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ALLIANCE POLITICS AND NATIONAL SECURITY: EXPLAINING FOREIGN POLICY ALIGNMENT AMONG DEVELOPING STATES

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Abstract

Why do developing states facing insecurity adopt different patterns of foreign policy alignment? We bring together balance-of-power and balance-of-threat approaches, neoclassical realism, foreign policy analysis, and scholarship on hedging and strategic autonomy. It develops a conditional alignment framework in which perceived threats create demand for security partners, but domestic political priorities, economic exposure, and the availability of diplomatic alternatives shape the eventual portfolio of external relationships. Pakistan, Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Kenya provide illustrative comparisons across South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Africa. The analysis distinguishes formal alliances from informal defense cooperation, issue-specific diplomatic convergence, and economic partnership. It finds that an exclusive alignment continuum obscures the ability of governments to cooperate with different powers in different domains. Pakistan shows the importance of acute regional rivalry and security dependence; Bangladesh illustrates diversified diplomacy amid economic and geographic constraints; Vietnam shows selective security engagement alongside a strong commitment to autonomy; and Kenya shows the interaction of regional stabilization, donor relations, and commercial diversification. These interpretations are grounded in published scholarship and public policy documents rather than original interviews or a coded event dataset. We thus advances a conceptual explanation, not a causal estimate. Its central proposition is that alignment is best understood as a revisable, multidimensional portfolio in which national security objectives are filtered through domestic and economic constraints.

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1. Introduction

Alliance politics remains central to the study of international security because governments rarely confront threats with only their own resources. Military cooperation can deter an adversary, support access to technology, and generate diplomatic reassurance. Yet it also creates dependence, may provoke a rival, and can entangle a weaker partner in conflicts that it would otherwise avoid. These trade-offs are especially consequential for developing states, whose security needs coexist with pressing development priorities and often constrained fiscal capacity [1-5].

The traditional language of alliance formation frequently assumes that governments face a choice between joining a balancing coalition and aligning with a dominant or threatening power. In reality, external relationships are more fragmented. A government can train its armed forces with one partner, import infrastructure finance from another, and vote independently in multilateral institutions. Such variation need not indicate inconsistency. It may reflect an effort to limit vulnerability while preserving bargaining room [6-10].

We ask: how do national security concerns influence foreign policy alignment among developing states, and why do similarly situated governments choose different combinations of security cooperation, economic engagement, and diplomatic autonomy? We argue that perceived external threats influence the urgency of alignment, but do not determine its final form. Domestic political incentives, economic dependence, and the availability of alternative partners intervene between systemic pressure and foreign policy choice.

Our contribution has three parts. First, it separates formal alliance commitments from broader patterns of policy alignment, avoiding the tendency to classify every partnership as an alliance. Second, it connects established security theories with domestic and political-economic explanations. Third, it treats alignment as a portfolio that may differ across military, economic, and diplomatic arenas. The four country illustrations are selected for variation in security environment and strategic practice, not as a representative sample of all developing states.

We move from a review of competing theories to an explicit framework and documentary comparative method. The country sections then assess the mechanisms suggested by that framework. The discussion considers alternative explanations, including geography, institutional continuity, and major-power agency, before drawing qualified policy implications.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Balance of power and the limits of systemic prediction

Classical realist accounts begin from the absence of an overarching authority capable of protecting states. For Morgenthau, diplomacy and power are inseparable, while Waltz's structural realism explains why the distribution of capabilities creates recurring incentives for countervailing coalitions [1,2]. Here, an alliance is an instrument for preventing a threatening concentration of power. States can increase their internal capabilities or combine resources externally. The resulting expectation is parsimonious: when a potentially dominant actor grows stronger, others have reason to cooperate against it. Walt's earlier discussion of alliance formation further establishes the distinction between aggregate power and threat-based coalitions [6].

This account provides a useful baseline, but its predictive reach is limited. Capability is not equivalent to perceived danger. A geographically distant great power may possess overwhelming military strength without appearing immediately threatening, while a weaker neighboring state may be seen as the principal adversary. Also, material asymmetry alone cannot explain why governments accept unequal security relationships rather than seek alternative partners. Scholars of alliance formation have thus asked whether states respond to power itself, to threats, or to the expected behavior of their partners [3-5].

