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## **A Critical Analysis of Pakistan's Hedging Dilemma and China-US Rivalry in 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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### **Abstract**

The world is witnessing one of the major confrontations of history between the two major powers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the United States and China. The period of cooperation and good relations between the United States and China which was started in 1970s has ended. Since the Trump Administration, Washington and Beijing relations have transformed significantly. The two countries are now confronting each other on several fronts. Firstly, being initiated from the United States side, Trade war remains a significant element of the current Sino-US rivalry. The Trade war was started after Trump carried out an investigation into Chinese economic activities. The trade war witnessed the imposition of heavy duties on Chinese items by the United States which met with similar response from the Chinese side. Secondly, the “Strategic Partnership”

between the United States and India, aimed at containing China, is major characteristic of the current Sino-US rivalry. The confrontation between the two most influential countries Washington and Beijing have brought with it serious implications for Pakistan. The paper gives an account of the Sino-US rivalry and Indo-US strategic partnership. The paper then discusses Pakistan's perspective regarding the Sino-US rivalry. Moreover, paper delves into the impacts of the rivalry on Pakistan.

### **Introduction**

The acrimony and antagonism between the United States and China has resurged in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Washington-Beijing rivalry is now in the spotlight of the world affairs. The rivalry has grown out of bounds captivating the attention of scholars and scientists of international relations. The contention has been expressed in several spheres, from politics to economy to vying for technological advancements and constructing significant influence on the emergent countries (NDU, 2023). The rivalry between the two major powers of the world has generated global perturbations regarding the effects and repercussions of intensified and aggravating contention. The prominent and illustrious policymakers like Henry Kissinger have also marked Washington and Beijing's antagonistic engagement as a point of concern for the world as it is a major event that will shape the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Scielo Brazil, 2021). Mike Pompeo's deliverance in 2020 has been equated with Winston Churchill's speech at the start of the Cold War. Mike Pompeo said that the United States should "partner with other countries against China" because what Washington was pursuing in bilateral relations with China since 1970 has failed. This represents how much venomous the bilateral relations between the United States and China have turned in the current era generating detrimental implications worldwide. The rivalry between Sino-US impacts encompasses Pakistan as well (Zhao, Zhao, & Zhang, 2021).

The United States has initiated a confrontation with China so that it can perpetuate its role as the only Super Power of the World, the status that all the countries in the international arena vie for. The United States's endeavors and efforts to maintain its hegemony have come due to the increasing influence of China. Beijing's economy has grown remarkably and conspicuously in the last couple of decades. The Chinese economy experienced this growth after initiating Reforms in the 1970s. China's economy grew at the rate of 9.5% GDP on average from the late

1970s to the late 2010s. Such large-scale economic growth is unequalled, out of the ordinary, and unprecedented. Such developments helped China to pull millions of people out of poverty and provide them with adequate opportunities and facilities for life. One of the main pushes behind China's prodigious and exceptional economic growth was its immense rate of savings accounting for 32% of GDP in the years following the Reforms. The savings were then invested again along with foreign investments which enabled China to grow tremendously. One of the attractive factors for Foreign Direct Investments in China was its inexpensive labor. Huge economic gains enabled China to transcend and outstrip the United States in terms of "Purchasing Power Parity" in 2014. Moreover, Beijing has turned into the world's largest economy. The rise of China to such a marvelous place in the international world has generated concerns for the hegemonic position of the United States. Therefore, Washington has initiated a policy to contain China to secure its supremacy (CRS, 2019).

India which is a rival of China, found its interests converging with those of Washington in the containment of China. The United States and New Delhi have commenced a partnership aimed at containing the increasing influence of China. Looking at India's huge economic power strategic location, it seems a good option for the United States to align with it to mitigate China's growing influence and maintain its status as a world-leading superpower. Washington and New Delhi have signed several security agreements strengthening their bilateral relations and empowering the latter to be capable of carrying out the task of containing China (Arha & Saran, 2024). However, the partnership between the United States and India has kindled concerns in Pakistan. The growing partnership between the United States and India is aggrandizing Indian power by providing it with favors i.e. NSG waiver. The partnership has also made the United States turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to Indian violations of human rights in Kashmir. Such developments have generated serious security concerns for Pakistan which considers India an adverse enemy and rival (Farooq, Kazmi, & Javed, 2018).

