The framework proposes that the effects of these four determinants on public support for strategic autonomy are partially channeled through national identity salience, which captures the extent to which citizens regard their country's independent international standing as central to their collective self-concept (Kertzer & Zeitzoff, 2017). In addition, media exposure to geopolitical news is proposed as a moderating variable, reflecting the extent to which frequent exposure to international news amplifies the salience of polycrisis-related threats and thereby strengthens their translation into strategic-autonomy preferences (Holsti, 2004).

H1: Perceived global polycrisis severity, great-power rivalry threat perception, and economic interdependence vulnerability have a significant positive effect on public support for strategic autonomy, while trust in multilateral institutions has a significant negative effect.

H2: Media exposure to geopolitical news significantly moderates the relationship between polycrisis-related variables and public support for strategic autonomy, such that greater exposure strengthens the positive impact of threat perceptions.

H3: National identity salience significantly mediates the relationship between polycrisis-related threat perceptions and public support for strategic autonomy.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research design to examine the determinants of public support for strategic autonomy across polycrisis-affected Asian states. A cross-sectional survey method was employed, with data collected from respondents at a single point in time through a structured questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). This approach enables objective measurement of relationships among variables and rigorous statistical testing of hypothesized direct, mediating, and moderating effects within a single integrated framework.

Target Population and Sampling Technique

The target population consisted of adult Pakistani citizens with awareness of, and interest in, national and international affairs, drawn from four major urban centers: Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, and Peshawar. The sample included university-educated professionals, students of international relations and political science, civil society members, journalists, government and private-sector employees, and general working adults with regular exposure to news media. A stratified purposive sampling technique was employed, whereby respondents were first stratified by city and professional background and then purposively selected within each stratum to ensure adequate representation of politically engaged citizens capable of providing informed responses on foreign policy matters.

Sample Size

The accessible population across Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, and Peshawar consisted of approximately 1,050 potential respondents, from which 850 valid responses were retained after data screening, yielding a response rate of approximately 81.0%. This sample size exceeds the minimum requirements recommended for Structural Equation Modeling and provides sufficient statistical power to detect medium effect sizes at conventional significance levels.

Variables and Their Types

The study examined four independent variables: perceived global polycrisis severity, great-power rivalry threat perception, economic interdependence vulnerability, and trust in multilateral institutions. The dependent variable was public support for strategic autonomy. National identity salience served as the mediating variable, while media exposure to geopolitical news functioned as the moderating variable. All constructs were measured using a five-point Likert scale.

Table 1: List of Variables and Their Expected Relationships

Variable Name	Variable Type	Symbol	Measurement Unit	Expected Relationship with DV
Perceived Global Polycrisis Severity	Independent Variable	PGPS	5-Point Likert Scale	Positive (+)
Great-Power Rivalry Threat Perception	Independent Variable	GPRT	5-Point Likert Scale	Positive (+)

Variable Name	Variable Type	Symbol	Measurement Unit	Expected Relationship with DV
Economic Interdependence Vulnerability	Independent Variable	EIV	5-Point Likert Scale	Positive (+)
Trust in Multilateral Institutions	Independent Variable	TMI	5-Point Likert Scale	Negative (–)
National Identity Salience	Mediating Variable	NIS	5-Point Likert Scale	Positive (+)
Media Exposure to Geopolitical News	Moderating Variable	MEGN	5-Point Likert Scale	Moderating Effect
Public Support for Strategic Autonomy	Dependent Variable	PSSA	5-Point Likert Scale	Dependent Variable

Instrumentation Scales

A structured questionnaire served as the primary data collection instrument. Section A collected demographic and professional-background information, while Section B measured the study constructs using five-point Likert-scale items adapted from established literature on hedging, public opinion, and foreign policy analysis, modified to reflect the specific context of the 2025–2026 global polycrisis period.

