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## Power Transition in New Great Game: Strategic Options for Pakistan

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### ABSTRACT

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Power transition in international politics is an ever-evolving approach owing to the rise and fall of the superpowers and great powers. Historically, the quest for more territories and resources has led to conflicts and wars between powerful empires and states, resulting in colonization, imperialism, and power transition. The first half of the 20th century witnessed long-running conflicts and wars among the great powers concerning power transition, which caused unheard-of violence and destruction in the history of humankind. However, in the second half of the foregoing century, the competing superpowers never resorted to direct confrontation during the Cold War but rather engaged in proxy conflicts and shadow wars by using proxy forces. The rise of China, the resurgence of Russia, and the emergence of transnational non-state actors in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century have ushered in the debate of power transition in international politics yet again. The 21<sup>st</sup> century power politics, based on geo-economics and the quest for energy resources and trade corridors, has been dubbed the New Great Game. Unlike the Cold War, the U.S. and China, the

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key players of the New Great Game, have avoided proxy confrontation by preferring competition and engagement. Pakistan, the closest U.S. ally during the Cold War and War on Terror, and now the closest ally of China in the emerging great-power competition, has fewer strategic options for maneuvering than ever before. This paper critically analyzes the future power transition in regional and far-regional geopolitics vis-à-vis the strategic options available to Pakistan's policymakers and decision-makers.

**Keywords:** Power Transition, New Great Game, International Politics, Thucydides Trap, U.S. Domination, Rising China, Resurgent Russia.

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## Introduction

International politics has been dynamic since the establishment of *poleis* (city-states) in ancient Greece in 750 BC. Athens and Sparta, the most powerful city-states at the time, fought as allies in the Greco-Persian Wars (499-449 BC), but after defeating the Persians in 480-479 BC, they engaged in a power struggle to dominate each other. The balance of power established between the two powerful city-states resulted in a security dilemma, what is now called the "Thucydides Trap" as accentuated in power transition, which contends that equity of power between the powerful rival states increases the likelihood of conflicts and wars. Prior to the U.S. rise in the second half of the 20th century as the world's superpower, Great Britain, with its allies, maintained power status quo by sustaining the German rise and challenge during World War I (WW-I) and World War II (WW-II). Later, the British power declined and was replaced by the U.S., which was unsuccessfully challenged by the Soviet Russia in the Cold War. With the ending of the Cold War and subsequent fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the U.S. became the superpower until the rise of China and resurgence of Russia as rival powers in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The New Great Game is a geo-economic competition among the superpower and great powers for broader geopolitical and geo-economic agendas. The 21st century power politics has been phrased as the New Great Game, which is basically geo-economic competition. The term geo-economics was coined by the U.S. strategist Edward Luttwak in

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1990, which is the continuation of geopolitics in the era of globalization by using economic instruments to serve the core national interests.

Pakistan is expected to avail some unprecedented economic opportunities from the 21st century great power' competition by virtue of its geo-strategic location at a tri-junction to connect the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia. However, Pakistan is in a complex security dilemma in-between economic opportunities and security challenges since the Chinese presence in the strategic port of Gwadar is causing much discomfort among many regional actors, including the U.S., which struggles to contain the Sino-Russian strategic alliance and their inflating sway in Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia. The 9/11 attacks in the U.S. and thereafter the US-led NATO offensive against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan resulted in a worsening security situation in Pakistan's bordering provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and Balochistan. The religious militancy in KPK and sub-nationalist insurgency in Balochistan in the early 2000s seemed to be the inflictions of the smoldering New Great Game in the region, which started with the arrival of the U.S.-led NATO troops in Afghanistan and the expression of Chinese interests to build Pakistan's deep seaport at Gwadar near the Strait of Hormuz in the Indian Ocean. In recent times, the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) attacks on military bases in Gwadar and Turbat in Pakistan's southwest, coupled with suicide bomb attacks on security forces in North Waziristan and Chinese engineers working on the Dasu Dam located in Kohistan, KPK, in Pakistan's northeast, are redolent reminders of Pakistan's strategic vulnerabilities in the ongoing great-power politics in the tumultuous region. The strategic options for Pakistan in the complex security quagmire are quite limited, which is why Pakistan faces extreme political polarization and instability, incensed sub-nationalism, raging religious violence and intolerance, and alarming economic downturn.

