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Beyond the Honeymoon: Translating Pakistan's U.S. Rapprochement into Sustainable Strategic Advantage

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the issue of Pakistan being able to turn these short term tactical victories into long term strategic advantages without losing its old time allies in China and Saudi Arabia. Based on recent trends in Pakistani foreign policy and precedents in the strategic behavior of middle power nations, this discussion maintains that the best way ahead of Pakistan is to practice calibrated opportunism, that is, maximizing the quality of the relations at the moment with the U.S. whilst gradually developing alternative relationships. The article reveals that the successes of Pakistan are pegged on shaky principles of personality-based diplomacy, internal political resistance, and structural uncertainty concerning the mission of the Board. Such measures as institutionalization of U.S. gains outside the realms of personal relations, managing Board membership with red lines, expediting implementation of CPEC 2.0 and balancing transparency with both Beijing and Washington and diversified partnerships in Europe, Central Asia and the Gulf need to be considered to create sustainable strategic advantage.

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Introduction

As Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif picked up his pen in Davos on January 22, 2026, to kiss the charter of Donald Trump Board of Peace, he was making a gambit (Talmazan et al., 2026). By being the co-positioned nation with the representatives of 18 other nations, most of which were middle-tier powers such as Pakistan, Sharif was gambling that being close to Washington during this time would give Pakistani capable outcomes. Initial returns are favorable. Pakistan gained a traded tariff of 19 per cent on exports to United States, something much more favourable than 25 per cent imposed on India. The Balochistan Liberation Army became the Foreign Terrorist Organization (Board of Peace, 2026). An advanced level of military-to-military interaction was revived after many years of gap. Trump himself talked about how he could assist Pakistan in developing its potential yet vast energy reserves and this phrase implied that a new relationship was in place following the icy years of the Biden administration.

But behind this disguise of diplomatic triumphs is another and more intricate truth. The success of Pakistan is built on the premises that are weak as such. They are left to rely on the level of personal rapport between Field Marshal Asim Munir and Donald Trump, on the transactional instinct of an American president re known to make abrupt policy shifts and on whether Pakistan will cooperate in a measure whose end game is deliberately ambiguous. The 11-page charter Board of Peace document, which on no occasion refers to Gaza, can even allude to grander plans than rebuilding the Palestinian lands (Al Jazeera, 2026). It is even implied by Trump himself at Davos where he stated that once completely constituted, then the Board could do anything they wanted so long as they wished to do it (Williams et al., 2026). To Pakistan, this ambiguity is its opportunity as well as threat.

The question to Islamabad lies in the answer to whether it has reached tactical victories- it has evidently done that. The issue is whether such short-term diplomatic benefits can be transformed into strategic leverage that is here to stay (Siddiquei, 2022). Will Pakistan be able to institutionalize its enhanced position with Washington in such a way that it outlives Trump when he leaves office in 2028? Will it be able to overcome domestic opposition of a people that perceives Israeli interests at every American action in the Middle East? Is it able to preserve its nurtured ambiguity with China and seek closer relations with Washington? And perhaps, most fundamentally, does Pakistan have the capacity to build a foreign policy infrastructure that does not have it always in a vise to one or other of its external benefactors?

These inquiries are very pressing as time is already running. The membership of the Board of Peace has led to uncommon bipartisan response in Pakistan with even the PTI and JUI-F finding reason to condemn the move in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly (Dawn, 2026). Polls on Pakistanis have indicated that over ninety percent have always been pro Palestine and it is politically toxic to be the subject of a Trump-led, possibly pro-Israel effort. In the meantime, the economic gains that Pakistan envisions to draw in such as oil mining or crypto-currencies alliances are largely theoretical. The best that Pakistan has attained so far is preferential treatment in a system that may be dismantled or reused at any point by Trump.

This article holds the position that the present time of enhanced U.S. relationship by Pakistan should be viewed in the wider field of constant Pakistani seeking attainment of strategic independence. Based on the evidence of recent innovation in the foreign policy of Pakistan, including the recent CPEC 2.0 upgrade with China and the Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement with Saudi Arabia, this paper argues that the best way into the future of the situation in Pakistan is not to be wholly aligned with Washington, but neither to be opposed to the action of American engagement (Ahmed and Akbarzadeh, 2018). Otherwise, Islamabad must seriously consider what can be termed as calibrated opportunism: to reap the best out of its existing U.S relationship and make the other partnerships that systematically result in redundancy and leverage.

The Anatomy of Pakistan's Recent U.S. Gains

In order to evaluate the Pakistani strategic options we have to find out what exactly has been done in the recent rapprochement between Islamabad and Washington. These three broad categories of the gains are; trade and economic concessions, security cooperation, and political recognition.

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Pakistan has attained high success in the trade arena. The current tariff rate negotiated by the Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb is 19 percent, it is the best market access that Pakistan has had in the recent past to the United States. This is relatively positive in comparison to the regional rivals, who both India and Vietnam have to deal with 25 and much higher rates, respectively, and gives Pakistani textile exporters, who contribute to approximately \$6 billion of annual U.S. sales, an edge to compete with. The tariff agreement followed months of hard work at tariff talks in July 2025, when the Pakistani officials promised to raise an import of U.S. LNG, coal and farm goods with the offer of reforming the regulations to invite American investment. The fact that Pakistan has been able to take a diplomatically nimble step was evidenced by the agreement in time with Trump who had set a deadline of July 9 to announce simultaneous tariffs.