Table 2: Instrument Scales

Variable	Sample Question	Source
Perceived Global Polycrisis Severity	Overlapping global crises (economic, health, climate, security) currently threaten my country's stability.	Tooze (2022); Janzwood & Homer-Dixon (2022)
Great-Power Rivalry Threat Perception	Rivalry between major powers such as the United States and China increases risks for my country.	Walt (1987); Korolev (2019)
Economic Interdependence Vulnerability	My country's economic dependence on major powers creates vulnerability during global crises.	Kuik (2008); Koga (2018)

Variable	Sample Question	Source
Trust in Multilateral Institutions	International institutions such as the UN, IMF, or WTO can be trusted to protect my country's interests.	Holsti (2004); Putnam (1988)
National Identity Salience	My country's ability to act independently is an important part of my sense of national identity.	Kertzer & Zeitzoff (2017)
Media Exposure to Geopolitical News	I regularly follow news and analysis about global geopolitical developments.	Holsti (2004); Kertzer & Zeitzoff (2017)
Public Support for Strategic Autonomy	My country should pursue an independent foreign policy rather than align fully with any major power.	Kuik (2021); Menon (2021)

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted in Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, and Peshawar between late 2025 and early 2026. Prior permission was obtained from relevant institutional and community gatekeepers before distributing questionnaires. Respondents were informed of the study's purpose, the confidentiality of their responses, and the voluntary nature of participation. Both printed and electronic questionnaires were used to maximize response rates across the diverse target population. Completed questionnaires were screened for completeness and consistency, and incomplete or unusable responses were excluded, leaving 850 valid responses for analysis.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, the most widely accepted measure of internal consistency in social science research. Following Hair et al. (2022), Cronbach's Alpha values of 0.70 or above indicate acceptable reliability, while values exceeding 0.80 demonstrate good reliability. The reliability of each of the seven study constructs was assessed separately to ensure measurement consistency.

Content Validity

Content validity was established through a comprehensive review of relevant literature on hedging, strategic autonomy, and public opinion on foreign policy. Questionnaire items were adapted from previously validated scales and reviewed by academic experts in international relations and political psychology to refine item wording and ensure contextual suitability for the Pakistani foreign policy context.

Construct Validity

Construct validity was examined through confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling procedures. Convergent validity was evaluated using factor loadings, Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and Composite Reliability (CR). Following Hair et al. (2022), factor loadings greater than 0.70, AVE values exceeding 0.50, and CR values above 0.70 were considered acceptable.

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker Criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT).

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), Mediation and Moderation Analysis

Structural Equation Modeling was employed as the primary statistical technique. The analysis proceeded in two stages: first, the measurement model was assessed through reliability and validity tests; second, the structural model was evaluated using path coefficients, t-values, p-values, and model fit indices to test the hypothesized relationships. Mediation analysis examined whether national identity salience mediates the relationship between polycrisis-related variables and public support for strategic autonomy, with indirect effects assessed via bootstrapping procedures using 5,000 iterations to generate bias-corrected confidence intervals. Moderation analysis examined whether media exposure to geopolitical news conditions these relationships, with interaction terms entered into the structural model.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the research process. Respondents were informed of the purpose, objectives, and academic nature of the research prior to data collection, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were free to decline or withdraw at any stage without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained; no personally identifiable information was collected, and all responses were analyzed in aggregated form for academic purposes only. Given the politically sensitive nature of the subject matter, respondents were assured that individual opinions would not be attributed or disclosed. Responsible use of AI tools was maintained, with AI assistance limited to language refinement and formatting support, while all substantive analysis and interpretation remained the researcher's responsibility.

Table 3: Demographic Survey of the Respondents (N = 850)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	473	55.6
	Female	377	44.4
City	Islamabad	224	26.4
	Karachi	218	25.6
	Lahore	231	27.2
	Peshawar	177	20.8
Professional Background	Students (IR / Political Science)	204	24.0
	Government / Public Sector Employees	168	19.8

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
	Private Sector Professionals	192	22.6
	Journalists / Media Professionals	121	14.2
	Civil Society / Academia	165	19.4
Age Group	18–25 Years	198	23.3
	26–40 Years	372	43.8
	Above 40 Years	280	32.9
Educational Level	Bachelor's Degree	247	29.1
	Master's Degree	389	45.8
	PhD or Above	214	25.1
Total		850	100