The balance-of-power approach is also less straightforward in the political economy of developing states. A government can depend on a powerful state for trade, investment, or

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development finance while seeking military assistance elsewhere. Treating these relationships as a single alignment decision conceals the separate incentives operating across policy sectors. The question is not merely whom a country supports, but in which domain, under what conditions, and with what degree of commitment [8,9].

2.2 Balance of threat, balancing and bandwagoning

Walt's balance-of-threat theory revises the power-centered explanation by identifying aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and perceived aggressive intentions as sources of threat [3]. States are expected more often to balance against a danger than to bandwagon with it. This distinction helps explain why the same great power may be a welcome security partner in one region and a source of anxiety in another. Perceptions of intention matter because states cannot infer future conduct from military inventories alone.

Bandwagoning nevertheless remains an important alternative. Schweller argues that revisionist incentives and the prospect of gain may induce states to join stronger powers rather than oppose them [4]. Others stress the vulnerability of weaker states, which may accommodate a stronger actor to reduce immediate punishment or gain protection. The disagreement is important: balancing theory privileges the avoidance of danger, while bandwagoning accounts allow the pursuit of rewards, opportunism, and the accommodation of asymmetry. These mechanisms can coexist when a government seeks security assurances from one power while accommodating another economically.

Alliance reliability complicates both responses. Snyder shows that partners face the twin risks of abandonment and entrapment: an ally may fail to assist when needed, or draw a state into unwanted confrontation [5]. Weaker partners can be especially exposed because they often possess limited influence over a patron's strategic choices. So, greater security dependence does not always translate into stronger diplomatic loyalty. A state may intensify military cooperation yet avoid commitments that surrender discretion over future crises.

Theories of balancing and bandwagoning thus identify important strategic incentives, but they are insufficient on their own to describe mixed relationships. A country that purchases weapons from one supplier and trades with a competitor is not necessarily balancing in every domain. More precise concepts are needed to distinguish formal treaty obligations, defense access, diplomatic endorsement, and issue-specific accommodation.

2.3 Neoclassical realism and domestic mediation

Neoclassical realism explains why comparable systemic pressures may generate different foreign policies. Rose argues that relative material power shapes foreign-policy opportunities through leaders' perceptions and domestic structures [11]. Later formulations identify state capacity, elite consensus, and institutional arrangements as mechanisms mediating external constraints [12,13]. For the present comparison, these mechanisms matter because external threat does not automatically determine the form or durability of cooperation.

For developing states, the domestic filter can be unusually visible. Fiscal weakness may restrict defense modernization, coalition politics may constrain diplomatic choices, and civilian-military relations may affect which threats receive priority. Leaders also evaluate whether an external partnership strengthens regime survival, provides material resources, or exposes them to opposition criticism. These considerations do not render security irrelevant; they affect how security is defined and which instruments appear politically feasible.

One limitation of neoclassical realism is its breadth. If almost any domestic variable can explain a deviation from structural expectations, the framework risks becoming difficult to falsify. A useful application must specify which domestic mechanisms matter in advance and identify evidence that would contradict the argument. We focus on threat interpretation, regime or coalition priorities, fiscal and institutional capacity, and the availability of

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external alternatives instead of treating domestic politics as an unlimited residual category.

2.4 Foreign policy analysis and decision processes

Foreign policy analysis directs attention to the individuals and institutions that make choices on behalf of states. Allison and Zelikow demonstrate how governmental decisions may reflect organizational routines and bargaining among officials not a single coherent national calculation [14]. Putnam's two-level games similarly show that international bargaining interacts with domestic political acceptability [15]. Hudson places agency, perception, and institutional context at the center of foreign policy explanation [16].

These perspectives challenge the image of the state as a unitary actor. Foreign ministries, armed forces, trade agencies, and elected leaders may have different assessments of a prospective partner. The defense establishment may favor a relationship that a finance ministry regards as commercially costly. Domestic elections and leadership transitions can alter the language of alignment without immediately changing procurement contracts, military training programs, or inherited institutional commitments.

Foreign policy analysis also clarifies why publicly declared neutrality may coexist with substantial cooperation. Official rhetoric serves domestic and diplomatic audiences, while operational arrangements respond to concrete security requirements. Researchers must thus compare speeches with agreements, exercises, procurement, voting patterns, and economic transactions. No single indicator should be treated as a complete measure of alignment.

