
The Belt and Road Initiative and the Reorientation of Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Prospects, Challenges, and Strategic Implications

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Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by China in 2013, is a cross-border development vision and has become a major initiative to connect regions and promote economic cooperation globally. The article provides an analysis of how the BRI affects the foreign policy orientation of Pakistan and the reconstruction of Pakistan's foreign policy with its major regional and global partners – China, India, and the US. The qualitative methodology is used to explore the influence of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on Pakistan's foreign policy in terms of prospects, challenges, and strategic implications. Structural realism is employed as a theoretical lens to understand the changing regional coalitions, strategic interests, and influence of the BRI. The results reveal that the BRI has deepened strategic cooperation between Pakistan and China, and its success has led to closer cooperation between the two countries. It has transformed Pakistan into a pivotal player in connectivity and trade in the region. It has also reshaped the strategic dynamics and introduced more diplomatic twists and turns in the Pakistan-US equation. Although the project has great economic, regional, and strategic potential, it is not free from challenges.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Foreign Policy, Geopolitics, Strategic Alignment, Regional Connectivity

Introduction

In today's international system, linkages in the economy, infrastructure, and strategic alliances have become key elements of global politics. One of the largest projects in the twenty-first century, the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has turned into a broad-based pathway for enhancing regional connectivity, trade growth, and economic collaboration across Asia, Europe, Africa, and beyond. With investments in infrastructure, transportation, energy, and trade routes, the BRI aims to promote economic integration and consolidate interregional relations (Rolland, 2017). Besides its economic goals, the platform has increasingly been used as a tool for China's foreign and strategic influence (Ferdinand, 2016).

Pakistan holds a crucial place in the BRI because of its geostrategic position at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. This has turned Pakistan into a critical partner for China's plan of regional connectivity. Launched officially in 2015, the proposed CPEC projects in China-Pakistan collaboration are seen as the flag bearer of BRI and thus the most crucial facet of China-Pakistan economic relations (Wolf,

2020). CPEC covers investment in transport infrastructure, energy projects, industrial zones, and the Gwadar port development, along with the grander vision of regional trade and economic integration (Ali, 2018). The nodal point of CPEC at Gwadar Port holds immense potential for billions of dollars in the blue economy (Askari, Tahir & Shaheen, 2020).

Both BRI and CPEC are not limited to economic collaboration and have strategic value for Pakistan's foreign policy. Pakistan's foreign policy has long been driven by security threats, strategic alliances, economic factors, and regional stability. But the advent of the BRI brought both. It has deepened Pakistan's strategic ties with China and increased the country's significance in regional connectivity and trade. At the same time, the initiative has had an impact on relations with major regional and global powers, especially India and the United States, in a context of shifting regional power balances and escalating geopolitics (Small, 2020).

India has traditionally opposed the CPEC, citing sovereignty issues and regional strategic competition, and the US has voiced concerns over China's growing geopolitical influence through the BRI (Markey, 2020). These changes have created fresh diplomatic tensions for Pakistan, with a need to delicately balance its relations with rival powers. Thus, the BRI has become not just an economic avenue but a strategic pillar in shaping Pakistan's diplomatic outreach and foreign policy imperatives. Although the scholarly work on the economic aspects of the BRI and CPEC is on the rise, relatively less consideration and discussion have been made on their implications for Pakistan's foreign policy and strategic orientation. The existing literature has primarily concentrated on economic prospects and development opportunities, but the political, diplomatic, and strategic effects of the initiative are still to be interrogated. As such, the present paper attempts to explore the consequences of the BRI for Pakistan's foreign policy through three lenses: political, strategic, and diplomatic. It analyses the way the BRI has shaped Pakistan's relations with China and has influenced its dealings with other regional and global powers. Further, the paper examines the strategic challenges and opportunities posed by the scheme and discusses its significance in influencing Pakistan's strategic role in a mutable multipolar world order.

Literature Review

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is considered one of the most ambitious global development and connectivity agendas of the twenty-first century. The initiative is expected to promote infrastructure, trade connectivity, and economic integration among Asia, Europe, and Africa. Over time, the BRI has evolved from a simple infrastructure initiative to a multi-layered framework that includes economic, political, and strategic aspects. Scholars contend that the BRI is not just a development model, but also a means of economic statecraft that enables China to extend its empire of influence across the globe and reorganize international patterns of connectivity (Petry, 2023; Rai, 2022).