It is in the realm of speculation that the economic aspect of the relationship goes beyond tariffs. When Trump announced his American aid in exploring Pakistani oil reserves that are considered massive the news in Islamabad caused some hype with the government envisaging low importation bills and even the exports of energy to India. The truth however is less inspiring. The oil deposits in Pakistan are still modest as per the optimistic rhetoric of Trump and extracting the oil would pose a great challenge in Balochistan in security terms. The initial export of U.S. crude oil to Pakistan set up by Cnergyico and Vitol has a symbolic value, though it is less than half of Pakistan annual bill to import oil of 11.3 billion U.S. dollars.

Pakistan has been more tangible in its gains in security arena. In July 2025, the Balochistan Liberation Army kept being designated by the U.S. as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, which was a major Pakistan diplomatic triumph. Islamabad had long desired this designation, citing the fact that the BLA had been targeting Chinese citizens who were residing in the nation working on CPEC projects as acts of terror that were destabilizing the region (Jahanzaib and Ahmed, 2024). This designation was established through greater cooperation in counterterrorism, such as the reinstatement of strained security consultations and an invitation to visit the white house by Field Marshal Asim Munir which is a prestige that highlights the revitalization of Pakistan in American strategic planning.

The political aspect of the Pakistani benefits is possibly manifested most evidently through its Board of Peace membership. Pakistan will enjoy a relatively high-rank among the 26 founding members to be announced by the end of January 2026 (Business Today, 2026). Trump sits on the executive council of the Board that is headed by Secretary of State Marco Rubio and has Jared Kushner, former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and dozens of other well-known people on board. The fact that Pakistan is included implies that American people are seeing the possibility of Islamabad serving as a gateway to the Muslim world and possibly even to China and Iran. Board membership was made out as diplomatic success by Planning Minister Ahsan Iqbal who argued that it showed that Pakistan was capable of doing constructive work on important international effort (WION News, 2026).

But even such a list of successes carries great qualifiers. The trade agreement though conducive is at the mercy of an unpredictable president who repeatedly alters his policies. Despite its benefits, the security cooperation has long been healthy and unhealthy to American strategic interests in Afghanistan and South Asia. And with

all its symbolic merits, the Board of Peace membership has domestic political importances, which just start to bear costs.

The Frailty Underneath the Surface

The recent diplomatic achievements of Pakistan are based on three pillars that have weak foundation and any of them can just fall anytime. Knowledge of such vulnerabilities is the key to developing a more sustainable approach towards foreign policy.

The initial pillar is dependence on personality. The thawing relations between the US and Pakistan have been earned and established mostly through the individual chemistry between Donald Trump and the present leadership of the country especially Field Marshal Asim Munir. In his decision making fashion, Trump values personal relationships and show toward due respects which is termed as flattery by critics and as good diplomacy by the supporters (Tellis, 2008). The nomination of Trump by Pakistan for the Nobel Peace Prize due to his mediation to a May 2025 Kashmir standoff between Pakistan and India is an example of this approach. As much as this kind of tactics has produced temporary gains, they have a systemic disadvantage: What will become of Trump when he is out of office?

There is not much help in the history book. Relationship between Pakistan and the United States has assumed a boom-bust process over the past decades (Fair, 2014). In the case of the Soviet-Afghan War, Pakistan was the most allied nation to Washington and was a recipient of billions of security aid. The withdrawal of the Soviet troops led to the loss of American interest, and Pakistan was sanctioned because of its nuclear program. With the second attack in 9/11, it became indispensable to the world and then it was implicated in duplicity and double-dealing following American frustration concerning the war in Afghanistan. The Trump-era rapprochement can be just another manifestation of this cycle - high cooperation because of the needs of American politics (this time, Trump wants to see diplomatic breakthroughs and agreements), but without any way to remain engaged after these needs evolve.

Additionally, the transactionalism of the foreign policy by Trump has an element of instability. The case of his administration and India depicts the story. In the first term of Trump, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was celebrated with huge rallies both in Houston and Ahmedabad. Towards 2025, Trump was openly condemning Modi and imposing punitive tariffs on Indian goods. Pakistan can hardly be safe, should such a sudden u-turn be possible with India, which is far bigger economy and India is its strategic ally. Modi was the good guy, according to one Pakistani analyst, now he was being beaten up. There is nothing in the approach of Trump that would suggest that similar treatment would not be meted on Pakistan.

The second vulnerability is home political legitimacy. The move by Pakistan to become a member of the Board of Peace sparked off immediate and strong criticism on both the left and the right sides. The one-hundred percent resolution passed by the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly in protest over the decision was a historic cross-party agreement (Dawn, 2026). The move was criticized by PTI, JUI-F and Jamaat-e-Islami and the Chief minister Sohail Afridi even accused Prime Minister Sharif and Field Marshal Munir of selling the blood of Gazans.