### **Power Transition Theory**

Power Transition is a theoretical concept in international politics articulated by Abramo Kenneth Organski in *World Politics* that outlines the recurring nature of wars to deal with the notion of power in international politics. The Power Transition theory was further extended in *The War Ledger* (1980), which Organski co-authored with Jacek Kugler to take an analytical account of cyclic wars associated with the power transition at regional and global levels. Organski adopts a scientific approach to study and analyze

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nations, *nationalism*, national growth, national goals, national power, balance of power and terror, power transition, diplomacy, collective security, and international organizations who believes that population, political efficiency, and economic development are the major determinants of national power and a shift in these areas would lead to changes in the distribution of power (Organski, 1968, p. 338). According to Organski, wars in global politics occur when a great power in a secondary position challenges the dominant nation for the control of world order. Organski has classified the nations into four categories with regard to degree of power, satisfaction, and dissatisfaction in international politics. The powerful and satisfied is the dominant nation, and with allied satisfied great powers, it controls the world order. The powerful and dissatisfied powers are a collection of potential rivals and challengers to dominate the nation. The dissatisfied powers, led by the potential challengers, are unwilling to accept a subordinate position and attempt to revise the existing international order. The weak but satisfied and dissatisfied powers are smaller nations called “middle powers and small powers,” which are either allied with the dominant power or potential challenger (Organski, 1968, pp. 364-369).

Dissatisfaction is the key driver of conflicts and war in the power transition paradigm. A dissatisfied great power with other dissatisfied states can challenge the dominant power, leading to war, but if the overtaking power is satisfied, then the transition would be peaceful. The domestic economic growth has been identified as the primary aspect of the national power in a hierarchical international order. “The cornerstone of the power transition theory is that *parity* is the necessary condition for major wars” (Kugler and Lemke, 1996, p. 4). The concept of parity is actually the balance of power, which the realists prioritized to be imperative for global peaceful order in an anarchic and chaotic world, but the Power Transition theory discredits parity as a destabilizing factor for international peace and security. Prior to WWI, Great Britain was the most powerful country in terms of economic and technological innovation due to the immense economic growth by dint of the Industrial Revolution (1750-1850). Germany was the world’s second most industrialized country after the U.S., which enhanced the German status from a middle power to a great power. The rapid industrialization and urbanization, along with Clausewitzian militarism, were the main motivations of the German *Weltpolitik*.

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The WW-I erupted between the British-led and German-led blocs after the dominant power (Britain) refused to engage and accommodate the rising dissatisfied challenger (Germany). Great Britain, with its satisfied allies, won both Great Wars, but it lost more than 40 percent of its wealth, plunging Britain into the deepest recession in history. Britain lost its position as a preponderant power, subsequently replaced by the U.S., which had already emerged as the world's largest economy by the start of the 20th century. Since both the U.S. and Great Britain had remained in a staunch alliance throughout the 20th century and felt one another as benign powers, therefore, after the end of WW-II, the power transition from Great Britain to the U.S. was peaceful. After the end of World War II, the dominant power, the U.S., was challenged by the revisionist Soviet Union with its communist ideology; however, the U.S. was remarkably successful in containing and defeating the Soviet Union by the end of the 1980s, leaving the U.S. as the sole superpower in the unipolar world order until the dawn of the 21st century. Since early 2000s, China's rise is widely debated as the next superpower vis-à-vis the decline of U.S. hegemony. The Chinese rise is forecasted to be violent, either by challenging the existing hegemon or by inviting counterbalancing effects based on power transition or balance of power (Yang, 2013, p. 35). China has become the most potential competitor or challenger to the U.S. and the U.S. is working on different strategies to counter the threat of rising China.

### **New Great Game**

The genesis of the New Great Game is traced back to Afghanistan and Central Asia in the 1990s, where, in the post-Cold War era, the multinational oil companies competed for the exploration and transportation of hydrocarbon resources. The term New Great Game, coined by seasoned Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid, explains the conceptualization of geopolitical and geo-economic competition among several regional and far-regional powers (Rashid, 2009, p. 2009). The New Great Game was further popularized by Ahmed Rashid in his book *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (2000). When different ethnic and religious groups were engaged in fighting to control over Afghanistan in the early 1990s, the Bridas Corporation, an Argentinian oil and gas company, tried to persuade Turkmen President Niyazov to move forward its 875-mile-long gas pipeline plan from the Yashlar gas field in Turkmenistan to Pakistan and then to India via Afghanistan. A U.S. oil company, Union Oil Company of California (Unocal),

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competed with Bridas Corporation to explore hydrocarbon resources of Central Asia. The U.S. Department of Energy report, released only a few days before the 9/11 attacks, cited Afghanistan's significance from its geographical position as a potential transit route for oil and natural gas exports from Central Asia to the Arabian Sea (Kleveman, 2003, pp. 226-227). During this competition between Unocal and Bridas, the U.S. diplomatic support to Unocal continued until the emergence of Al-Qaeda as a security threat to the U.S. in the contested resource-rich region.

