

Transformation of Power and Polarity in the Post-Soviet World Order: Hegemony, Great Power Politics and Pakistan's Strategic Role

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Abstract

The study is based on realist understanding of hegemony, great power politics, balancing and national interests, this paper analyzes the change in power and polarity in the post-Soviet world order with a specific focus on the significant role of Pakistan in the new and more contested international order. The end of the Soviet Union has generated a remarkable consolidation of material and institutional power in the U.S. and the ensuing ascendance of China, strategic comeback of Russia, and increasing agency of regional and middle powers have continually complicated the unipolarity. There has been no consensus on the nature of this shift in the existing scholarship, answering the questions of whether the shift is towards multipolarity, to a multiplex order, or to a new version of America's continued dominance. The study is a qualitative research design, using 23 in-depth interviews with academics, foreign-policy specialists, strategic-affairs researchers and practitioners, who were purposively selected. In its analytical framework it relies on realism and on current debates on hedging, hegemonic order and power transition. The study brings to light six themes: redistribution of global power, changing polarity, continuity and constraints of the dominance of the USA, China and Russia as sources of contestation of the system, 'hedging and strategic autonomy' among secondary states, and Pakistan's constructive strategic role. The results show a growing differentiation in the international scene, with America still dominant but more limited; and Pakistan's need to create strategic space by working on connectivity, diversifying diplomacy and multilateralism.

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1. Introduction

When the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, the structural landscape of international politics changed as the last peer competitor, capable of balancing the United States on the military, ideological and geopolitical front changed. The initial post-Soviet situation was thus unusual in that it had an excessive amount of capabilities and agenda setting power in Washington. However, this international system that evolved following the moment was not static. Economic globalization opened opportunities for emerging powers; China grew to a new level of economic and technological power, Russia re-gained military and diplomatic strength to

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challenge parts of the new post-Cold War settlement and regional powers gained greater room for maneuver. This modern scholarship, in turn, does not approach the post-Soviet era merely as an era of American domination but rather as a more complex dynamic that involves the re-negotiation of hierarchy, polarity, institutional order, and sources of power again and again (Acharya, 2018; ; Buzan & Lawson, 2015; Cooley & Nexon, 2020). Whether or not the international system changed after 1991 is thus not the central analytical question, but how much has it changed in terms of the distribution of power, the nature of polarity, and the nature of political foundations of hegemony.

With a realist lens, the focus is on material means, strategic vulnerability, the national interest, and balancing behavior in the center of this change. In the liberal international order, Mearsheimer (2019) notes, the unipolarity allowed for the absence of great power rivalry and competition, but its emergence is now bringing back bounded strategic competition. Unlike Ikenberry, however, the liberal order's crisis should not be blamed solely on material declines: institutions, alliances, and the adaptability of the U.S. political system continue to play a role. Acharya (2017, 2018) offers another explanation: it is a return to the multipolarity of the nineteenth century but in a new form, one that he terms multiplex. The disagreements are significant because they separate the gross domestic product, the military budget or any other aggregate and suggest an understanding that polarity is not a formula for gross domestic product or military spending, but an evaluation of capabilities, the organization of power and whether the leading states can turn their resources into lasting influence in regions and institutions. The post-Soviet order thus needs to be studied, not only in terms of the structural concentration, but also the ever-diversifying manifestations of resistance, accommodation and cooperation.

The problem which was in need of study was that in recent scholarships, the American hegemony, the rise of China, the strategic reassertion by Russia, the hedging by middle powers, and the change of power and polarity to post Soviet world order were studied separately, which means there was a lack of integrated analysis of how these processes collectively transform power and polarity in the post-Soviet world order, and how the power transformation of the strategically located countries like Pakistan plays a role in it. The aim of the study is to analyze, within realist approach, the shift in the nature of power since the collapse of the Soviet Union; impact of such changes on polarity and hegemonic politics; dynamics of great powers in terms of national interest and competition/balance; and Pakistan's attempts to find strategic space through connectivity, multi-lateral engagement and diversified external relations. The study questions are: How has the world's international system become more or less powerful and polarized in the post-Soviet era; how has this shift in international politics changed the nature of hegemonic and great power politics; and how does Pakistan fit into the international system as it changes and how does it shape the changing order? A multi-level mapping of the structural level of international politics with strategic decisions of a regionally important state is provided in this integrated formulation.