### **The United States Realizing China Threat**

The United States and the People's Republic of China were at odds during the first two decades of the Cold War era. China was furious about the United States' stance regarding Taiwan. The Soviet Union and China were jointly devising policies against the United States and carrying out

their implementation through cooperation in the early half of the Cold War. The Chinese and Soviet interests started to diverge and clash, and the cooperation against the United States started to demolish and finally broke up in the late 1960s. Soon, the United States considered the moment to be advantageous and started to normalize relations with China and expand engagement with it. The relations were normalized through American official's visits to China like Henry Kissinger and later President Richard Nixon proved to be triumphant in shifting American-Chinese relations from confrontation to cooperation. Moreover, the United States changed its stance on Taiwan and declared the People's Republic of China as the true representative country of China to the United Nations while Taiwan is just a chunk of China. The United States since the 1970s followed a cooperation policy towards China. The first reason was that the United States thought it would be beneficial to pursue good relations with China to contain the Soviet Union. The second reason was to gain economic benefits by engaging with China. After China launched Reforms in the late 1970s, it became an attractive location for the United States foreign direct investment. Later, the United States again helped China join the World Trade Organisation which further boosted China's economic growth (Lawrence, et al., 2019). The United States by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to some extent, became concerned about China and its aggrandizing influence. But the United States after 2001 became involved in the war on terrorism and its attention was diverted from China's increasing influence (Khan, Ali, & Hammaduddin, 2021). After China overshadowed the United States in terms of "purchasing power parity", Washington was perturbed and agitated. The United States officially realized China's threat with Trump becoming the President. When Trump came into power in the United States, he was focused on changing Washington's policy towards China. He affirmed that America's China policy has been a significant failure and that the United States needs to adopt a new policy in which China's ambitions and challenge to Washington's supremacy are entertained. In 2017, he denominated China as a major threat along with Russia and declared the United States would employ such a policy to counter its rivals (Hiromu, 2023).

### **Thucydides' Trap**

The confrontation between the United States and China has become the center of attention in the international arena in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The rivalry between Washington and Beijing has serious

implications worldwide. Mitigating the tensions between the two most powerful states of the time, the United States and China, requires a comprehensive understanding of the basis of conflict. One of the most distinguished and lionized explanations of the conflict is the “Thucydides’ Trap”. Thucydides lived about 2400 years ago when Sparta was the superpower. Athens at that time was another state gaining influence and increasing in power. Soon, Athens and Sparta were compelled to fight a war that came to be known as the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides in an attempt to explain the origin of the Athen-Sparta antagonism that led to the Peloponnesian War contended that Sparta was infuriated by the increasing power of Athens. The Spartans even felt threatened by the expanding ascendancy of Athens which made it difficult for them to avoid conflict. The Trap expounds that “an already existing superpower” would always endeavor to contain the emerging states to perpetuate its role as the hegemon state (Misenheimer, 2019). The same is the case in the 21<sup>st</sup> century between the United States and China. The United States became the sole power in the world with the dissolution of its greatest rival of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The United States soon launched a world order of its choice in the early part of the 1990s. Washington enjoyed being the only superpower of the world for a significant time. Meanwhile, China kept on achieving economic and military supremacy with a silent but conspicuous approach. The United States initiated the policy to curb China’s expanding dominance so that it could secure its hegemonic position (Liaqat & Abbasi, 2023). The Thucydides’ Trap is the befitting elucidation of the current confrontation between the United States and China in which both countries are employing malice policies to undermine each other’s interests. In the current conflict, the United States is the already existing superpower while China is the new emerging power. A deep dive into the history also corroborates the same assertion. For the 12 times in the last quincennial, whenever there was an emerging power, the already existing superpower would always try to suppress and quell the former. This makes the causes behind the Washington-Beijing confrontation perspicuously intelligible (Hanania, 2021).