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This rejection is authentic popular opinion. The Pakistani population is still too pro-Palestinian where the levels have been above 90. This statement by Muhammad Ali Jinnah of Pakistan which the country would never in any way recognize Israel has become a quasi-constitutional declaration in the minds of the people of Pakistan. To most Pakistanis, any US attempt in the Middle East is assumed to support the interests of the Israelites, no matter its intentions. These suspicions have been strengthened by the fact that the Board of Peace did not mention Gaza even once in its charter and by the fact that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has shown that he will be a part of the Board (Al Jazeera, 2026).

The reaction of the government that Pakistan involvement would make the voices of Muslims heard in the planning of the post-conflict matters has not appeased the critics. The skeptical spirit was best described by Maulana Lutfur Rehman of JUI-F who posed the question of how Pakistan could bring peace in Palestine when it is confronted with increased terrorism at home. The critique does not just lie on the ideological level, but also procedural: the court has ruled without consulting the parliament, in a political system where constitutional government is already under scrutiny regarding its legitimacy.

Such domestic resistance is important since it limits the freedom of action of Pakistan. In case the membership in Board of Peace is considered being the surrender to American and Israeli interests, any further cooperation would be causing the reinforcement of the political opposition and the unlike of the government itself. The awkward situation that could engulf Pakistan is its joining the international effort in which the country has no political capital to actively contribute.

The third fragility pillar is the structural ambiguity regarding the role of the Board with respect to the mission and the role of Pakistan in the entire Board. The charter of the Board of Peace specifically leaves the details regarding the operations vague. The Board of Peace charter is not specific in terms of the operations. So what is the Board going to do? How will decisions be made? What are the responsibilities of the members? The replies are not clear and the ambiguity cuts across. On the one hand, it enables Pakistan to assert that it is just membership concerning humanitarian reconstruction and Palestinian welfare. Conversely, it allows mission creep which may lure Pakistan into taking commitments it never foreseen and capable of taking politically (Modern Diplomacy, 2026).

There has been a hint by some Pakistani officials that the voluntary participation clause of the Board gives a way out to Pakistan- they can just refuse to engage in actions that take it outside its red lines. This optimistic interpretation however does not consider the diplomatic costs of selective engagement. By becoming part of the Board and then declining to the important actions, Pakistan will be viewed as a presence that inhibits peace or a fair-playing ally. The need to be a team-player may be hard to resist especially when the American aid to Pakistan happens to be in trade, security, or multilateral financial areas.

CPEC 2.0 and the China Variable

Any serious deliberation involving the strategic choices available to Pakistan would have to grapple with the China factor. The association of Pakistan with Beijing symbolizes its most essential foreign tie in which it has been receiving economic

lifelines it has never experienced with any other nation. The CPEC 2.0 launch in 2025 and the signing of the Action Plan to Foster an Even Closer China-Pakistan Community with a Shared Future (2025-2029) also highlight the vitality of the relations despite the attempts to reach the rapprochement with Washington in reference to Pakistan (Jahanzaib & Ahmed, 2024).

CPEC 2.0 is continuity and evolution. In CPEC, Phase I was successful in helping to solve the acute energy crunch in Pakistan, contributing 8,000 megawatts of new electricity line, and eliminating to a great extent the load shedding that had grounded the Pakistan economy. Phase I also enhanced infrastructure, roads and rails, but at a high price- Pakistan owes China a bigger percentage of its external debt than any other country does. Phase II transition is oriented on the industrialization, agricultural industrialization and mining and the special economic zones are planned to provide Chinese investment in manufacturing and transfer of technology.

This transition was formalized by the 14th Joint Cooperation Committee meeting in Beijing in September 2025. Pakistan and China were to coordinate their respective development strategies- the 15 th five year plan of China and the 13 th five year plan of Pakistan on similar themes such as industrial upgrading, ecosystems of innovation, digital transformation, renewable energy and green growth. This unparalleled alignment gives CPEC 2.0 continuity and strategy over a long period. To Pakistan, the framework ensures the inclusiveness into the Chinese chains of supply chains, availability of modern technologies, and the industrial growth that the nation has been missing in decades (Ahmed et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, the strategic dilemma of Pakistan can be also mentioned in CPEC 2.0. The announcement of the extension of CPEC to Afghanistan in May 2025 discussed in one of the trilateral meetings of the foreign ministers of China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan shows the ambitions of Beijing in the region and the function of Islamabad in the matter of facilitation (Modern Diplomacy, 2026). Nevertheless, the same trilateral collaboration might hurt the relations between Pakistan and Washington, where the apprehension of Chinese penetration in Afghanistan is still sensitively high. Equally, Pakistan security assurances about the safety of Chinese nationals involved in CPEC projects under construction presented by Prime Minister Sharif in July 2025 place burdens that may disrupt other security-related issues and will be abused by anti-government rebels aiming to divide Islamabad and Beijing.

Certain American concerns are also generated due to the relationship with China. Under President Trump (the first term), and under President Biden, Washington put pressure several times on Pakistan to lessen their reliance upon China infrastructure investment and rethink a few points of CPEC. Although the recent rewarming between Trump and Pakistan has kept such criticism down there would be naivete to think that there is no longer American apprehension. Pakistan is on a fine balancing act to continue and enhance the Chinese relation, which gives it economic stability, and develop American relations with which it has access to the market and diplomatic favors.