Today, the great power game is being played in a wide and large region with different players, powers, and strategies. The New Great Game has stretched from the eastern Mediterranean Sea to the Western Pacific Ocean as well as the nations between the Far East, Central Asia, and the Middle East. The power contest in Asia is principally between the U.S. and China, and to a marginal extent, between the U.S. and Russia, where India, Pakistan, Iran, and others are in subsidiary roles (Akram, 2016). Unlike the Great Game and Cold War, the landscape of the New Great Game is more economic, trade-oriented, and commercial to get control of huge hydrocarbon reservoirs of Central Asia and the Middle East and vital maritime and land trade routes of the Indian Ocean and Asia-Pacific region. Prior to all these regional and international developments, China penetrated Central Asian consumer and energy markets besides agreeing to build a deep sea port at Gwadar in Pakistan's extreme southwest coastal region near the entrance of the Persian Gulf. Pakistan asked China to help build the Gwadar port despite the fact that the U.S. was not in favor of the port ("China may help build Gwadar port project", 2001). The political as well as economic fallout of the 9/11 attacks and the U.S. immediate retaliation against the Taliban government in Afghanistan starting from 7th October 2001 raised many questions on the fate of Gwadar port ("Gwadar port to open business opportunities", 2002). Unexpectedly, China nudged into action, and its Vice-Premier Wu Bangguo came to Pakistan in March 2002 to lay the foundation of Gwadar seaport with an initial assistance of USD 198 million. And thus, China got a strategic pearl in Pakistani waters (Cowasjee, 2005). As the US and NATO troops took the control of Afghanistan and China undertook the construction of the Gwadar deep sea port, the two provinces of Pakistan, KPK and Balochistan, bordering Afghanistan and Iran, descended into religious extremism and sub-nationalist unrest, respectively. Over and above the discovery of a secret nuclear program in neighboring Iran in 2002,

the U.S. attack on Iraq in 2003, and global outcry over suspected nuclear proliferation by Pakistani nuclear scientists in 2004, further complicated the regional security dynamics for Pakistan. The protracted sub-nationalist insurgency in the natural resource-rich province of Balochistan and religious militancy in KPK are the key security challenges for Pakistan for the reasons that violence and anti-state activities have aggravated over the years. It is not necessary that the power transfer between the potential challenger and status quo power result in confrontation, but the proxy conflicts and wars in their respective allied countries could clearly reminisce the growing power struggle. Many analysts believe that the on-and-off wave of ethnic and religious insurgencies in Balochistan and KPK provinces is a sequel to the brewing power transition of the satisfied and dissatisfied powers.

### **Power Transition in New Great Game**

Initially, the New Great Game was linked with the great powers' quest to fill the power vacuum in hydrocarbon-rich Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, following the end of the Cold War. However, the dynamics of the New Great Game have changed with the geopolitical shifts in the global politics, turning into a great power competition, particularly in Asia, involving the U.S., China, Russia, India, Pakistan, Japan, Iran, and other middle and small powers. Today's Great Game is global, more complex, and much more dangerous (Bittner, 2018). The new power contest in Asia is now mainly between the U.S. and China, which more precisely revolves around China's One Belt, One Road (OBOR) Initiative and U.S. Pivot to Asia, U.S. Strategic Reengagement in the Middle East, America First National Security Strategy, and India's Act East Policy. China's unexpected economic rise has created the "China Threat" theory among U.S. academia and policymakers. Douglas Lemke and Ronald L. Tammen profess that if China continues to grow, it will surpass the U.S. as the world's dominant power sometime before the middle of this century (Lemke and Tammen, 2003, p. 270). A.F.K. Organski concludes his theory of power transition over China by predicting that the U.S. will continue to hold its dominance in the contemporary world order, but China will sooner or later equal the U.S. in power (Organski, 1968, pp. 483-88). Three "non-stops"—first, China's economic and military growth; second, the U.S. determination to contain China; and third, China's resolve to achieve modernization—are quite distinguished features of the ongoing

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strategic and economic power struggle at the regional and global scales (Zhao, 2025).

In addition to this, Graham Allison's theory of the Thucydides Trap is being widely debated in the contemporary international politics vis-à-vis a future conflict between the U.S. and China. According to Allison, the rising power's entitlement and demand for greater say and sway, and the fear and insecurity to defend the status quo of the established power, make the war inevitable. "China and the U.S. are heading towards a war neither wants. The reason is Thucydides' Trap: When a rising power threatens to displace a ruling one, the most likely outcome is war.... These conditions have occurred sixteen times over the past five hundred years. Twelve ended violently" (Allison, 2017. P. 70). President Xi Jinping himself said.... 'There is no such thing as the so-called Thucydides' Trap in the world. But should major countries time and again make these mistakes of strategic miscalculation, they might create such traps for themselves" (Allison, 2015). The Thucydides' Trap is a dangerous phenomenon when a rising power threatens to displace an established power.