### **An Economic Rise Faces Economic Challenge**

China has become a significant, potent, and influential actor in the international affairs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a consequence of its economic growth. This economic growth has been brought about through the initiation of policies by China like “Opening Up” and several other Reforms that

were adopted almost 4 decades ago. Such policies enabled China to interact with the outside world which fostered economic relations between China, a country with cheap labor, and the rest of the world. Deng Xiaoping who became the ruler of China after Mao, sowed the seeds of the Reforms in China. He was focused on learning from the past and employing such policies in China that would help it flourish and sprout. For this purpose, he wanted to remove all those elements in the governance system of China that were holding it back from achieving fruitful results. Firstly, he unfastened the control over the provinces. Secondly, he eliminated the communes. Thirdly, he amplified and accelerated production in China. In addition to this, the agriculture sector was revamped. He also exposed the country to trade with other countries and presented China to foreign countries for their investment through the construction of “Special Economic Zones”. Moreover, the “state-owned enterprises” to a greater extent, were directed to operate independently. Such policies turned out to be fruitful for China in making it the “second-largest economy.” However, in terms of “purchasing power parity,” China is the world’s first economy since the middle of the previous decade. Despite of huge population, China still manages to export its exceptional agricultural production after fulfilling the domestic demands. China’s economic growth has enabled it to conquer the position of holding the world’s largest foreign exchange reserves, even more than Washington's (Andrabi, 2015).

The United States had become well aware of the Chinese economic gains and the significant influence it had achieved through economic engagement. So, the United States wanted to hurt that specific element of China that had been aggrandizing and boosting China’s power and elevating its status in the modern world. In addition to this, the United States felt that bilateral China and US economic relations were hurting Washington. The United States believed that the job losses that Washington faced were due to China. Secondly, the United States inculcated that it was experiencing a “trade deficit” because of China’s malicious policies to hurt the United States. Therefore, the United States carried out a trade war against China to incapacitate its rival so that it could not further prosper (Huang, 2021).

The trade war was commenced and kicked off by the American side, specifically by the Trump Administration. Firstly, the Trump Administration in its early years carried out meet-ups with Chinese Officials. Meanwhile, it had rung up the curtain on the investigation of Chinese

economic policies so that it could wage a trade war against China. However, in the first month of 2018, Washington launched tariffs on a limited number of Chinese products. This was only the first step taken before the actual start of a trade war between the United States and China. The tariffs of this first step targeted mainly two products from China, washing machines and solar panels. With the passage of time, the United States tariffs became harsher, grating and grinding for the Chinese products. The United States not only turned raucous but also incorporated more and more Chinese products under the tariffs category. Washington then with a gap of one month, pursued tariffs on Chinese products like aluminum and steel in March of the said year. Soon, the United States put more than 1250 Chinese products under tariffs in the same month. After facing tariffs on such a huge number of products, China struck back and got its own back. But the actual trade war to its full level in June 2018. In June, the United States had increased the tariff volume up to 25% encompassing the products of \$50 billion evaluation Chinese products. China hit back with the same percentage of tariffs on the same evaluation of American products. China had focused on agriculture and vehicles in its retaliation. Then in June and September 2019, the United States thrust tariffs on Chinese products that were directed toward Washington which were even more severe than those enacted in 2018. The June 2019 tariffs received tariffs in response from China, but this time Chinese response only hit American products evaluation of \$60 billion. Later, the two countries were successful in mitigating their tensions in 2020 through a “Phase-One Deal.” However, the tariffs hang in the air extending the trade war to date (Nardon & Velliet, 2020) (Zhou, 2023).