More importantly, the Pakistani authorities claim that this is not a zero-sum game. They believe there is a way to balance relationships with both Beijing and Washington in their rhetoric and state it in private words and in open ones (Siddique, 2022). They want to cite examples of successful hedging other middle powers do like the example of concurrent relationships between Vietnam and China and that

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of the United States. They observe that even China has not been complaining over the enhanced U.S. relations of Pakistan, possible since Beijing is cognizant that a stable and economically viable Pakistan is in China's best interests than a failed state that is on constant life support.

However, such a rosy judgement overshadows possible areas of conflict. When the Board of peace develops as a vehicle of American power projection in the areas where China has interests, it would put Pakistan in awkward decisions. When U.S.-China rivalry becomes more intense in such a manner that requires better alignment among the partners, the ambiguousness practiced by Pakistan might not be sustainable. The difficulty of Pakistani policymakers lies in deriving the value of both relationships and planning to face such a situation that the simultaneous partnership could not be achieved.

The Saudi Strategic Hedge

Another aspect of the hedging strategy by Islamabad is the Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement signed by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in September 2025. The treaty, in which it is dictated that any aggression toward one of the two nations must be treated as aggression to both the countries, promotes a long term informal security relationship to the level of a security alliance. To Pakistan, the agreement has a number of strengths: improved pride in the Islamic community, economic success due to heightened Saudi investment and finance and the added strategic dimension of formal association with a key power in the region.

The Saudi-Pakistan agreement is timely. It was less than two weeks following attacks by Israel on Doha which assassinated top Hamas leadership and showed America its own boundaries in limiting Israeli military response. To Saudi Arabia, this is an insurance against the Iranian threats and unreliable American security assurances. In the case of Pakistan, it offers Pakistan a form of insurance against isolation in case its rapprochement with the US collapses.

Saudi-Pakistan relations have significantly increased economically. Already, Saudi Arabia has signed 34 bilateral agreements with Pakistan in value of more than 2.8 billion dollars, in relation to energy, mining, infrastructure, and financial assistance since the year 2024. As the economy of Pakistan is always limited due to the necessity to finance it externally, Saudi Arabia will become the greatest external financier of the fiscal year 2025-2026, with more than 6 billion of loans and deposits in terms of external funding. This is the financial aid that keeps Pakistan afloat economically and less reliant on IMF programs with its conditionalities.

However, the Saudi cooperation also brings problems. India has reacted to the Saudi-Pakistan defense pact with a certain amount of apprehension, saying it will examine the implications of the pact on its overseas policy of the agreement. The fear of Delhi is comprehensible--the agreement may limit the other country of action in reacting to terrorism based in Pakistan, as any military retaliation directed at an attack made by Pakistan can possibly be portrayed as attack on Saudi Arabia. Such dynamism would either strengthen Pakistan or at least add more diplomatic barriers to Indian revenge.

To the relationship between Pakistan and Washington, Saudi pact has its advantages and threats. On the optimistic side, it illustrates that Pakistan is not without other

opportunities— that Islamabad is not blackmailing to be loved by America, it can build other forms of security systems. This would make Pakistan more immune to negotiation and, in fact, it might become a stronger party in its negotiations with Washington. Conversely, the implicit nuclear aspect of the pact is that the Pakistani authorities have said that, should there be the need, they would make themselves available to Riyadh in nuclear terms, something that will raise concerns among American nonproliferation activists and make bilateral relations tricky.

The Saudi alliance is consequently a hedge of a hedge. It gives Pakistan strategic depth in the Gulf, economic resources to ensure stability and political capital in the Islamic world. Concurrently, it will enable Pakistan to foster better U.S. relations, without seeming desperate and dependent. The question is whether or not this tri-polar diplomacy, the process of balancing between Washington, Beijing, and Riyadh is sustainable in the long-term or that challenges between the partnerships will ultimately compel such hard decisions.

Hypothetical Lessons: How to Manage Great Power Competition as a Middle Power

Pakistan is not the only one, facing the issue of keeping relations with rival powers of the first rank, on the one hand, and keeping strategic independence, on the other. Various middle powers provide educative lessons about successful (and unsuccessful) hedging plans that can be followed by Pakistan.

It can be possibly best compared with the experience of Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Being a member of NATO, Turkey was formally allied to the United States at the same time acquiring Russian S-400 air defense systems, intervening in Syria against the American North Alliance Kurdish forces, and developing economic relations with China. Such a provocative act of balancing had created a sustained tension with Washington, such as Turkey being kicked off the F-35 program and threatening sanctions frequently. But Turkey has not felt energetic separation with any of the chief powers, keeping to each of them just sufficient value so that none of them is willing to break entirely.

The Turkish example illustrates the cost and the possibilities of aggressive hedging. It would have been inconceivable to most U.S. allies that Ankara was ready to go against American wishes on key matters of security, but the geographic location, which allowed entry to the Black Sea, gave the American bases and served as the southeastern irons to NATO, gave Turkey a bargaining point that other smaller states would have had no leverage. Another advantage was a domestic political superiority enjoyed by Erdoğan because this enabled him to absorb the American pressure that could have upset weaker governments. The takeaway here is two-fold, as in the case of Pakistan, hedging can be made in even formal alliances, but it must be accompanied by an actual strategic value and the political muscle of the country.