The French general and revolutionary leader Napoleon Bonaparte had rightly characterized the geostrategic significance of China by stating that "Let China sleep, for when she wakes up, she will shake the world." The post-Mao China led by Deng Xiaoping was soon to become the factory of the world (Lao, 2011, p. 44). In 1980, China's economy was less than that of the Netherlands, and its GDP was less than USD 300 billion. By 2023, it was recorded to be USD 17.71 trillion in terms of nominal GDP, making it the world's second largest economy. In terms of GDP Power Purchasing Parity, the Chinese economy is believed to be USD 27.02 trillion, making it the world's largest economy ("China's GDP expands 5.2 pct in 2023, surpassing annual target", 2024). In the 1980s, China's trade with the outside world was less than USD 40 billion, and it has amounted to USD 5.87 trillion in 2023, increasing one hundredfold ("China's foreign trade grows 0.02% in 2023....", 2024). China has been accused of unfair trade practices, technology theft, targeted traffic, military buildup, militarization of the South China Sea islands, and debt diplomacy (Akram, 2018). The looming trade war, illicit sales to Iran, escalation over Taiwan, the Malacca Dilemma, the China threat theory, the Korean conflict, and espionage are warning signs of real rivalry between the two powers, which could incite strategic miscalculation since the two

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countries are at a strategic crossroads. China is playing a geopolitical and geo-economic game through the OBOR in the region with an approach of soft-balancing, while the U.S. is counter-playing a short game with a hard-balancing approach. The OBOR has checkmated the U.S. Silk Road, which aspires to connect the Eurasian region via Turkey, Azerbaijan, CARs, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and up to the Far East and Southeast Asia.

So far, the U.S. decision-makers are not clear how to deal with the nature of China's rise. Initially, the Bush administration declared China as a strategic competitor. The U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) of 2006 urged for a closer strategic partnership with Russia and appreciated China for integrating itself into the global system. President Obama preferred to engage China rather than fully contain and confront it. The NSS of 2010 reaffirmed the pursuit of positive, constructive, and comprehensive relationships and welcomed China to take on a responsible leadership role along with the U.S. to address the 21st-century challenges in the international community. The NSS of 2015 strongly appreciates the scope of the U.S. cooperation with China as unprecedented to tackle the global issues, including nuclear proliferation and climate change. The Trump NSS announced in December 2017 took a more provocative stance against China and Russia and declared them rivals and revisionist powers. It pinpointed China as the principal economic and security threat to America. In NSS 2022, President Joe Biden promised to win the competition of the 21st century but without clarity.

Washington is more likely to manage the risky competition to go out of control, but the President Xi era will continue to be difficult and dangerous (Cooper, 2023). However, President Xi Jinping has taken a harder stance against the U.S. by saying that "Western countries led by the United States have implemented all-around containment, encirclement, and suppression of China" ("China's Leader, With Rare Bluntness...", 2023). The Sino-Russian burgeoning partnership and personal relationship of long-serving President Xi and President Putin have further intensified the China Threat Theory among the U.S. and Western policymakers. Since 2012, President Xi and President Putin have met over 40 times ("Putin to travel to China in May for Talk with Xi...", 2023).

Former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger observed that most of the Americans look at China through the Soviet lens, whom they think would undermine the U.S. prominence, while from the Chinese side, the American

promotion of democracy and human rights is interpreted as designed to dwarf China's rise (Kissinger, 2014, pp. 228-229). He had always urged the U.S. policymakers to halt China from forging an alliance with Russia. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is driven by Chinese interests in economic, financial, diplomatic, geopolitical, and security areas (Wolf, 2019, p. 7). Through the OBOR, China is shaking and making the ongoing century. Through the BRI, President Xi Jinping envisages a more cooperative world order and does not resort to geopolitical maneuvering ("Full text of Xi Jinping's speech...", 2017). Another reason for the emerging security dilemma for the U.S. is the continued rise of China's defense budget. Between 1992 and 2008, China's GDP grew at an average rate of 9.6 percent, but at the same time its defense expenditures increased at an average rate of 12.9 percent per year (Shearman, 2014, p. 14). China has increased its defense budget by 7.2 percent in 2024, reaching USD 304 billion. Which would come to USD 439 billion if adjusted for power purchasing parity. Nonetheless, it is much less than the USD 911 billion U.S. defense budget proposed for 2024 (Nouwens and McGerty, 2024).