The existing research suggests that the BRI is critical to expanding China's position within the global economy and geopolitics. Petry (2023) describes how BRI is much more than the usual infrastructure projects – ports, roads, rail – and contains financial and institutional tools that increase China's strategic reach. Likewise, Petry (2022) argues that the BRI creates financial infrastructure at the core of China's larger economic strategy to expand its economic reach in participating regions. Rai (2022) also asserts that rising powers shape global governance architectures and power relations through such vast international schemes. These viewpoints strongly imply that the BRI would be best understood as a mixture of economic and geopolitical enterprise. Pakistan lies at the heart of South Asia and is a crucial player in the BRI considerations due to its geographic location.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is one of the major pillars of Pakistan's leadership and the central theme of the Pakistan-BRAIN Initiative. This initiative is not just an economic corridor, but a vital part of Pakistan's development and economic prosperity. In recent years, it has played a crucial role in enhancing the stature of Pakistan in the region in terms of connectivity and economic integration. Pakistan's participation in the BRI has enhanced its strategic relations with China (Parvez et al., 2023). This new

partnership is a sign of the pivotal role of Pakistan in the growing cooperation between the two countries. The literature confirms that there are many BRI benefits from an economic perspective for Pakistan. Khan et al. (2023) believe that foreign investment has significantly risen in Pakistan because of the BRI-related investments. These investments have led to greater economic activity and generated more potential opportunities for economic growth. Similarly, the BRI is also reputed to cater to broader sustainable development when it comes to offering enhanced regional connectivity, trade development, and creating jobs. It enables economic cooperation to be more effective (Ali and Munir 2023). The BRI-related issues might have a long-lasting effect on economic growth and development, but recently the geopolitical dimensions of the BRI have become an additional focus in research.

BRI's commitment to economic modernization, with a special focus on digital infrastructure and urban connectivity, points to a shift in BRI's reach from connectivity to engaging with digital transformation in countries that are participating. The developments, in turn, could pave the way for more opportunities for Pakistan in the future. Despite these possibilities, it is also clear from available literature that there are some institutional and financial issues as well. According to Amineh and Li (2025), the governance challenges, dependency threats, and unequal distribution of economic benefits related to BRI projects pose major challenges in the effective implementation of the BRI. Such structural issues can be associated with sustainability and economic sustainability issues in the long run. Similarly, the concerns of transparency raised by Upadhyay (2023) in the policy arena are points of serious concern.

While the BRI is a potential tool for development, in many ways it poses difficult challenges. Regarding governance and policy-related issues, the effect of the BRI, in the course of Pakistan's foreign policy, is also cited in the literature. Parvez et al. (2023) assert that the rise of the BRI has significantly impacted Pakistan's foreign policy trajectory towards China. BRI has come to define the evolution of Pakistan's strategic convergence with China on one hand and its relations with other major regional and global powers such as the United States and India on the other. Amineh and Li (2025) also stress that BRI has transformed Pakistan's geopolitical stance by making it more strategically dependent on China. The regional and global geopolitical ramifications of the BRI have been extensively discussed in the academic literature. Rabeya (2023) contends that BRI embodies China's wider geopolitical ambitions and has escalated strategic competition in a range of regions, most tangibly in Asia. Correspondingly, Khanal and Zhang (2023) describe the past ten years where the BRI has emerged as a powerful global strategic framework that shapes international power relations and global economic governance. At the global scale, BRI-related debates similarly raise issues of image, strategic clout, and international legitimacy.