2.5 Hedging, diversification and strategic autonomy

Recent peer-reviewed scholarship develops this debate further. Marston [48] connects hedging to neoclassical realism and the domestic mediation of great-power competition. Kuik [49] shows how a state's outwardly balanced posture can coexist with uneven relationships across policy domains, while Kuik and Jamil [50] emphasize that hedging is adaptive not a fixed status. These studies reinforce the need to distinguish deliberate risk management from diversification that results from separate institutional or economic incentives.

Hedging scholarship emerged partly from the observation that Asian states often resisted a simple choice between the United States and China. Goh describes regional strategies that combine engagement, indirect balancing, and efforts to sustain a favorable regional order [7]. Kuik emphasizes insurance-like behavior in which governments pursue contradictory-looking measures to avoid excessive exposure to either side [8]. Lim and Cooper caution, however, that the concept becomes analytically weak when almost any mixed foreign policy is labeled hedging [9].

The debate concerns both definition and measurement. Some scholars reserve hedging for behavior under significant uncertainty about a major power's intentions, while others apply it more broadly to simultaneous cooperation and resistance. A state may diversify partners for routine economic reasons without making a deliberate strategic hedge. We thus treat hedging as a specific risk-management strategy: the purposeful maintenance of alternative external relationships when the future conduct of powerful partners is uncertain and exclusive commitment is costly.

Strategic autonomy overlaps with hedging but is not identical to it. Autonomy refers to the capacity to make decisions without external veto, while hedging describes a strategy for managing uncertain external relationships. Acharya's work on regional order and non-Western agency highlights how smaller and middle powers seek room to shape institutions rather than merely react to great powers [10]. Autonomy can be a goal of diversification, but the pursuit of autonomy can also require selective commitments and costly investment in indigenous capabilities.

Another disagreement concerns whether economic interdependence reduces conflict or creates leverage. Keohane and Nye show that interdependence is characterized by asymmetrical sensitivity and vulnerability [17].

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Farrell and Newman argue that network positions can become instruments of coercion [18]. From this perspective, trade diversification is not merely a development strategy; it can be an element of national security. Yet reducing dependence may be costly, and the strongest economic partner is not always the most credible military guarantor.

The theories work best together, but only under certain conditions. Balancing explains reactions to threats; bandwagoning highlights accommodation and possible gains; neoclassical realism explains domestic filtering; foreign policy analysis explains decision processes; and hedging and strategic autonomy explain cross-domain diversification. None should be assumed to replace the others. The empirical challenge is to establish which mechanism is most plausible in a particular decision and to avoid interpreting every mixed relationship as evidence of the preferred theory.

A related difficulty is that scholars often infer a strategy from its outcome. Observing that a state maintains diplomatic contact with rival powers does not establish that its leaders deliberately adopted a hedging policy. Diversification may result from fragmented bureaucratic mandates, inherited contracts, or a pragmatic search for finance. Calling a policy hedging requires evidence of uncertainty, conscious preservation of alternatives, and policies designed to limit exposure to an unfavorable future. Without those observations, the more modest term "diversified engagement" is preferable.

The distinction between alignment and alliance is equally consequential. A formal alliance normally creates identifiable expectations of assistance under specified contingencies. Security alignment may involve arms purchases, exercises, intelligence exchanges, access arrangements, or recurring diplomatic support without a mutual-defense promise. A country may deepen one form while resisting another. Measuring these activities separately prevents a defense procurement agreement from being treated as equivalent to a binding collective-defense treaty.

Scholars also disagree about how far small-state agency can offset asymmetry. Structural accounts stress the constraints imposed by geography and material power. Agency-centered work emphasizes institutional entrepreneurship, bargaining skill, and the capacity to assemble issue-specific coalitions. Both insights are plausible: diplomatic skill can improve the terms of an unequal relationship, but cannot eliminate a neighboring power's geographic advantage. The conditional approach adopted here treats autonomy as variable and costly, not as an attribute that a government either possesses or lacks.

3. Theoretical Framework

Our conditional alignment framework treats alignment as an outcome in three distinct domains: security cooperation, economic partnership, and diplomatic convergence. A perceived threat raises the value of external protection, but domestic political priorities and economic vulnerability alter the attractiveness of particular partners. Strategic flexibility,access to alternative suppliers, diplomatic channels, and regional institutions,conditions whether a government can avoid exclusive dependence. Figure 1 displays the proposed conceptual sequence; its arrows represent hypothesized relationships rather than estimated causal effects.