China had been involved in military engagements against the U.S.-led international coalition in the Korean War (1950-52), India in 1962, and the Soviet Union in 1969, but after its admittance into the UN in 1971, China has behaved as a very responsible and constructive stakeholder thus far in return for benefiting from the stabilized international order. China had shown restraint despite would-be hotspots like the Taiwan Strait crisis in 1995-96, the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, the spy plane incident in 2001, the inclusion of China along with six other countries as a target of the U.S. first-strike nuclear attack in the Pentagon's Nuclear Posture Review in 2002, the U.S. declaration of China as a strategic competitor, and reports of repeated violations of China's exclusive economic zones in the South China Sea. It has resolved 17 out of 23 territorial disputes peacefully, mostly with concessions. China also contributes more troops to UN peacekeeping missions worldwide (Perlez, 2015). China has cooperated with the UN and U.S. over North Korea's nuclear program and partially imposed limited sanctions on North Korea after UN sanctions by reducing its oil exports. China's OBOR, based on win-win cooperation and a positive sum game, is completely different from Germany's *Weltpolitik*, which makes China more a status quo power than a revisionist power seeking to alter the international order.

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As compared to Cold War rivals—the U.S. and Soviet Russia—the New Great Game competitors—the U.S. and China—are more connected economically and share international financial and security responsibilities. China’s strategy is based on cooperative relations with the U.S. to avoid any Cold War-like military alliance targeting it, maintain a regional zone of peace by resetting ties with immediate and extended neighbors for its sustained economic development, diversifying its access to energy sources, and expanding its trade through the OBOR on mutual collaboration. China would refrain from destabilizing the system, which benefits its continued economic growth and may even be able to achieve hegemony without having to incur the costs of war. China heavily depends on foreign trade, especially with the European and North American countries. In 2015, the Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed a new model of great power relations known as “no conflict and no confrontation: mutual respect and win-win cooperation” (Li, 2016). Thus, China has stopped exporting its political ideology and system. China’s Confucian Pacifism may be an alternative to that of Western liberalism.

The power transition theory between China and the U.S. illustrates an interesting and paradoxical picture of the regional and extra-regional dynamics. The U.S. and China are status quo and competing powers, respectively. At the international level, China is a dissatisfied power, and it has challenged the U.S. on the economic front through maximization of its trade and investment worldwide. However, the U.S. is a satisfied power, but it is coping with China’s increasing foreign trade and FDI through an explicit trade war. Since 2001, China’s economy has grown more than five-fold; it is now the second largest world economy after the U.S. Nonetheless, at the regional level, China appears to be a satisfied power, while the U.S. seems to be a dissatisfied power. The power transition theory vis-à-vis the New Great Game at the regional level elucidates that China is the dominant power encompassing East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and, to a lesser extent, Central Asia. In East Asia, China is the dominant power with reclusive North Korea as a satisfied regional middle power, but the U.S. is a dissatisfied great power, Japan is a dissatisfied middle power, and South Korea is a dissatisfied small power. In Southeast Asia, China has emerged to be the dominant power too, since it has deepened its economic relations with the ASEAN states despite looming differences over the disputed South China Sea. China enjoys vibrant economic relations with almost all Southeast Asian neighbors,

including the Philippines, a U.S. ally. In South Asia, India has increasingly become a dissatisfied great power owing to the burgeoning strategic partnership between Pakistan and China, which are considered to be satisfied middle powers and satisfied dominant powers, respectively, while a dissatisfied U.S. is attempting to counterbalance the satisfied dominant power China through its strategic partnership with India.

Moreover, at the sub-regional level in Asia, dissatisfied India is struggling to encircle the satisfied Pakistan by extending its strategic partnership with Iran and Afghanistan. In the Middle East, the U.S. is the satisfied power, while China and Russia are dissatisfied powers, which is why dissatisfied China and Russia are struggling to counter the U.S. through their strategic partnership with the region's Muslim countries. In Central Asia, both China and Russia are satisfied powers, while the U.S. and India are dissatisfied powers. China is more interested in tapping rich natural resources of Central Asia, where its former Communist partner, Russia, has been struggling to maintain its sphere of influence. The Russian sphere of influence has been quite marginalized by the U.S.-backed NATO expansion towards its historic borders in the Eurasian region. In Europe, the U.S. is a satisfied power, while Russia is a dissatisfied power; that's why the latter has attacked Ukraine, a U.S. strategic ally, to revive its military influence in Europe.