According to Hines (2024), China is struggling to shape global narratives of the BRI in terms of trust, strategic motives, and global prestige. Unfavorable perceptions of the same issues of debt reliance, strategic influence, and transparency continue to impact acceptance of the initiative on a global scale. These discussions suggest that the BRI debate is not simply confined to South Asia but has a wider international resonance. A key research vacuum in extant literature is the scant attention paid to BRI's impact on the foreign policy actions of Pakistan beyond economic dependence. Infrastructure construction, patterns of use, and community attitudes and values are the main concerns of most experts. This gap hints that the focus of the BRI should be placed on the following aspects: its impact on Pakistan's foreign policy in both political and strategic aspects. As a whole, the BRI literature shows that the BRI is not an economic but a political and strategic initiative. The BRI opens up huge opportunities for Pakistan in terms of infrastructure development, economic, and social growth. But it also entails security, dependency, and strategic challenges. This is due to competition and geopolitical pressure. Thus, to analyse the implications of the BRI on Pakistan is to analyse both the potential and the problems in a global political and economic context.

Theoretical Framework

Structural Realism (Neorealism) has been used as the theory in this study to analyze the influence of the Belt

and Road Initiative (BRI) on the foreign policy of Pakistan. Structural Realism, as a form of realism, was synthesized by Kenneth Waltz (1979) and is amongst the most widely accepted theories in International Relations (IR). The theory states that the international system is anarchic, as no entity sits above states to provide them with security and stability. In this condition, nations view national survival, national security, and national interest protection as the top priorities when deciding their foreign policies (Waltz, 1979; Donnelly, 2019).

Structural Realism holds that the actions of states are largely determined by the structure of the international system and their relative distribution of power within that system. States adapt their policies continually to the shifting dynamics of power at regional and global levels. Several key foreign, strategic, and diplomatic policy decisions, including strategic alliances, diplomatic partnerships, and foreign relations, are influenced by calculations related to security and balance of power (Wæver, 2009).

In this study, the BRI – a Chinese concept introduced in 2013 – takes on more significance than a scheme for economic and infrastructural build-out. It is now a key geopolitical strategy with significant strategic implications for regional and global politics (Tahir & Askari, 2022). Through the BRI, China has extended its economic, political, and strategic reach over numerous areas. Pakistan plays a pivotal role in this initiative through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is the flagship project of the BRI (Parvez et al., 2021).

From the Structural Realist perspective, Pakistan's engagement with the BRI is a strategic recalibration and response to the shifting power dynamics within South Asia. The evolving global power system and the burgeoning India-China strategic rivalry in the region have pushed Pakistan to enhance its strategic ties with China. In this context, the BRI has emerged as a significant element in shaping Pakistan's foreign policy trajectory.

It is about regional security, geopolitical rivalries, and power balancing. Pakistan aims to bolster its strategic significance, maintain economic stability, and obtain bolstered political and strategic support from China regionally and globally through the BRI and CPEC.

Therefore, this research uses Structural Realism to examine how the Belt and Road Initiative affected Pakistan's foreign policy in terms of its strategic alignments, security priorities, and external relations. This theory is especially useful because it points to the fact that although Pakistan's foreign policy under the BRI is dictated by economic cooperation, it is also influenced by wider strategic matters relating to power, security, and survival in a changing regional order.

Research Methodology

The qualitative methodology is used to explore the influence of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on Pakistan's foreign policy in terms of prospects, challenges, and strategic implications. The qualitative approach is deemed suitable as the research endeavor is an examination of evolution in policy, regional and strategic alignments, multilateral momentum, and trade interconnectedness that are better understood through idiosyncratic exposition than numeric reporting. The research used is descriptive and analytical. The descriptive section stipulates the growth and value of the BRI. Consistent with the context of the paper, the analytical section summarizes the opportunities and risks associated with Pakistan's foreign policy and its strategic impact. This design allows for assessing the impact of the BRI on Pakistan's foreign policy, economy, and society. The qualitative method enables the researcher to study policy choices, bilateral relations, economic events, and geopolitical transformations holistically. It is particularly good for the analysis of Pakistan-China strategic cooperation in the regional and international context.

The research employs secondary methods of data collection. Relevant data has been gathered from genuine and reliable sources such as reviewed journal articles, books, government reports and policy papers, official documents, and reports of international organisations. Secondary data is appropriate for this study as it sheds light on the broad economic, political, and strategic dimensions of the BRI.