The study's importance is that it brings together the themes of systemic transformation and state agency in the field of foreign policy in the context of an Indian Ocean state that is both an interface between South Asia and Central Asia, China, and the Arabian Sea, as well as a hub for the wider Indian Ocean. The issue is becoming more pertinent with an increasing rivalry between the United States and China and growing expansion of the institutions and

connectivity projects of the Eurasia. According to Hassan (2022) Pakistan is in a strategic dilemma as it deepens its ties with China, but still maintains its interest in the relation with the United States and security concerns in the region. Biased alignment decisions can also come with a cost, as does hedging, and this is also suggested by Siddiqi (2022). Pakistan's association with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and efforts to link up with the markets in the Central Asian region also mean that it is part of the broader change in the political economy of Eurasia (Gul et al., 2022; Khetran, 2019; Rauf, 2021). These dynamics are analytically helpful to understand the behaviour of non-great powers in the face of increasing contestation in polarity.

2. Literature Review

Theoretical literature on post-Cold War international order is at odds as to the link between power concentration and international order. Buzan and Lawson (2015) stress that shifts in the nature of international politics are not just a result of diplomatic settlement but of changes in the sources, organization and distribution of power. The historical account, therefore, is helpful for the present study for its focus on the interdependent aspects of structural change: economic, technological, institutional and military. This is not an order that is established in 1991 and will remain stable thereafter, but rather an arrangement in a state of flux, in which the durability of the order is determined by the ability of the leading states to continually create material and political advantages.

The language of polarity, anarchy and balancing is best explained and understood within a realist framework. Nationalism and the security dilemmas arising out of anarchy constrain the liberal universalism's efforts to organize international politics, Mearsheimer (2018) states. Mearsheimer (2019) later argues that liberal hegemony was made easier by the unipolarity of the post-Cold War era and that this is now making liberal international order less sustainable as great power competition has returned and China has emerged. The importance of this argument is that it makes it clear that in the case of different security interests of states, there is no reason why institutions should be able to remove strategic competition. It also establishes a direct relationship between polarity and order: the more the power is spread out the more it loses its ability to determine the political rules of the system and the more balancing is salient. But modern hegemony scholarship suggests a more complex interpretation than this materialist one. Ikenberry and Nexon (2019) define hegemonic orders as political constructions that are constructed, sustained, negotiated and challenged. Hegemony is not just a matter of preponderant ability, but also of institutional bargains, social relations and patterns of authority. In East Asia, Goh (2019) illustrates that contestation of the leadership position of the United States is different in the three areas of security, economy and institutions. It means there might be some unevenly of the erosion of hegemony. The foremost state may be losing its economic clout but still have alliance leadership and/or monetary benefits, technological networks or institutional influence. On the other hand, a growing state can increase its resources, but not its powers. This is an important consideration when looking at the post-Soviet order and determining whether it really is multipolar or more controversial. Ikenberry (2018) is one of the better formulations that challenges the notion that the present chaos is nothing new but simply the lack of American leadership. He is aware that there are significant challenges to the liberal international order, but stresses the net institutional and alliance benefits created around the United States. Also, Brooks and Wohlforth (2016)

contend that the American presence abroad is built more than economic decline rates suggest on a larger slate of capabilities. These arguments are contrary to Acharya's (2017, 2018) assertion that the current order is moving towards a more plural and regionally differentiated order. The multiplex concept by Acharya has particular significance in that it implies that multiple institutional, cultural and strategic orders can operate within an interdependent global system. The theoretical debate thus revolves around the nature of the contemporary change, either as a polarization or as a decentralization of power.