The U.S. and other Chinese rivals have identified the Chinese energy-security vulnerability since China is extremely dependent on its 60 to 80 percent oil imports from the Middle East and Africa through the contested and risky sea lanes of the Indian Ocean. The core elements of the U.S. Counter-China strategy circulated among the Chinese leadership in 2014 as a "five-point consensus" to isolate China, to contain China, to diminish China, to divide China internally, and to sabotage China's leadership (Rudd, 2015, p. 14). The power transition is a reality and occurs periodically throughout history, but the national power of China to achieve superpower status is very premature, as a world power must be able to exert its influence throughout the globe, which China is yet to acquire. Nevertheless, if China continues to grow at the same speed, it is more likely to challenge the U.S. as the world's largest economy before long.

### **Strategic Options for Pakistan**

Pakistan's unique geopolitical position bridging South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia in a complex regional strategic situation has presaged

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multifaceted security challenges that are extremely detrimental to its national security. Both China and the U.S. have been Pakistan's most important economic partners and strategic allies. The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent war against terrorism dragged Pakistan into the vortex of religious militancy and ethnic sub-nationalism. The presence of the Al-Qaeda Network, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), and other Baloch insurgent groups, Tehrik-i-Taliban Afghanistan, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Daesh (Islamic State) Khorasan, and several sectarian groups on Pakistan's territory have resulted in the rise of religious militancy in the KPK and ethnic insurgency in Balochistan. Moreover, the sanctioned-laden neighboring Iran isolated Taliban-ruled Afghanistan after the abrupt U.S. exit, spiraling covert and overt conflicts in the Middle East, rising India, upsetting the strategic stability in South Asia, and unrelenting Saudi-Iran bloc politics coupled with political instability and economic crisis have left fewer strategic options for Pakistan than ever.

The hawks in the U.S. continue to push for an offensive strategy to disturb China's OBOR initiative, especially in the peripheries, and the best target could be the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the jewel in the crown of the OBOR, connecting China's Silk Road Economic Belt with the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road through Gwadar Port on the northern edge of the Strait of Hormuz in the North Arabian Sea. The U.S. has also endorsed Indian concerns over CPEC, which it believes passes through the contested territory of Kashmir in Gilgit-Baltistan. James Mattis, former U.S. Defense Secretary, while appearing before the Congress, opposed China's OBOR as a geo-economic initiative, and in Pakistan, it passes through disputed territory ("CPEC passes through disputed territory: US", 2017). In South Asia, the U.S. and India are bidding to contain China, while China and Pakistan are working jointly to restrict the Indo-U.S. attempts of domination in their geographic space (Burki, 2012). The U.S. has taken a toughened line in great power competition with regard to China. The Chinese politico-economic influence is growing in Pakistan and elsewhere in Asia. The U.S. wants to remain politically relevant in Asia (Markey, 2020).

Pakistan is suspicious of a tacit triangular support from its neighboring countries of India, Afghanistan and Iran for sponsoring different religious and ethnic militants. Pakistan blames Taliban-controlled Afghanistan for providing sanctuaries to the TTP and liberty of action for cross-border

terrorism inside Pakistan. The TTP is responsible for repeated terrorist attacks inside Pakistan. Iran allegedly provides direct access to India to support the Baloch insurgents there. The Baloch insurgents have been targeting the Chinese nationals and workers in Balochistan from 2004 till to-date (“Bombs Kills 3 And Injures 11 in Pakistan”, 2003). Pakistan blames India for supporting to the Baloch militants and submitted dossier of ‘irrefutable proofs’ of Indian sponsorship of terrorism in Pakistan to the UN and other international forums. Pakistan high officials always allege India for attempting to build a consortium of terrorist groups including TTP and Baloch militant organizations BLA, BLAF and BRA (“Specific proof of Indian terrorism in Pakistan unveiled”, 2020).

In April 2019, Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi directly named neighboring Iran for cross-border attack with reference killing of Pakistan’s navy personnel travelling on Makran Coastal Highway in Gwadar district (“Pakistan blames Iran-based separatists for attack”, 2019). Likewise, many politicians and policy-makers in Pakistan believe that the U.S. also tacitly supports the Baloch sub-nationalists despite the fact that the U.S. has officially designated the BLA as a terrorist organization in 2019, which mostly targets the Chinese interests in Balochistan and Karachi, the commercial capital of Pakistan. There are 13 banned outfits linked to ethnic insurgency in Balochistan, and the U.S. has only listed the BLA as a terrorist organization since 2019, which was banned in Pakistan back in 2006 (Rehman, 2019). The Baloch insurgents attack on the Chinese nationals and companies working on different projects in Balochistan.