### **Forging Partnership**

There is a significant chronicle of the United States in shaping and forging alliances to incapacitate its rival. In the Cold War, the United States was aligned with Western European countries to contain the Soviet Union. In the latter part of the Cold War, Washington also partnered with China to counterbalance the Soviet Union. In the current conflict and rivalry between the United States and China, India has been playing the role of American Pawn to block Chinese advancement and to keep a check on the latter. The antagonism between the United States and China has hurled and propelled the United States to pursue closer ties with India. China is already a contentious rival of India. The latter has turned its hand to the United States

with whom it earlier had repugnant relations. But the Washington-Beijing rivalry along with China and Indian dissension has enabled the United States to transmogrify their relations from that of abhorrent and offensive to cooperative. Therefore, in the current Sino-U.S. rivalry, the United States and India have partnered to quash China's increasing influence (Burgess, 2019).

After the end of the Cold War in the absence of a powerful Russia, India was making every effort to come closer with the United States. This Indian ambition turned into a reality when the Bush Administration realized that China needed to be equipoised along with a cooperative US policy towards the latter. From 2001-04, India and the United States paved the way for pursuing a strategic partnership aimed at "Balancing China." The United States and India have signed several agreements that have shaped and strengthened the Indo-US strategic partnership. These include General Security of Military Information Agreement, Logistics Exchange Memorandum Agreement, Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement, and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement. The United States through these agreements opened the doors of "high technology military equipment" to India. The United States has adequately provided India with such intelligence information and military equipment that enhanced the latter's military power. The United States has also assisted and accommodated New Delhi in the Nuclear Suppliers Group. The United States has pursued a policy to strengthen Indian power so that it is capable of countering China. On the other hand, such favors to India by the United States have boosted Indian military capacities and power which is a major point of concern for Pakistan which considers New Delhi as a long-standing rival (Ali, 2020) (Barrech & Siddiqa, 2022).

### **Pakistan's View of the US-China Rivalry**

The United States has been an important great power for the security assurances to Pakistan. However, the relations between Pakistan and the United States have not remained always stable and have seen many ups and downs. The United States provided Pakistan with economic and military assistance in return for securing Pakistani support to fulfill the former's interests. The United States has always left Pakistan alone after realizing its objectives. However, Pakistan is still dependent and hinges on the United States both directly and indirectly through institutions like the International Monetary Fund. On the Other Side, Pakistan's relations with China have been more stable and consistently cooperative in nature. Among the Muslim World, Pakistan



forwarded recognition to the “People’s Republic of China” in the first place. Both the People’s Republic of China and Pakistan have common interests against India and in various other aspects of international affairs. Pakistan has also provided help to China during the times when it started to pursue Reforms and normalize relations with the United States. Moreover, the kick-off of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has further initiated a new aspect of cooperation between Pakistan and China (Asad & Shah, 2021). In recent times, it is quite visible that Pakistan is trying to pursue a policy that would be more engaged with China. While it struggled to divert its way from the United States at least during the Imran Khan. Pakistan under IK put efforts in place to escape the American orbit of influence. However, escaping the United States orbit would be very arduous and strenuous. In addition to this, Pakistan pursues to mitigate tensions between the United States and China as it had helped them normalize relations during the 1970s (DAWN, 2022) (Business Standard, 2022).

### **Implications for Pakistan**

The rivalry between the United States and China has been expressed through their economic, military, and political means and has been escalating and augmenting with time. The Sino-US rivalry generates serious repercussions for Pakistan, which is a neighbor of both India and China.

#### **1\_Perilous Environment for Pakistan**

The rivalry between the United States and China has become heart of the international politics and the nucleus of scientists and intellectuals of International Relations. The world is witnessing a major rivalry between the two great powers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The major rivalry has major implications for Pakistan as well. The rivalry has abominably impacted the structure of relations in South Asia. The increased engagement and partnership of the United States with India in the region has miserably and abysmally impacted the region surrounding Pakistan. The military power aggrandizement of India through US help has destabilized relations between Pakistan and India. The Sino-U.S. rivalry has further aggravated and exacerbated the existing antagonism between countries like Pakistan and India on one hand and the Indo-Chinese rivalry on the other. This in turn has resulted in South Asia with heightened tensions than ever before. The exacerbated situation of the region would impact Pakistan’s decision making leading to increased

contention between India. This would keep Pakistan entangled in contentious relations with India and divert its way to progress (Ullah, 2023).