The literature on hedging offers a linkage between the structural realism and the behavior of middle and second powers. From a neoclassical realist point of view, Marston (2024) suggests that engagement and insurance are often paired, as structural pressures are channeled through domestic and regional dynamics, for states in a competition with the U.S. and China. However, as Hedging becomes more intense and allies placed under greater pressure to align, it can become narrower as demonstrated by Fortier and Massie (2023). Similarly, Nagy (2022) shows that middle powers in the Indo-Pacific are reacting to great power rivalry in multiple ways and with different approaches, rather than in a uniform fashion, in order to safeguard their interests. Theoretically, these studies hold significance for Pakistan as they indicate that there are other options for states to have outside the theory of balancing and bandwagoning. Empirical work on the post-Soviet order has always pointed to China as the most significant future source of long-term reconfiguration of global power balance, but there has been a debate on whether or not Chinese powers have already created a new polarity. Goh (2019) finds that Chinese actors contest aspects of a regionally ordered structure of order in the East Asian region, but not the overall order. While the United States has clear benefits from alliances, funding, innovation and military capabilities around the globe, the benefits are enduring, as stated by Kroenig (2020), and therefore, it is unhelpful to have such a deterministic expectation that the United States will be displaced. In contrast, Acharya (2018) claims that the United States' power to shape the international community in its preferred ways has reduced, even in the absence of the "hegemon. These studies suggest that the discussion is not a simple one of an American decline and a Chinese rise, but rather about a change in the capabilities' configuration that has affected the strategic options and institutional choices of others.

The situation is different with Russia. While its economy is not as broad as the United States or China, its arsenal of nuclear weapons, range, military tactics, energy resources and readiness to use force has provided it with significance outside of the economic rankings. Lo (2020) describes the China-Russia relationship as an interest-driven and pragmatic one and not a block against the West. This is analytically important as it alerts one not to assume that all opposition to its leadership is an indication of a counter-hegemonic alliance. There are areas in which Russia and China work together, such as opposition to some Western political domination, but other spheres are where their interests differ. The result is a coalescing bipolar alliance system instead of a consolidated bipolar alliance system.

It bears noting that the resurgence of great-power rivalry is regionalized as well, as evidenced in the literature. Economic corridors, security partnerships, military postures, and institutional memberships have started to play in the game of Central Asia, Indo-Pacific, Eastern Europe and Indian Ocean. The U.S.-China competition in Central Asia has implications for Pakistan as China's Belt and Road Initiative and institutional engagement in the region heighten the

strategic significance of connectivity via Pakistan, argue Gul et al. (2022). Rauf (2021) also points out infrastructure and corridor development as measures that can facilitate the link between the states of Central Asia and Pakistan, and political and security barriers. These studies place Pakistan in a broader process of change in Eurasia, as opposed to dealing with Pakistan exclusively in the framework of South Asian bilateral competitiveness.

The strategic issue of Pakistan – asymmetric relationships – and the need to manage them without compromising policy autonomy – has become a theme for scholarship focused on Pakistan. In the book, *Pakistan as a Middle Power: Contesting between the United States and China*, Hassan (2022) reviews the situation of Pakistan as a middle power in the middle between the United States and China. He says it doesn't mean that there's no incentive for working with Washington as well as closely with China. Going beyond this, Siddiqi (2022) presents a rhetorical argument that hedging is better than an extreme either/or choice between balancing and bandwagoning, especially in the context of Pakistan's domestic and foreign goals – economic, political and security. This literature agrees with other research on middle powers, which highlights the importance of mixed strategies under uncertainty (Nagy, 2022; Marston, 2024).

Another strand of the literature is related to geo-economics and connectivity. The location of Pakistan can be utilized for corridors between South and Central Asia as put forward by Rauf (2021) and Gul et al. (2022) demonstrate how this possibility turns into a strategically important in the context of United States-China competition. But connectivity doesn't necessarily equate to influence. It relies on the implementation of infrastructure, political stability, market access, security and the desire of the neighbouring countries for participation. Based on the literature, it is possible to formulate a qualified role for Pakistan with respect to the region's connectivity both in terms of geographical features and partnerships, the effectiveness of which differs from project to project and political landscape to political landscape.

Main gap in the literature is Conceptual Integration. Usually system level studies on polarity are done on the United States, China and Russia while Pakistan-based studies are usually based on hedging, CPEC, the SCO or regional connectivity. In relation to these levels, relatively little work has been done that seeks to link them and ask how the transition from one to the other shapes Pakistan's decisions and how Pakistan's reactions feature more comprehensive aspects of the new order. This study attempts to fill in that void by incorporating realist approach to distribution of power with qualitative data of perceptions of hegemony, balancing, strategic autonomy and Pakistan's role. It, therefore, looks at Pakistan not as a sign of multipolarity being realised but as a process to assess the impact of the growing contestation of power.