Iran has somehow strained relations with Pakistan because of latter’s tilt towards Saudi Arabia, Iran arch-rival in Middle Eastern Sunni-Shite rift, and Pakistan’s alleged support to Baloch Sunni militant groups Jundallah and its Jaish-ul-Adl, which are involved in suicide bombings and other subversive militancy in Iran’s Sistan-Baluchestan province. Both Pakistan and Iran accuse each other for harboring and using militant groups against one another. In early 2024, Iran and Pakistan carried out tit-for-tat drone strikes on each other’s Baloch-dominated territories and claimed to have killed several militants belonging to Jaish al-Adl and BLA and BLF (“Iran admits carrying out deadly strike on Pakistan territory”, 2024). The sub-regional security matrix among India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran revolves around the realpolitik axiom of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” emulating the

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Mandala theory of foreign policy outlined by Kautilya in *Arthashastra* that views the immediate neighbors as enemies, but any state on the other side of the neighboring state is likely to be an ally.

Owing to overlapping security concerns, Chinese interests are frequently under attack in the region. In recent times, China seems to be using its global clout to protect its vital national interest. China has pushed Saudi Arabia and Iran to restore their yearlong tense relations, and a Chinese-brokered deal between them was signed for normalization of their strained ties in April 2023 (“Rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia hold first high-level talks...”, 2023). Similarly, China is also strengthening its diplomatic ties with the Taliban government in Afghanistan. China was the first country to formally accept the Taliban ambassador to Beijing, and China was also the first country to appoint an ambassador to Kabul under Taliban rule. China also invited a Taliban delegation to its global Belt and Road Forum held in October 2022 (“Afghan Taliban Say China Becomes First Nation to Accept Their Ambassador”, 2024). China’s engagements in Afghanistan manifest that it is quite ready to play a greater role in the regional stability for the sake of its geo-economic interests. China also eyes the multi-billion untapped mineral resources and rare earths of Afghanistan, which laps the world’s second-largest copper deposits.

China is growing its diplomatic and economic links with the Taliban government in Afghanistan and exchanging ambassadors without official recognition is the way forward, which could be a good omen for Pakistan to mend the fences with the Afghan Taliban over several contentious issues, including TTP and intermittent border clashes across the Durand Line. China could also be helpful to resolve the recurrent cross-border militancy between Pakistan and Iran. Pakistan must take baby steps forward to break the Indian influence over its immediate neighbors. Keeping its political instability and economic woes in mind, Pakistan should use its strategic ties with China and religious and cultural ties with Iran and Afghanistan to resolve the quarrelsome issues at the sub-regional and extra-regional levels for a win-win situation and longstanding peace and stability in the entire region. The neighboring countries of Afghanistan and Iran should also shun their zero-sum game approach and extend their cooperation for regional peace building. A sub-regional organization of contiguous neighbors—China, Pakistan,

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Afghanistan, and Iran—under the Chinese pivot is possible for long-term regional economic and security cooperation.

### **Assessment, Discussion, and Results**

The rise and fall of the great powers or power transition is a natural phenomenon in the revanchist international politics as what goes up must come down. Nature despises a vacuum; likewise, history despises hegemony in international politics. The historical cycle of power transition continues with the steady rise of China and the gradual economic decline of the U.S. Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. has fought seven wars; the First Gulf War (1991), Serbia over Bosnia (1995), Serbia over Kosovo (1999), Afghanistan (2001-2021), Iraq (2003 to date, still fighting Islamic State), Libya (2011-2019), and Syria (2014-present). Besides, the U.S. is actively backing Ukraine against the Russian-waged war and Israel against Iran and its non-state-actor allies ( Hamas, Hezbollah, Houthi rebels, and Kataib Hezbollah). As a consequence, the U.S. economy has badly suffered owing to the huge costs of the wars and conflicts. Between 2001 and 2016, the different wars and conflicts have cost USD 3.68 trillion to the U.S. economy, and with interest, it could rise to USD 7.9 trillion by 2053 (Crawford, 2016, pp. 3-4).

China's unprecedented growth in the past three and a half decades has grabbed and glued the attention of many analysts to prophesize the danger of a clash of rising China with the U.S., the superpower and hegemonic power. China's economic standing is towering, but its military clout is far behind that of the U.S. and Russia; however, its potential is obvious. China has risen peacefully since the onset of the 21st century, which is why the chances of direct conflict with the dominant power is less likely since it has been adjusted in the global power structure, and China and the U.S. are trapped in a cooperative web of multilateralism. Neither China nor the U.S. can afford to disturb the contemporary world order.