The data gathered is analyzed through thematic analysis. This approach enables the researcher to recognize, categorize, and make sense of key overarching themes within the literature. The review concentrates on three main themes: the prospects that BRI generates for Pakistan; the problems associated with BRI; and the geopolitical effects of BRI on Pakistan's foreign policy. Thematic analysis enables researchers to draw meaningful conclusions by identifying patterns in the data at any level (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

This study's population comprises all the literature, policy documents, and academic papers concerned with the Belt and Road Initiative and Pakistan's foreign policy. For data selection, purposive sampling has been applied in order to select relevant and authentic sources that are directly related to the subject of study. The sources were chosen according to their relevance, legitimacy, and contribution to the understanding of the research issue. The present study is an endeavor to explore only the effect of BRI on Pakistan's foreign policy with regard to the opportunities, challenges, and strategic outcomes. The study is confined primarily to 2015 and beyond; by 2015, major BRI-related projects in Pakistan, mainly through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), began to take shape.

Discussion and Analysis

BRI Interactions with Pakistan-China Relations

Since BRI Chair Chinese President Xi Jinping's introduction of the Belt and Road in 2013, it has deeply changed Pakistan-China relations, enhancing economic, political, and strategic cooperation. Both countries had close diplomatic relations in the past, and the two have always described their relationship as an "all-weather strategic partnership." But BRI has taken this relationship to another level beyond traditional security cooperation by promoting geo-economic and long-term strategic coordination.

Since it is at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, Pakistan has a pivotal place in China's BRI vision. China has increased investments in infrastructure, transportation, and energy sectors, boosting economic interdependence between itself and Pakistan through BRI and its signature project, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Pakistan provides China with easy access to the Arabian Sea through Gwadar Port, cutting long maritime distances to very short land routes for energy transportation. On the other hand, Pakistan is looking for China's investment for infrastructure, strategic support, and economic modernization, in addition to development (Saeed & Askari, 2021). Bilateral diplomatic trust and policy coordination are growing under the BRI cooperation. As a result, Pakistan's foreign policy has been influenced by China on a host of regional and global matters. In this context, BRI gave rise to a new kind of PMS relationship – a full-spectrum strategic and economic partnership (Parvez et al., 2021).

Significance of CPEC in Pakistan's Foreign Policy

It is common knowledge that BRI's largest component and magnet is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) - a major guiding force in shaping Pakistan's foreign policy. CPEC covers the areas of infrastructure development, transport networks, industrial cooperation, and energy projects that aim to boost both Pakistan's economic capacity and regional connectivity.

The advent of CPEC has resulted in a gradual recalibration of Pakistan's foreign policy from the previously primarily security-based perspective to a focus on geo-economics. In general, Pakistan's foreign policy was oriented toward military alliances and strategic security issues and conflicts in the region. But CPEC has also increased the salience of economic diplomacy, trade facilitation, and regional integration (Faisal & Askari, 2024).

CPEC also strengthens Pakistan's position as a regional trade and transit hub. Gwadar Port development has elevated the strategic importance of Pakistan in China's larger economic map and as a hub in regional connectivity. Hence, economic collaboration and regional integration now constitute more significant aspects of the current foreign policy of Pakistan (Khan et al., 2020).

Impact on Pakistan–India Relations

The BRI and CPEC have impacted Pakistan–India relations immensely. India is vehemently opposed to CPEC as a portion of the corridor runs through Gilgit-Baltistan, a region linked with the Kashmir dispute. Therefore, India considers CPEC to be incompatible with its claims of sovereignty and a threat to its strategic interests.

Also, India sees BRI as a way of exacerbating Chinese power in South Asia. Intensified Pakistan–China relations have fueled Indian anxieties about the balance of power within the region and strategic rivalry. Indian officials are concerned that the economic and strategic advantages Pakistan gains from CPEC will strengthen its standing in the region and upset the regional balance of power in South Asia.

As a result, BRI contributed to amplifying geopolitical rivalry for Pakistan, India, and China. Pakistan sees CPEC as a path towards economic development and strategic leverage, while India perceives it as a source of regional insecurity. BRI, therefore, is both a strategic opening point for Pakistan and a source of regional tensions (Shaheen & Panhwar, 2022).

Effect on Pakistan-US Ties

BRI's expansion has also affected Pakistan's ties to the United States. Traditionally, bilateral relations between Pakistan and the United States have been dominated by defense cooperation, regional security, and counterterrorism. Yet the burgeoning strategic alignment between Pakistan and China under the BRI has introduced a new element into Pakistan-US relations.