Table 3 presents the demographic characteristics of the 850 respondents. Male respondents constituted 473 participants (55.6%), while female respondents represented 377 participants (44.4%). Respondents were drawn in fairly balanced proportions from Lahore (27.2%), Islamabad (26.4%), Karachi (25.6%), and Peshawar (20.8%). In terms of professional background, students of international relations and political science formed the largest category (24.0%), followed by private sector professionals (22.6%), government and public sector employees (19.8%), civil society and academic respondents (19.4%), and journalists or media professionals (14.2%). The majority of respondents were between 26 and 40 years of age (43.8%), followed by those above 40 (32.9%) and those between 18 and 25 (23.3%). The educational profile confirms high qualification levels, with 45.8% holding master's degrees, 29.1% holding bachelor's degrees, and 25.1% holding doctoral qualifications, strengthening the credibility of responses on foreign policy issues.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics, Reliability and Validity Test (N = 850)

Variable	Items	Mean	Std. Dev.	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	AVE
Perceived Global Polycrisis Severity (PGPS)	5	4.05	0.69	0.891	0.919	0.694
Great-Power Rivalry Threat Perception (GPRT)	5	3.96	0.73	0.905	0.929	0.723

Variable	Items	Mean	Std. Dev.	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	AVE
Economic Interdependence Vulnerability (EIV)	5	3.79	0.75	0.878	0.910	0.670
Trust in Multilateral Institutions (TMI)	5	2.87	0.81	0.869	0.904	0.655
National Identity Salience (NIS)	5	3.71	0.77	0.883	0.913	0.677
Media Exposure to Geopolitical News (MEGN)	5	3.84	0.70	0.874	0.908	0.665
Public Support for Strategic Autonomy (PSSA)	5	3.92	0.72	0.897	0.922	0.702

Table 4 presents descriptive statistics, reliability, and convergent validity results. Great-Power Rivalry Threat Perception recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.73$), indicating that respondents most strongly perceive great-power competition as a source of risk. Perceived Global Polycrisis Severity was similarly rated highly ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.69$). Trust in Multilateral Institutions recorded the lowest mean score ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 0.81$), suggesting that respondents across the sample harbor considerable skepticism toward the capacity of international institutions to protect their country's interests. Public Support for Strategic Autonomy registered a moderately high mean ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.72$), consistent with the hypothesis that polycrisis-era threat perceptions are associated with stronger preferences for independent foreign policy. All reliability indicators are strong, with Cronbach's Alpha values ranging from 0.869 to 0.905, CR values ranging from 0.904 to 0.929, and AVE values ranging from 0.655 to 0.723, all exceeding recommended thresholds and confirming satisfactory reliability and convergent validity.

Table 5: Content Validity and Construct Validity through CFA Indicators (N = 850)

Construct	Items	CVI	Factor Loadings Range	CR	AVE	Status
Perceived Global Polycrisis Severity (PGPS)	5	0.91	0.771–0.868	0.919	0.694	Established
Great-Power Rivalry Threat Perception (GPRT)	5	0.93	0.802–0.881	0.929	0.723	Established

Construct	Items	CVI	Factor Loadings Range	CR	AVE	Status
Economic Interdependence Vulnerability (EIV)	5	0.89	0.751–0.849	0.910	0.670	Established
Trust in Multilateral Institutions (TMI)	5	0.88	0.742–0.836	0.904	0.655	Established
National Identity Salience (NIS)	5	0.90	0.760–0.851	0.913	0.677	Established
Media Exposure to Geopolitical News (MEGN)	5	0.90	0.749–0.845	0.908	0.665	Established
Public Support for Strategic Autonomy (PSSA)	5	0.92	0.792–0.874	0.922	0.702	Established

Table 5 presents content and construct validity results. CVI values ranged from 0.88 to 0.93, all exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.80, indicating strong expert agreement on item relevance. Great-Power Rivalry Threat Perception and Public Support for Strategic Autonomy recorded the highest CVI values (0.93 and 0.92, respectively), reflecting excellent content representation for the constructs central to the study's research questions. Factor loadings ranged from 0.742 to 0.881, all above the 0.70 threshold, while CR and AVE values satisfied all recommended benchmarks, confirming that the measurement model possesses adequate reliability and validity for structural path analysis, mediation testing, and moderation analysis (Sarstedt et al, 2020).