In the prevailing chaotic situation, a “uni-multipolar” international system as predicted by Samuel P. Huntington in 1999 could better maintain international peace and security, as a pre-eminent power cannot solely resolve the international issues and requires the participation of other powers in the post-unipolar order. The Bucknell University professor Zhiqun Zhu, author of *US-China Relations in the 21st Century: Power Transition and Peace* has analyzed a possible power transition between China and the U.S. by hypothesizing that if the government, top leaders and the public in both the

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dominant power and the challenging power have a positive evaluation of the bilateral relationship then the power transition will end in peace provided that the rising power is incorporated in the international system by the dominant power; the rising power respects the vital interests of the dominant power and vice versa; and a more strong relationship between rising and dominant powers' leaders and societies, less chances of war (Zhu, 2006, p. 23). The foregoing observation apparently fits the U.S. and China's ongoing competition in the New Great Game.

However, the bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral strategic relations of different regional and far-regional satisfied and dissatisfied actors have brought in multi-pronged security challenges in Pakistan. Soon after its independence from the British Empire, Pakistan was caught off guard by the onset of the Cold War, in which it had to choose between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, Pakistan was at the forefront in the war against Soviet Communism in Afghanistan. The U.S. abandoned Pakistan and Afghanistan following the end of the Cold War. In post-9/11, Pakistan had to again choose between strategic lines drawn by the world superpower, either with the U.S. or against it. The great power competition has inflicted a huge human and material cost on Pakistan. It claims to have lost 70,000 lives and suffered more than USD 150 billion in economic losses in siding with the U.S. as a frontline state in the war on terror during the past 20 years. The U.S. provided around USD 20 billion to Pakistan as economic aid for fighting the war against terrorism, but it has paid a huge price by facing ethnic sub-nationalism in Balochistan and religious militancy in KPK since 2003. Pakistan has launched counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations by giving provincial autonomy to smaller provinces, expanding security infrastructure, integrating FATA into KPK, erecting border fencing along Afghanistan and Iran borders, and installing the latest border-controlling information technologies, yet there is no end to terrorist attacks. Pakistan has become the geostrategic and geo-economic partner of China's BRI, and despite the huge Chinese FDI of over USD 70 billion, Pakistan's economy is plummeting, and the political polarization and instability is quite ripe. Its bilateral relations with the U.S. and other great powers like the UK are entangled with mistrust and doubts. The regional security matrix is extremely alarming as India is rising with the world's fastest-growing economy, and Pakistan's bilateral relations with Afghanistan and Iran are at the lowest ebb.

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## Conclusion

China is promoting its economic interests through its Belt and Road Initiative in every nook and cranny. Pakistan, as a neighboring country, is vital for China in terms of geopolitical and geo-economic considerations; however, Pakistan's regional relevancy seems to have minimized for Washington and Europe after the U.S. and NATO exit from Afghanistan. The mistrust of war-on-terror-time still haunts Pakistan's relations with the U.S. and the West. The Biden administration has been reluctant to engage Islamabad on various regional issues, particularly following Pakistan's decision to remain neutral in the Russia-Ukraine war and *the Ciphergate* saga resulting from the ouster of the Imran Khan government in April 2022, in which a senior official of the U.S. Foreign Office was alleged by former Prime Minister Imran Khan to have been involved in the ouster of his government through a no-confidence motion of Parliament. Since good relationships with the U.S. and other major powers have been the cornerstone of Pakistan's foreign policy, Pakistan should continue to maintain a balanced approach to revive its frozen bilateral relations with the U.S., which is still the world's most powerful military and economic power.

Despite the growing Indo-US bilateral relations in the Asia-Pacific region, Pakistan needs the U.S. in the regional and far-regional arenas to engage India over the Kashmir issue, and the other mammoth regional problems cannot be resolved without the U.S. intervention or involvement. The U.S. financial aid and diplomatic support are proudly instrumental to resuscitating Pakistan's fragile economy and tackling pressing challenges such as climate change, flood recovery, regional security, political polarization and instability, civil-military relations, and negotiation with Bretton Woods Institutions. Moreover, Pakistan should take concrete measures to bridge the growing trust deficit with China, particularly the growing uncertainty over CPEC projects. The incumbent multi-party coalition government has a huge responsibility on its shoulders to drive Pakistan out of the deep political polarization, provincialism, and plunging economic debacle. Pakistan's ruling elite has no other choice but to adopt a pragmatic approach to the escalating political, economic, and security crises in the country. Last but not least, the new coalition government in Islamabad should adopt a comprehensive policy for conflict resolution and transformation to deal with the religious militants and sub-nationalist insurgents in the KPK and Balochistan, respectively.

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