## **2\_Impact on Pakistan's Economy and CPEC**

The tariff war between the United States and China was enacted in 2018 and increased in 2019 and 2020. During this period, specifically in the first year of the trade war, Pakistan's economy suffered a lot. Whether it was due to international tensions created by the trade war or due to the country's internal dynamics, the matter remains controversial. However, when the trade war started, Pakistan faced setbacks through the "current account deficit" and "fiscal deficit." The setback was conspicuously felt in foreign direct investment, exchange rates, and industrial growth (Salik, 2020). Secondly, CPEC is the most important project for the development and progress of Pakistan. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is an arm of China's main Belt and Road Initiative which provides Beijing with short and easy access to the Indian Ocean and Gulf countries. CPEC is regarded as fortunate, lucrative, and propitious for the development of Pakistan and for quashing most of its economic issues (Sara, 2023). However, the CPEC project could not remain free from Sino-US rivalry. Earlier, during the Obama Administration, Washington encouraged the CPEC as it would bring prosperity to Pakistan. Later, after the Trump Administration changed its policy toward Beijing, Washington's stance over CPEC also changed. It started to oppose the project through statements claiming that it was a "Debt trap." Moreover, Indian recent opposition to CPEC and objections to the route of the project have attributed by to the increased US-India partnership against China. CPEC is important for China to realize its goal of establishing a trade route connecting Chinese markets world-wide. However, the goes against the Indo-US interests propelling them to oppose and create hurdles in the way of the project (Boni, 2021).

## **3\_The Impact on Kashmir**

The strategic partnership between the United States and India has brought the two countries much closer. In the midst of this strategic partnership, Pakistan has become less important for the United States. The Indo-US convergence of goals against China have depreciated Pakistan's importance for the US policy makers. In the current Sino-US rivalry, India has become most

important state in Washington's ambition to contain China. This has enabled India to secure American support in several issues i.e in Kashmir Conflict. The United States has given statements supporting Indian stance over the Kashmir that the United Nations Resolutions calling for plebiscite are not due in the current times. Secondly, Indian strategic partnership with the United States has turned India violent. In 2019, India abolished the "Special Status" to Kashmir and put the Indian Occupied Kashmir under curfew. Since then, it has been freely committing human rights violations in Kashmir and has killed hundreds of people. The Indo-US strategic partnership has fueled Indian violent attitude towards Kashmiris (Saboor, Ali, & Bhutto, 2022).

### **Conclusion**

The Sino-US rivalry has impacted international affairs with exacerbating tensions in the South Asia. Pakistan is not immune from the implications of the rivalry. The impacts of the Sino-US rivalry have been felt greatly by Pakistan. The Sino-US confrontation has depreciated the strategic importance of Pakistan for the United States and has pushed the latter to pursue a partnership with India to achieve objectives against China. The United States needs a strong India to counter Chinese influence. Therefore, the Washington is helping the New Delhi to enhance its power, specifically in military terms. The United States has paved the way for India to purchase "advanced technology weapons" from the Washington. In addition to this the United States has provided India with a helping hand in nuclear technology as well. Such advancements have serious repercussions for the Pakistan's security. The Sino-US rivalry has deteriorated the situation in South Asia leading to increased antagonism between Indian and Pakistan and race for the arms. The Sino-US rivalry impacts has also incorporated the CPEC project, affecting its realization. Moreover, the India has turned violent in Kashmir following the Indo-US strategic partnership. Indian policy toward Kashmir has become more hostile as it is visible through recent increase in the human rights violation by India. Such new developments in the region requires Pakistan to thoroughly assess the situation and devise a policy through which, it can balance India's increasing power. Pakistan should also take steps to assuage relations between the United States and China to keep the CPEC and region secure from harsh implications of the Sino-US rivalry.

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