3. Research Methodology

This is a qualitative study that aims to explore the informed participants' interpretations of the changing face of power, polarity, hegemony, and great-power politics in the post-Soviet world order. The region of study is the modern international system since the fall of the Soviet Union, and the empirical focus will be the interactions among the United States, China and Russia, and Pakistan's strategic location in South Asia and in a broader sense, in Eurasia. The study population is comprised of personal with academic, professional or policy background in international relations, strategic studies, and foreign policy, security and region studies. The

sampling technique was purposive sampling technique which were selected 23 participants who can give informed opinion and experience-based opinion on the problem of the research; if required, expert referrals could be added to the purposive sampling without altering the qualitative nature of the sample. The data were gathered from semi-structured, in-depth interviews because this type of data collection enables the respondents to give more detailed explanations regarding causal interpretations, strategic perceptions and contentious aspects than that of closed-ended instruments. The interview guide included questions related to the power redistribution, polarity, American hegemony, the rise of China, the role of Russia, balancing and hedging, national interest, Pakistan's strategic autonomy, regional connectivity and multilateral engagement. Interviews were recorded with the participants' consent, anonymized using codes (P1–P23), transcribed and then analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Analysis was done in line with Braun and Clarke (2022) which involved familiarization, initial coding, development of themes, review of themes, naming and defining of themes, and interpretive writing. Transparency in coding, attention to deviant cases, comparison across the categories of participants and separation of participants' perceptions and theoretical interpretation contributed to strengthening the credibility. This coding framework has resulted in the following six main themes that are directly related to the objectives and research question of the study. Ethical safeguards were in place, including that the participants were asked to volunteer for the study, informed consent, confidentiality, transcript handling in a secure manner, and the possibility to withdraw from the study, and the interview guide allowed for the same content to be covered among all the respondents.

4. Analysis of the Data and Results

Six main themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the 23 in-depth interviews: (1) the dynamic of global power shift, (2) the new polarity in the post-Soviet world, (3) continuity and limitations of the United States' hegemony, (4) China and Russia as sources of great power contestation, (5) balancing, hedging and strategic autonomy of secondary powers, and (6) Pakistan's strategic and constructive role in the new order. The findings are reported at the participant level, in order to keep the qualitative nature of the research.

4.1. Transformation in the Distribution of Global Power

Out of the 23 participants, 18 felt that the international system was much less concentrated than it had been in the early post-Cold War era. The change was related mainly to China's economic and technological development, Russia's military and diplomatic activism and the growing autonomy in pursuing regional powers' interests by participants P2, P4, P6, P7, P9, P10, P11, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18, P19, P20, P21, P22 and P23. They did not see redistribution as a loss of the power of the United States, but rather as an emerging reality of viable alternatives and increased expense to Washington in its quest for policy consensus in regions.

In this group, participants identified power in terms of its various manifestations. In China, economic scale, manufacturing, technology, infrastructure, trade and investment were the most common associations, while for Russia the associations were nuclear power, military strength, energy resources, and geopolitical involvement. Participants P1, P3, P5, P8, and P12 emphasized the enduring structural advantages that the United States has over other states, and suggested that none yet has the same mix of global military power, alliance arrangements, financial strength, and technological capabilities as the United States. Thus, the finding is an

indication that there is a difference between relative (decline in concentration) and absolute (decline in capability) loss. Most of those who saw diffusion of power also did not characterize the United States as strategically marginal.

4.2. Changing Polarity in the Post-Soviet World Order

There were three distinguishable interpretations of the polarity of the modern. The system was moving towards multipolarity, with twelve respondents (P2, P4, P6, P7, P9, P11, P13, P15, P17, P19, P21, and P23) saying that the United States, China, Russia, the European Union and influential regional actors are increasingly determining the outcomes. Seven of them (P1, P3, P8, P10, P14, P18, P22) had chosen the description transitional or hybrid and the idea that the system is no longer unipolar, but has not yet stabilized into a multipolar regime. Four participants (P5, P12, P16 and P20) highlighted the concept of modified unipolarity, given the unrivalled military power of the United States and the large military and institutional advantages it enjoys in its alliances.