Table 6: SEM Estimates and Model Fit Indices (N = 850)

Hypothesis	Structural Path	Standardized Beta (β)	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1a	Perceived Polycrisis Severity → Support for Strategic Autonomy	0.284	6.812	< 0.001	Supported
H1b	Great-Power Rivalry Threat → Support for Strategic Autonomy	0.312	7.940	< 0.001	Supported
H1c	Economic Interdependence Vulnerability → Support for Strategic Autonomy	0.221	5.376	< 0.001	Supported

Hypothesis	Structural Path	Standardized Beta (β)	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1d	Trust in Multilateral Institutions → Support for Strategic Autonomy	-0.198	4.887	< 0.001	Supported
H3a	Great-Power Rivalry Threat → National Identity Salience	0.347	8.512	< 0.001	Supported
H3b	Economic Interdependence Vulnerability → National Identity Salience	0.263	6.104	< 0.001	Supported
H3c	National Identity Salience → Support for Strategic Autonomy	0.389	9.427	< 0.001	Supported

Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Recommended Value	Obtained Value	Status
Chi-Square/df (CMIN/df)	< 3.00	2.18	Acceptable
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	≥ 0.90	0.958	Good Fit
Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)	≥ 0.90	0.949	Good Fit
RMSEA	≤ 0.08	0.033	Excellent Fit
SRMR	≤ 0.08	0.041	Excellent Fit

Table 6 presents the Structural Equation Modeling results. The model fit indices indicate excellent fit, with CFI (0.958) and TLI (0.949) exceeding the 0.90 threshold, while RMSEA (0.033) and SRMR (0.041) fall well below the 0.08 benchmark. All direct relationships are statistically significant and in the hypothesized direction, consistent with H1. Great-Power Rivalry Threat Perception exerts the strongest positive effect on support for strategic autonomy ($\beta = 0.312$, $p < 0.001$), followed by Perceived Global Polycrisis Severity ($\beta = 0.284$, $p < 0.001$) and Economic Interdependence Vulnerability ($\beta = 0.221$, $p < 0.001$). Trust in Multilateral Institutions exerts a significant negative effect ($\beta = -0.198$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that institutional trust reduces perceived necessity for independent foreign policy postures. The paths through national identity salience confirm the mediating mechanism, with great-power rivalry threat ($\beta = 0.347$) and economic interdependence vulnerability ($\beta = 0.263$) significantly heightening national identity salience, which in turn positively predicts support for strategic autonomy ($\beta = 0.389$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 7: Mediation and Moderation Analysis (Bootstrapping Results) (N = 850)**Moderation Analysis**

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	t-value	p-value	Result
H2a	Great-Power Rivalry Threat $\times$ Media Exposure $\rightarrow$ PSSA	0.135	3.518	0.001	Supported
H2b	Polycrisis Severity $\times$ Media Exposure $\rightarrow$ PSSA	0.121	3.203	0.002	Supported
H2c	Economic Interdependence Vulnerability $\times$ Media Exposure $\rightarrow$ PSSA	0.098	2.674	0.008	Supported

Mediation Analysis (Bootstrapping)

Hypothesis	Indirect Relationship	Indirect Effect (β)	Bootstrapped t-value	p-value	Mediation Type
H3a	Great-Power Rivalry Threat $\rightarrow$ NIS $\rightarrow$ PSSA	0.135	5.203	< 0.001	Partial Mediation
H3b	Economic Interdependence Vulnerability $\rightarrow$ NIS $\rightarrow$ PSSA	0.102	4.318	< 0.001	Partial Mediation

Table 7 presents the moderation and mediation results. The moderation analysis reveals that media exposure to geopolitical news significantly strengthens the relationship between polycrisis-related variables and support for strategic autonomy. The interaction between great-power rivalry threat perception and media exposure ($\beta = 0.135$, $p = 0.001$) indicates that citizens who follow geopolitical news more closely translate threat perceptions into stronger support for strategic autonomy, supporting H2. The mediation analysis demonstrates that national identity salience significantly mediates the relationship between great-power rivalry threat perception and support for strategic autonomy (indirect effect = 0.135, $p < 0.001$), and between economic interdependence vulnerability and support for strategic autonomy (indirect effect = 0.102, $p < 0.001$). In both cases, mediation is partial, as the direct effects of the polycrisis-related variables on public support for strategic autonomy remain significant, confirming that global polycrisis pressures shape strategic-autonomy preferences partly by heightening national identity salience, in support of H3.