The hedging strategy in Vietnam provides a less differentiated model. Vietnam has preserved huge economic interactions with Beijing in spite of the historic agility with China and continuing maritime disputes in the south china sea, as it has been intensifying security relationships with the United States. The American naval visits, joint exercises and American purchases of military equipment occur in Hanoi all the time without assuring its China trade is ever expanding and that there is no formal commitment of any commitments to an alliance to bind Vietnamese foreign policy. This strategy is what researchers term as economic engagement, security

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hedging, they maximize economic interdependence with one who is potentially an adversary and simultaneously construct security relations which insure against worst-case events.

The success of Vietnam can be attributed to the fact that it was clear-eyed in regard to its position. The Vietnamese policy makers are working with the realization that they cannot rival the Chinese might, cannot completely rely on American dependability and thus they have to remain flexible. They have shunned the discourse of taking sides or describing relationships in the terms of a zero-sum game. Rather, it has been through low profile relations across the board as well as making certain that the military and economic strength of Vietnam is such that it can act independently. Pakistan can emulate this low profile strategy that creates less drama as compared to the confrontational hedging by Turkey but could be more sustainable in the long run.

The Philippines with Rodrigo Duterte is an example of the danger of erratic hedging. The shift of Duterte to China and the United States was melodramatic and open, including rhetoric attacks on Washington, the minimization of maritime conflicts with Beijing and welcomed Chinese investment. However, the policy was unsustainable in part due to the continued mistrust of China in the domestic opinion of the Filipinos and due in part to Chinese actions in the South China Sea where they were still erecting military installations and harassing Filipino fishermen preventing the possibility of any accommodation. Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the new president who replaced Duterte has pivoted back toward America, permitting greater access to the United States military and becoming more aggressive in maritime sovereignty.

The case of Philippines shows the existence of multiple threats that are applicable to Pakistan. Their personal leadership tastes might not be aligned to the greater interest of the country or the people, and thus, this becomes a weakness to be toppled by any new leadership. Second, when relying much on one relationship (which is the situation with china in the case of Duterte), like a relational partner giving actions detrimental to the political sustainability of the relationship, this may work against the favor of the better. Third, the key actors take note and recollect of perceived betrayals- the U.S.-Philippines alliance, despite its ability to withstand Duterte rhetoric, demanded a significant amount of mending work after that. It is a lesson that Pakistan needs to learn: the metathesis can also result in short-term benefits but long-term issues with credibility.

One more model, however, is provided in the United Arab Emirates by the economic pragmatism and security conservatism. Abu Dhabi has developed strong economic relationships with China, which has turned the UAE into a Chinese finance and trade hub in the Middle East, whereas the UAE and United States have had close security relationships by having defense contracts, exchanging intelligence, and acquiring weapons. Compartmentalization has enabled the UAE to balance this act: the commercial logic controls the economic policy and it is relatively independent of security, and the security policy is superseded by the relationships with the established military powers (to name just the U.S and France) without reference to economic ties in other places.

In the case of Pakistan, the UAE paradigm indicates that balancing between the economic and security relations in China, the American and Saudi security relations may prove easier than aiming to form comprehensive relations with any of the two superpowers. The threat, of course, is that big countries are becoming more inclined to regard economic and security spheres as inseparable, and compartmentalization becomes problematic. The attempt by the American allies to limit Chinese technology firms such as Huawei shows that Washington cannot always recognize the difference between the economic and the security sectors to which the UAE is more inclined to remain.

So what can be learned out of these comparative cases? A number of principles are outstanding. One, hedging must possess an actual strategic value that provides middle powers within a number of major powers. The geographical location Turkey, the contributions made towards the stability of Southeast Asia by Vietnam, the financial hub of the UAE- all these are bargaining power that Pakistan needs to foster using economic growth and location. Second, political stability in the country is significant. In comparison to international maneuvers, leaders who have to continuously fret about staying in office do not have potentially that much space. Third, foreign policy rhetoric is not always less significant than foreign policy. Small course corrections that allows maintaining the relationship without breaking it and still being flexible will likely prove more effective than the high-drama proclamations of the pivots or realignments. Fourth, this is limited by popular opinion, which influences foreign policy decisions, especially in democratic or semi-democratic countries; where such policies go too far out of favor they become politically unsustainable, no matter how good their strategic justifications are.

The difficulty of Pakistan is to implement these lessons in its own situation. Pakistan has no formal commitments on alliance which could be leverage against Turkey. In contrast to Vietnam, the relationship of Pakistan with its main security competitor (India) does not leave much space to the economic engagement that could call equilibrium to the security tensions (Ahmed & Bhatnagar, 2007). As compared to the UAE, Pakistan does not have the financial resources to act as a neutral economic hub. Pakistan assets that include nuclear weapons and strategic geography, potential as a bridge between China and Middle East should be reflected in reality but with the help of the expert diplomacy, the asset can be translated into the durable influence.

The Afghanistan Dimension: Endless Dilemma in Pakistan

The Afghanistan issue must be faced at any serious analysis of the strategic options of the Pakistan, as it is the most important foreign policy issue to Pakistan and a potential golden opportunity when approached properly. The rise of the Taliban to power in Kabul in 2021 was initially considered by the Pakistani government as a strategic win- the friendly government in Afghanistan would add depth in the fight against India and the risk of the Taliban using the Afghanistan territory against the Pakistani interest would be eliminated (Ahmed & Bhatnagar, 2008).