The fact that the respondents' classifications varied according to the definitions of a pole showed that there was a divergence. The former were more reluctant to say that it was multipolar, while the latter were more inclined to say so. The most salient non-numerical finding was, in fact, that there was a general sense of transition, not that there was a consensus on a specific term. The overwhelming majority of the respondents, who did not use the term unipolarity, agreed that today's world is more conflicted than the international system of the 1990s.

4.3. Continuity and Constraints of United States Hegemony

Sixteen of the participants (P1, P2, P4, P6, P7, P9, P10, P11, P13, P14, P15, P17, P18, P19, P21 and P23) said that the United States is still the most important global power, but has less uncontested hegemony than it had during the first decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union. They saw ongoing advantages for America in force projection, NATO and bilateral alliances, the international influence of the dollar, technology advances, diplomatic influence and dominance in existing institutions. Meanwhile, these respondents emphasized that the cost of unilateral U.S. action can be greater economically, politically and strategically by these and other regionally capable powers by the time it happens that much more, if it happens at all, in the presence of China and Russia.

Five respondents (P3, P8, P12, P16 and P22) emphasized the continuity of American hegemony and expressed the belief that none of their rivals has a reach that is as developed. P5 and P20 felt the loss of authority of the United States was more pronounced. In all of these roles, primacy was again and again upheld as a category that set itself apart from hegemony as such. Some respondents might see the U.S. as the strongest overall actor while at the same time recognizing that a decline in the capacity to convert capability into accepted leadership has occurred. This discovery identifies the increasing negotiation/ contestation/ regionalization of hegemonic politics.

4.4. China and Russia as Sources of Great-Power Contestation

Twenty of the 23 respondents saw China as the biggest long-term threat to the status quo in the distribution of power. Their judgment has been on economic size, industry capacity, technological growth, the Belt and Road Initiative, world trade routes and, to an increasing extent, on their diplomatic relevance. Seventeen participants also described Russia as a major military and geopolitical power whose actions and influence go beyond its economic weight

due to its nuclear power, energy resources, military strength and its geopolitical influence throughout Eurasia. Respondents thus did not consider Chinese and Russian influence to be equal, but differentiated between them.

Fourteen of them (P2, P4, P6, P7, P9, P11, P13, P14, P15, P17, P18, P20, P21, and P23) spoke of 'strategic convergence' between China and Russia but not of a full union. Both highlighted the resistance to some aspects of U.S. dominance and the fact that they had varying interests and long-term strategies in Central Asia and differing economic power. Six participants saw their collaboration as becoming more institutionalized, and even more likely to provide a more powerful counterweight to the West, but three didn't feel that was the case. The respondents thus saw a contestation as differentiated rather than as a mere return of a bipolar world that was clearly Cold War.

4.5. Balancing, Hedging and Strategic Autonomy of Secondary States

Hedging and diversified partnership were seen to be more important strategies in secondary states by 19 participants. They pointed out that many States do not want to be completely aligned with one great power group due to the possible need for economic, security, technological and diplomatic relations with other groups. Security cooperation with one major power with trade with another, membership in multiple regional organizations, issue-specific partnerships and diversified defence and economic relations were all cited by respondents as instruments for strategic room for manoeuvre that they believed were common.

Four participants took a different view and believed that the greater the competition the less room for grey areas. They believe that competition in technology, sanctions, supply chains, access to finance, and defence cooperation in particular can push secondary states to do one of two things: clear decisions or withdrawal. They believe that competition in technology, sanctions, supply chains, financial access, and defence cooperation in particular can push secondary states to make clear decisions or pull out. In both positions strategic autonomy was considered as a relative rather than absolute concept. Smaller states have only so much room for manoeuvre in terms of their geography, economic dependence, domestic capacity, security threats and external pressures. It was this theme that turned the analytical focus on the relations of change in polarity and Pakistan's foreign-policy decisions.