The United States has raised concerns about the lack of transparency, debt sustainability, and China's growing geopolitical influence through BRI. Washington views the CPEC as a vital element in China's strategic reach into South Asia. As a result, the growing economic ties between Pakistan and China have had an impact on the contours of Pakistan-US relations.

Hence, the challenge for Pakistan is to keep relations with the two superpowers 'equal and balanced'. Despite the fact that China is still the most important economic and strategic partner of Pakistan, the US is still a significant player in trade, diplomacy and security cooperation. The world's two largest populations, India and China, have added Pakistan to their lists, and now Pakistan's foreign policy must juggle with the two nations, being the hallmark of Pakistan's foreign policy of late and mirroring the dynamics of the changing international system (Hussain et al., 2024).

Findings

This study establishes that the foreign policy of Pakistan has been significantly transformed with the advent of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as strategic and economic relations with China have solidified, and more so with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The relationship has transformed from traditional security cooperation to encompassing large geo-economic and strategic cooperation. One of the broad conclusions is that Pakistani foreign policy has steadily evolved away from a security-centric approach to a geo-economic approach, with economic connectivity, trade, and infrastructure development all playing an important role. The study also concludes that the BRI has enhanced Pakistan's geopolitical relevance by transforming it into a regional trade and transit hub connecting South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. In addition, the study demonstrates that the BRI has been a factor in the transformation of regional power dynamics, as it has led to heightened strategic rivalry between China and India, with Pakistan as a pivot in this regional system. Yet at the same time, it has complicated the relationship between Pakistan and the United States, as Washington is uneasy about China's surging influence in the region, causing Islamabad to have to balance diplomatically (Mahmood & Askari, 2022). The results also suggest that the BRI has an enormous role in boosting financial opportunities in infrastructure development, energy production, and financial inflows, but it also brings several risks, such as financing obligations, poor governance, and increasing financial dependence on China. In sum, it is concluded that the BRI is an increasingly important

determinant of the foreign policy course of Pakistan in the context of a multipolar and contested international system.

Conclusion

The study finds that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is becoming a key factor in the rearticulation of Pakistan's foreign policy in the present era. It has transformed Pakistan–China relations into a close strategic and economic partnership, with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) serving as the linchpin.

The BRI has also diverted Pakistan's foreign policy priorities away from a security-centric posture towards a geo-economic framework premised on connectivity, trade and development. At the same time, it has also propelled Pakistan's importance in regional and world politics.

This transformation isn't without its tribulations, though. The BRI has stimulated power competition in the region, particularly complicating Pakistan's ties with the United States and the split between India and China. In addition, economic challenges such as debt sustainability and governance concerns continue to be significant hurdles. In overall terms, the BRI has connected Pakistan with a multipolar global environment where Pakistan and other nations are cooperating economically and through various other forms of engagement. The two concepts of strategic competition are intertwined. It intends to point out the evolution of Pakistan's foreign policy, with growing pressure for pragmatic calculations to balance economic opportunities with geopolitics.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Balanced Foreign Policy Approach

A balanced foreign policy for Pakistan is needed to bolster ties with China and involve it in various processes. Develop relationships and partnerships constructively with the United States, the European Union and other regional partners.

2. Improve Transparency and Governance in CPEC Projects

Pakistan needs to have transparency, accountability and efficient handling of the BRI/CPEC projects to maximize the benefits, and ensure that the project is not misused or delayed.

3. Reduce Economic Dependency

Pakistan should diversify its economic relations and should seek investments from various countries, otherwise, it will be in danger of remaining too dependent on one country.

4. Strengthen Security Framework

Pakistan should further fortify security measures of infrastructure-related projects of CPEC, particularly at sensitive areas due to security concerns.

5. Attach Attention to Industrial Development

There is a need to move away from infrastructure development only towards industrialization and job creation and export-oriented growth in CPEC special economic zones of Pakistan.

6. Regional Cooperation Strategy

Pakistan should use its strategic position under the BRI to promote regional connectivity and economic integration, especially with Central Asian and Middle Eastern countries.

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