It is a fact that turned out to be a lot more complex. The Pakistani Taliban (Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, or TTP) still has bases in Afghanistan where it carries out attacks within the country. The Afghan government of Taliban which relies on Pakistani support, including access to Pakistani ports has been surprisingly stubborn to Pakistani pressure over the issue. Pakistan and Afghanistan bilateral negotiations

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have been stalled on several occasions due to the inability of the Kabul administration to make written commitments regarding action against TTP militants and insistence of the Islamabad government regarding classification of TTP as a terrorist group by the Afghan government (Modern Diplomacy, 2026).

The negative effect of this shrinking security environment onto the foreign policy within Pakistan is direct. Suicide attack on the district court located in Islamabad on November 2024 where 12 individuals were killed and more than thirty injured was associated with TTP militants working in Afghanistan. Khawaja Asif, a member of the interior ministry, threatened to launch cross-border attacks on Afghanistan in case it remained the refuge of Pakistani militants. As of early 2025, The Pakistani patience was tested, as a series of cross-border air attacks on alleged TTP targets on the Afghan side have prompted protests against Taliban leaders and threatened to sever the relationship altogether.

Pakistan has other relationships that lie on the intersection of Afghanistan dilemma. China has been alarmed with the unstable situation in Afghanistan, with CPEC security and has demanded Pakistan to stabilize the situation. The spreading of CPEC to Afghanistan needs some minimum security level that will not be reached in circumstances where the TTP is free on the other side of the border. Although the US is technically no longer involved in Afghanistan, its interests are in ensuring that Afghanistan is not used by terrorist organizations to plot attacks internationally- which provides possible grounds upon which the U.S. and Pakistan might cooperate, however, there is the risk of United States censure of Pakistan should it be perceived as subsidizing the Taliban regime.

In the case of the Board of Peace membership in Pakistan, the Afghanistan case presents a problem and an opportunity. On the complication aspect, critics have observed the irony felt by Pakistan, a nation being the member of a board whose role would be to bring peace to Gaza when it could not stabilize its neighborhood. This was the same point that Maulana Fazlur Rehman raised in the parliament, inquiring how a country that had experienced an increasing terrorism among its own people could extend its arms to Palestine and bring peace there. This is politically resonant criticism, which discredits the government in stating that membership of this Board is an indication that Pakistan is committed to international peace and stability.

At the opportunity side, Afghanistan is an opportunity where Pakistani skills and relations would be beneficial to American and foreign interests. In case the Board of Peace grows to other conflict regions besides Gaza, the special status of Pakistan compared to the Afghanistan Taliban will turn out to be an asset. Islamabad can also be the essential broker in any future Afghan peace process, rebuilding operation, or humanitarian project. This would mean that Pakistan would have to first ensure that its relationship with Kabul is stabilized; this is not a small task but possibly may turn the Afghanistan liability into a strategic asset.

The way forward involves a more transparent and realistic policy formulated by the government of Pakistan on Afghanistan. This is to come to terms with it that Taliban government is not a proxy or even a trusted partner but a neighbour with whom Pakistan has to establish a *modus vivendi*. It involves accepting that Pakistani influence in Kabul, though a fact, is limited, the Taliban has spent decades to gain

independence and nobody will dictate to it what to do in Islamabad. It is an investment in the border security and counter-terrorism capacity instead of thinking that the willingness to have friendly ties to the Afghan government will automatically convert into the occurrence of security on this side of the border.

Sustainable Strategic Leverage Recommendations

The present (and longstanding) position of Pakistan in diplomacy, which is pursuing the West, characterized by strengthening the relationship with China, and signing an alliance with Riyadh, is a better one than what its critics admit but at a cost as serious as what its promoters might have imagined. To transform short-term tactical victory into the long-term strategic benefit, policy decisions in a variety of areas are compulsory.

To start with, Pakistan needs to institutionalize gains of the U.S. outside personal relationship. The history of the U.S. relations with Pakistan shows that alliances that form based on personal chemistry rarely make it through changes in leaders. Pakistan needs to leverage to form bilateral institutions to establish bureaucratic constituencies of cooperation to avoid another round of engagement and abandonment. This could involve a reinstated U.S-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue with periodic ministerial discussions, joint working groups on particular matters such as those to deal with counterterrorism and trade and parliamentary exchanges to develop relations outside the sphere of the executive branch.

At the economic level, Pakistan ought to aim to lock trade advantage by creating formal agreements and not executive actions, which may be nullified. The existing tariff of 19 is good though it is susceptible- trump can do it in the face of a tweet. Pakistan ought to consider the possibility of having a bilateral investment treaty or a more complex trade structure that would offer more stability. In a similar manner, the ambiguous promises on oil development and cryptocurrency are to be transformed into tangible projects including the American corporations. After the American corporations have invested human and financial resources, they are involved in stability of relationships.

Special attention should be paid to congressional involvement. The historical issue facing Pakistan in Washington has been the dependency on the connections with the executive but failure to acknowledge Congress. It is an evaporation of Pakistani influence when changes in administration occur. A better way would be systematic contact to important congressional committees, building of bipartisan backing on particular matters (such as counterterrorism collaboration or regional stability), and economic participation in congressional districts that generates local constituencies of the partnership. The diaspora of Pakistan in the United States might be mobilized to do so much better than it has ever done before.