4.6. Pakistan's Strategic and Constructive Role in Emerging Order

Eighteen participants spoke of Pakistan's strategic location and its possible positive role in the region of connectivity, in multilateral and major powers engagement and Pakistan's role in relations between multi-lateral powers. They highlighted the role of the Pakistani country as a land bridge between South Asia, China, Central Asia, the Arabian Sea and the region as a whole. Among the 16 participants, six specifically mentioned China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and its connectivity projects and underlined the following areas as important aspects of Pakistan's contribution: transport infrastructure, access to Gwadar and the Arabian Sea, energy cooperation and possible Central Asian linkages. Concurrently, participants emphasized the importance of implementation, political stability, economic power, and security conditions, as the determining factors for geographic potential to be a durable influence.

17 participants said that the development of Pakistan's relations with China was the most stable aspect of its current great power policy while 15 pointed to the importance of functional relations with the USA due to trade, diplomacy, education, technology, finance, and security

cooperation. 39 individuals highlighted the importance of increasing the cooperation with Russia, especially in the energy field, in the sphere of regional security, as well as in the sphere of diplomacy with regard to Afghanistan and in the work of Eurasian institutions. Fourteen respondents believed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was a good platform for Pakistan to interact with China, Russia and the CAC.

Participants also listed the fields where they felt that Pakistan has the potential to contribute in a positive manner to the order in the region. Twelve highlighted counterterrorism and security expertise, 11 noted diplomacy in the affairs of Afghanistan and Central Asia and 13 pointed to regional economic connectivity as Pakistan's greatest potential long-term play. Five of the respondents, however, pointed to other factors - economic fragility, domestic political volatility, security issues, regional rivalries and implementation issues - which limit Pakistan's ability to leverage strategic location into lasting influence. The general impression was thus that Pakistan is not a great power and not a passive player but a strategically positioned country which was trying to make a case for greater autonomy in a new range of approaches to diplomacy, connectivity, multilateral engagement and selective engagement with contesting centers of power.

4.7. Summary of the Findings

The six themes show an overall trend towards decentralization of power from post-Cold War concentration and towards the complex. Continued American primacy was generally acknowledged, but the primary long-term challenger was seen as being China and hedging was acknowledged as a typical secondary state response while Russia was seen as a consequential strategic player. While diversified partnerships and regional connectivity as well as multilateral engagement were seen as avenues of Pakistan's strategic autonomy, its capacity and regional insecurity were also noted as obstacles for it to exercise influence.

5. Discussion

The results show that the post-Soviet world order is a partial transformation of the American unipolar system of order rather than a fully-fledged transformation of it by a multipolar world. Most of the evidence gathered for the interview indicates that many participants believe that there has been a significant shift in the distribution of capabilities, but they still identify a difference between the power of the United States and the rest of the powers in terms of military reach, the density of alliances, financial centrality and institutional influence. This is a highly similar division to that which already exists in scholarship. While Ikenberry (2018) underscores the longevity of United States-based institutions and alliances, Acharya (2017, 2018) is skeptical of the unchanging nature of authority and influence, which are becoming more plurality and regionalized. The respondents' perceptions indicate that these two can take place at the same time: American primacy can continue to be important yet its ability to structure international politics without constant challenge wane.

This conflict in the participants about the notion of polarity is noteworthy. Twelve respondents preferred a multipolar interpretation, seven had a transitional or hybrid interpretation and four emphasized a modified unipolar interpretation. This deviation from the study does not reduce its strength; it shows only that, according to the analysts, polarity is a function of the indicators that they value. Hegemonic contestation is neither uniform across different security, economic or institutional spheres nor is it simply the sum of material capabilities, as Goh (2019) has demonstrated and Ikenberry and Nexon (2019) have argued. The results of the interviews

corroborate this multi-faceted interpretation. Those who highlighted the expansion of the American military network had different views than those who highlighted China's economic strength, infrastructure, technology and increasing role of the regional states in diplomacy. The new multi-polarity is not necessarily balanced in all of the sectors.

The role differentiation of China and Russia is also in line with the latest scholarship. Twenty respondents viewed China as the major long-term systemic challenger, while seventeen viewed Russia as a more focused, geopolitical and military power. However, according to Lo (2020), the China-Russia relationship is not a complete alliance, but rather one that is pragmatic and based on mutual interests. Fourteen of these participants also reported Beijing and Moscow as being strategically converging, but autonomous. They help limit Western freedom of maneuver and increase the options of other countries but in general the respondents did not see a bipolar structure of alliances similar to the Cold War. This outcome, which runs counter to the limited view that provides a simplified understanding of all non-Western cooperation as a single counter-hegemonic bloc, challenges the idea.