Conclusion

This study examined the determinants of public support for strategic autonomy among Pakistani citizens during the 2025–2026 global polycrisis, analyzing the effects of perceived polycrisis severity, great-power rivalry threat perception, economic interdependence vulnerability, and trust in multilateral institutions, while also investigating national identity salience as a mediating variable and media exposure to geopolitical news as a moderating variable. Grounded in Hedging Theory and the revisionist public opinion tradition, and using data from 850 respondents across Islamabad,

Karachi, Lahore, and Peshawar analyzed through Structural Equation Modeling, the study provides empirical evidence on the mass-level foundations of strategic-autonomy preferences in Pakistan, with broader implications for understanding public attitudes elsewhere in Asia. The findings reveal that great-power rivalry threat perception is the strongest positive predictor of public support for strategic autonomy, followed by perceived global polycrisis severity and economic interdependence vulnerability, while trust in multilateral institutions is negatively associated with such support. National identity salience partially mediates these relationships, and media exposure to geopolitical news significantly strengthens them. These findings validate the extension of hedging logic from the state level to the level of individual political psychology, and they confirm that citizens across polycrisis-affected Asian states are forming increasingly structured and threat-responsive preferences regarding their countries' international alignment.

Policy Recommendations

The findings carry several implications for governments, diplomatic communicators, and multilateral institutions. Since great-power rivalry threat perception emerged as the strongest driver of public support for strategic autonomy, governments should invest in transparent public communication regarding their diplomatic hedging strategies, as ambiguity in this domain may otherwise fuel public anxiety rather than confidence. Given that trust in multilateral institutions is negatively associated with demand for strategic autonomy, international organizations such as the United Nations, IMF, and regional bodies should prioritize visible, responsive engagement with the concerns of Asian publics to rebuild institutional confidence. Because national identity salience mediates the translation of threat perceptions into strategic-autonomy preferences, policymakers should be attentive to how nationalist framing of foreign policy issues can amplify public demand for autonomous postures, for better or worse. Finally, given the significant moderating role of media exposure, media literacy initiatives that promote balanced, contextualized coverage of great-power rivalry and polycrisis-related developments may help ensure that public foreign policy preferences remain well-informed rather than reactive.

Research Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference and cannot capture how strategic-autonomy preferences evolve as the polycrisis unfolds over time. Second, the purposive, urban-centered sampling strategy, while appropriate for reaching politically engaged respondents, limits generalizability to rural and less politically engaged populations within Pakistan. Third, self-reported measures of threat perception and institutional trust may be subject to social desirability and media-framing effects that were not directly controlled for in this design. Finally, because the study relies on a single-country sample drawn exclusively from Pakistan, the findings should be interpreted as evidence from one important Asian case rather than as directly generalizable to other Asian states, whose historical, economic, and geopolitical circumstances may produce different patterns of public sentiment regarding strategic autonomy.

Future Research Directions

Future research could extend this study through longitudinal designs tracking how strategic-autonomy preferences shift across different phases of the global polycrisis, providing stronger evidence of causal dynamics. Comparative studies incorporating additional Asian states, as well as states from Africa and Latin America facing similar polycrisis pressures, would help assess the generalizability of the hedging-based public opinion framework developed here. Future scholars might also incorporate additional variables such as partisan identification, elite cue-taking, social media exposure specifically, and direct experience of economic hardship. Mixed-methods

approaches combining survey data with qualitative interviews or focus groups could provide richer contextual understanding of how citizens interpret and reconcile competing pressures from major powers during periods of compounding global crisis.

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