Second, Pakistan has to operate with extreme care in regard to the Board of Peace membership. The political fallout of joining the Board in the domestic political opinion is very tangible and limiting. To deal with this, the strategy that Pakistan should employ is vocal conditionality. Islamabad ought to openly draw red lines: not to take part in any actions that jeopardize Palestinian self-determination, not contribute to any enforcing mechanisms, and not collaborate with any Israeli actors without that they are represented in the Board decision-making.

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This strategy is not only one-fold in nature. It offers political protection in the country, which shows that Pakistan did not betray its ideals. It sets up clear limits that minimise chances of mission creep. And it gives the option of positive exit in case the Board in any way develops in ways that do not agree with the interests of the Pakistani. Superior withdrawal is justifiable in cases where the interests of Pakistan are disregarded as being based on principle and not petulism.

Pakistan would also be required to make sure that it liaises effectively with other Muslim representatives on the Board which include Turkey, Qatar, Indonesia, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. A union of Muslim nations that would speak with one voice would be far more useful than Pakistan taking up action alone. This kind of coordination has the ability to make sure that the activities of the Board are actually in the spirit of rebuilding and humanitarian efforts as opposed to being a means of pursuing geopolitical goals at the expense of Palestinians. The politics of coordination also offer political lube-up- Pakistani can argue that there is some consensus in the region and therefore it is being played.

Third, the relationship with China will have to be toned with support and not with flaunts of independence. There has been some opinion in Pakistan that enhanced U.S.-relations ought to occur to the disadvantage of China-that Islamabad ought to establish advancement among Beijing to calm Washington. This would be a foolhardy strategic move. The United States has never and probably never will offer China the same economic resources, security collaboration, and diplomatic backing that it offers to Pakistan (Jahanzaib & Ahmed, 2024). Belt and Road Initiative and CPEC in particular are the biggest foreign investment ever in the Pakistani history. To grant Washington his way by turning our backs on this would be economical suicide.

Rather, Pakistan ought to do what can be termed as transparent hedging. This involves telling both Washington and Beijing the type of partnerships that Pakistan has (Siddiquei, 2022). Pakistan ought to clarify to American interlocutors that the relationship between China is non negotiable and lifelong and this should not imply that the U.S-Pakistan cooperation will not be very strong. At the same time, Pakistan must assure Beijing that the better U.S. relations are, the more Pakistan will be stabilized economically and this does not mean that they are shifting their strategy. China, however, does not lack a qualified experience with the United States, and realizes the approach to hedging.

In practical terms, this implies the expedited deployment of CPEC 2.0, especially in industrial zones as well as agriculture modernization where Chinese know-how is most likely at the highest value. It entails securing Chinese nationals who are employed in Pakistan with the adequate level of security whereby cases of attacks become a rarity and not a norm. It is the ability to meet debt burdens in time, to ensure financial credibility. And it entails finding spheres in which the U.S. and China cooperation in Pakistan can be complementary and not competition (e.g. U.S investment in the services and other technology-related sectors where China concentrates on infrastructure and manufacturing).

Fourth, Pakistan needs to shift the focus away from the U.S.-China-Saudi triangle to limit the exposure to deterioration of individual relationships. It implies that it has to invest seriously in partnerships within Europe, engage more with Central Asian

states, normalize relations with Afghanistan, and continue to work to stabilize (or even improve) relations with India (Ahmed & Akbarzadeh, 2023).

The European relationship has been left very long. As the key European powers, France, Germany or UK have refused to join the Board of Peace this is an opportunity that Pakistan can use to negotiate with the powers on other terms. In Europe, there is a huge potential of a market entry (possibly with GSP+ status), sustainable development and climate adaptation, as well as assistance in multilateral institutions. Partnerships with specific areas should be pursued: the renewable energy with Germany, the agricultural technology with the Netherlands, the financial services with the UK.

Another opportunity that is not exploited is Central Asia. Pakistan borders and has cultural connections with Afghanistan which in turn leads it to the larger Central Asian region. The extraction of CPEC to Afghanistan instills infrastructures of increased trade. However, the instability and the security issue have not seen Pakistan realize this potential. A conscious approach of energy politics, facilitation of trade and integration at the regional level has the potential to turn the strategic geography of Pakistan out to be a liability into an asset.

Afghanistan relationship is the most consequential and the most problematic of all to Pakistan. The fact that Taliban has made a comeback to power in Kabul poses an opportunity and threat to Pakistan. On the one hand, such an Afghanistan, which would be congruent with the Pakistani interests, would have offered a strategic depth and minimized the Indian influence. Conversely, refuge that is accorded to Pakistani Taliban in Afghanistan poses a threat to the security of Pakistan. Pakistan must have a realist policy that will involve working with Afghan Taliban on common grounds (border security, economic development) and working hard to press matters where Taliban activities adversely affect Pakistan (hosting TTP militants, refugee movements). It will demand a long-lasting diplomatic focus as opposed to the alternating of embrace and coercion which has been frontlined by the Pakistani policy.