The fifth theme relates structural transformation and agency of secondary states. Hedging and diversified partnerships were likewise the most common themes, as they align well with Marston's (2024) analysis of the neoclassical realist calculus of hedging and diversified partnerships by states in the face of competing with the United States and China. Similarly, Nagy (2022) outlines the different middle power approaches in the Indo-Pacific. The four respondents who said that increased competition leads to less strategic ambiguity, however, do fit with the limitations Fortier and Massie (2023) identified. The whole conclusion is that hedging is not a sign of independence nor just indecision. It is a conditional approach, one that will only work if the economy is robust, domestic capacity is there, it's not far away from any allies, the alliance will endure, and great power pressure will be strong.

The case of Pakistan is very illustrative. Eighteen participants saw Pakistan having a positive strategic role for Pakistan, but in a specific context not necessarily in terms of geography. Sixteen people emphasized the need for stressed connectivity, seventeen people spoke about the stability of China-Pakistan relation while 15 highlighted the need for functional engagement with the United States, 13 highlighted the importance of relations with Russia, and 14 highlighted the importance of the SCO as a multilateral platform. The results are consistent with those of Hassan (2022) who describes Pakistan's hedging in the face of growing competition between the United States and China, and with those of Siddiqi (2022) who urges the policy-makers of Pakistan to opt for hedging rather than picking an alignment. The respondents thus saw Pakistan's policy as one of diversification and not bloc selection.

Overall, the results are consistent with a realist perspective in which the central tenets of anarchy and national interest continue to be central, while state reactions go beyond the classic hard balancing. Great powers play a security game, an institutions game, a technology game, an infrastructure game, a markets game, a political game, and selectively align, hedge and engage with others in a multilateral game in order to protect their autonomy. Pakistan's positive influence is greatest in the arena of commerce, transportation, security cooperation, regional dialogue and competing power centers. But its effectiveness is much dependent on the internal capacity and the overall regional environment. However, the post-Soviet order is not a successful diffusion of power, a competitive process of hegemony, a differentiated polarity or a successful process of adaptation of state approaches. But rather than a successful

diffusion of power, a competitive process of hegemony, a differentiated polarity or a successful process of adaptation of state approaches, the post-Soviet order is characterized by its incomplete nature.

6. Conclusion

In this study, it is explored how power and polarity have shifted in the post-Soviet world order through the realist concepts of anarchy, national interest, balancing, and hegemony and analyzed them using the perception of the 23 respondents informed about the post-Soviet world order. The results address the research question, as they reveal that the international system has now gone beyond the post-Soviet era's unprecedented concentration of power and failed to generate a common and even distribution of power. The respondents confirmed that China remains the main long-term systemic threat, Russia a consequential military and geopolitical player and the United States is still the greatest combination of military, financial, technological and alliance power on the world stage. The order created in this way is then more contested, more differentiated, and more transitional than the unipolar order of the 1990s.

The interviews illustrate the hegemonic politics that has started to happen as negotiation, resistance, selective cooperation and competition happen across multiple domains in relation to the objective of this study. The continued strength of America's position doesn't mean that other countries are losing the ability to limit results, establish new institutions, and broaden options. National interests are thus pursued through hedging and diversified partnerships in the interest of secondary states. Such strategies are contingent as there are economic, security, geographical and domestic constraints that restrict weaker states' freedom.

Pakistan is in a significant role in this transformation. It was related to participants by the positive role it plays in the region regarding connectivity, China-Pakistan partnership, continued cooperation with the United States, enhanced interaction with the Central Asian countries, involvement in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and possible contribution to security and economic integration in the region. At the same time, the results indicate that they do not necessarily have to be located strategically to have impact. Economic stability, institutional capability, security and policy continuity are key to Pakistan's success in achieving a long-term regional relevance from its geo-political and diplomatic gains. The study thus recommends Pakistan's role in an emerging and a growingly plural international order can be best served by the practice of pragmatic strategic autonomy, diversified diplomacy, connectivity and cooperative regional engagements, rather than the practice of bloc politics.

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