Three years of trouble with India relationship could not be jettisoned. The May 2025 skirmish incident in Kashmir and the consequent U.S.-mediated ceasefire proved that despite all the tension, de-escalation can always be achieved. Pakistan needs to have avenues of managing a crisis even as it acknowledges that the overall normalization will not be possible soon. This should be aimed at avoiding the further development of conflicts, preserving the trade at the level that is politically viable, and making sure that the relations with the third parties (not necessarily the U.S., but also Saudi Arabia or China) do not become a hostage of the India-Pakistan relationships.

Fifth, the success of the foreign policy cannot be discussed without reform in the domestic economy. The traditional state of chronic external dependence of Pakistan is based on the failure to obtain pertinent export revenues or domestic funds to finance development. There is not a bit of good diplomacy that will cover such an economy, which staggers on one IMF program after another. The unfortunate truth is that, economically developed nations have strategic choices; those lacking it have to be contented with the reliance.

The latter implies speeding up the reforms that are being recognized by Pakistani leaders but which they can hardly execute: expansion of the tax base beyond the

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small segment of the population that already pays income tax, decreasing circular debts in the energy sector, privatizing loss-making state-owned businesses, enhancing the business climate to invite FDI, and investing in education and human skills development. These are the reforms which are hard politically, as they pose threat to vested interest, and burden costs in the short-run in the interest of long-term gains. Deprived of them, however, Pakistan will still be what it has been century after century, an economically weak state whose economic weakness is partly due to failure in foreign policy.

The export industry is especially worth focusing on. The export base in Pakistan is still limited with poor quality textiles with minimal upgrading. To make the move up the value chain, one has to invest in technology, skills, and quality. It ought to diversify into service, information technology and higher value production. The diaspora could contribute to it in a far greater way, by taking advantage of Pakistani-origin entrepreneurs and professionals to establish export networks and investment influx. Such nations as India or Vietnam have been able to mobilize their diasporas towards economic growth; Pakistan has hardly made efforts.

Conclusion: The Path Forward

The present year of the U.S. relations is a shining moment in the Pakistani history in the form of the membership in the Board of Peace and the trade deal, and it should neither be wasted nor exaggerated. The returns are factual but, the returns are questionable, and premised on a basis of personal relationship and transactional bargaining that might tumble down even as fast as it was formed. The political costs involved domestically are high and they limit Pakistan to further intensify cooperation even in case Washington would have been interested. And the ambiguity of structure of Pakistani position, which appears to be allied and even rivals and competitors at once, is suggesting inherent tensions, which will need professional skills in a diplomacy.

The road to sustainable strategic advantage is not the one that is made by selecting one among great powers but rather by establishing relations with each and every one of them and establishing the internal economic and institutional base which will diminish outside reliance. The U.S gains should be institutionalized in Pakistan by way of formal agreement and increased political involvement. It must walk the fine red line in the Board of Peace membership and coalition politics among other Muslim states. It has to expedite CPEC 2.0 and explain to Beijing and Washington the rationale of hedging. It must use the Saudi alliance to be economically stable and have a regional presence as it balances the issues it brings to India relations. And it must invest in systematic collaboration with Europe, Central Asia connectivity and internal domestic economic reform.

Most importantly, Pakistan has to leave the illusion of assuming that one external relationship would be a solution to its challenges. The U.S is not going to save Pakistan neither will be China nor Saudi Arabia. Genuine security and prosperity of Pakistan will be found in the route of Islamabad and not in the routes of Washington or Beijing, Riyadh. Outsourcing may offer facilities, market penetration, and political assistance. However, they cannot be used to replace the reform of governance, economic modernization, and difficult political task of establishing internal consensus on the feasible model of sustainable development.

The episode of the Board of Peace shows the potentiality, as well as the danger of the existing strategy of Pakistan. The benefits of membership also include American led programs and possible influence on post-conflict planning in the Middle East. But it also subjects Pakistan to mission creep, internal blow back, and the potential of mission creep being exploited to serve the American interest which especially does not augur well with the interests of the Pakistani people. The success or failure of this gamble will be determined by the way that Pakistan handles the relationship boundaries, coalition building and participation is an instrument of the national interest to the end and not the goal.

Pakistan is at a crossroad familiar to the history of the nation and has to make decisions that it has long made. It is able to seek representing on Washington and hope this time will be different- American dedication will be as permanent and reliable. It can redoubled the partnership with China and take whatever the price it comes at the cost of relations with the West. Or it may follow the more challenging road of moderate involvement with various partners, paying the cost of complexity and some contradiction in the balance between strategic flexibility.

The third course of action is supported by the history and the argument of Pakistan. Pakistan is too significant not to notice, too vulnerable to stand on its own and too strategically placed to escape the interest of the great powers. Its best tactic is to capitalize on these facts, and transform the physical location and nuclear capability into bargaining power, to appeal to the investments and sustenance of economical potential, and to ensure it has enough relationship diversity to avert dictations by a particular partner.

The honeymoon in Washington will not last long. The Trump era will end, American priorities will be changed and probably the process of engagement and disappointment will come again. The question to Pakistan on this window is whether it uses it to develop institutions and partnership difference or just relishes the moment which will ultimately dictate whether the current rapprochement is a path to a sustainable strategic change or yet another installment in a long history of boom and bust. The decision, this time, is one majorly in the hands of Pakistan. It is yet to be determined whether its leaders have the vision and discipline to make the right choices.

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