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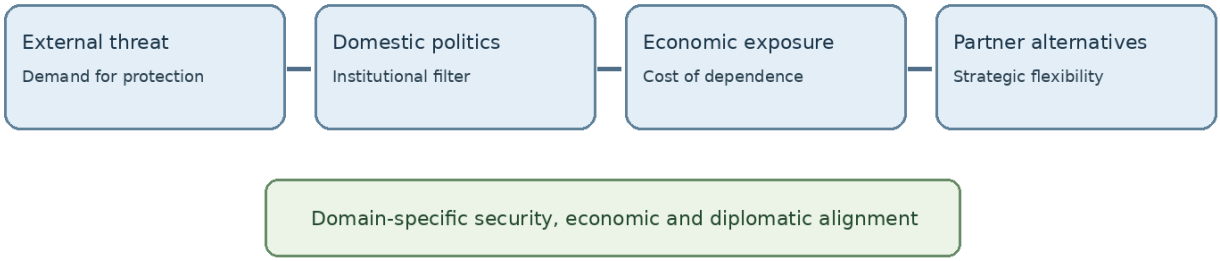


Figure 1. Conditional alignment framework (conceptual illustration).

Proposition 1: More immediate and credible external threats increase demand for security cooperation, although they do not necessarily increase alignment across economic and diplomatic domains.

Proposition 2: Domestic political incentives and institutional constraints shape the speed, visibility, and durability of external commitments.

Proposition 3: Concentrated economic dependence increases the costs of antagonizing a partner and encourages issue-specific accommodation.

Proposition 4: Greater access to alternative partners increases the feasibility of diversification and diplomatic autonomy.

Stage	Mechanism	Observable implication
Security environment	Threat perception and defense needs	Defense agreements, exercises, procurement and threat statements
Domestic filter	Elite priorities and institutional capacity	Policy continuity or change across leadership transitions
Economic filter	Trade, debt and investment exposure	Selective diplomatic accommodation and commercial diversification
Strategic choice	Partner alternatives and autonomy goals	Different partners across military, economic and diplomatic domains

Table 1 summarizes the framework and links each mechanism to evidence that could be examined in future process-tracing research.

The framework requires a distinction between the perceived magnitude of a threat and the capacity to respond to it. A government facing severe insecurity may still avoid a visible alliance if such a commitment would provoke escalation, threaten domestic legitimacy, or endanger access to essential markets. Conversely, a state facing a relatively modest immediate threat may cultivate substantial defense ties because cooperation provides technology, training, or diplomatic status at manageable cost. The prediction is conditional not a simple linear relationship between threat and alliance intensity.

Alignment decisions also have a temporal dimension. Procurement and infrastructure commitments create sunk costs that outlast electoral cycles. Diplomatic declarations can change rapidly, but the composition of an air force or the structure of sovereign liabilities may be difficult to alter. This temporal mismatch helps explain why governments sometimes announce strategic reorientation while maintaining much of the inherited partnership

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architecture. Researchers should distinguish short-run rhetoric, medium-run operational cooperation, and long-run structural dependence.

Another factor is the availability of substitutes. A government with multiple credible suppliers, export destinations, and diplomatic forums can resist pressure more effectively than one whose security and financing depend on a single actor. Yet diversification itself imposes coordination costs: different weapons systems may not be interoperable, fragmented procurement can raise maintenance expenses, and conflicting partner expectations may constrain crisis behavior. The model thus predicts that states diversify selectively, concentrating dependence where substitution is costly and seeking alternatives where feasible.

4. Research Methodology

This study adopts a structured, focused qualitative comparison to develop and assess the plausibility of a conditional alignment framework. The unit of analysis is the country-level pattern of foreign policy alignment across security, economic, and diplomatic domains. Individual treaties, defense activities, policy statements, and economic relationships are treated as observations informing that country-level assessment, not as separate units of analysis or a systematically coded event dataset. The purpose is conceptual explanation and cross-case interpretation rather than statistical estimation or causal identification.

Pakistan, Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Kenya were selected purposively to provide variation in security environment and the form of external cooperation. Pakistan illustrates persistent interstate rivalry; Bangladesh combines geographic proximity with development and export dependence; Vietnam faces maritime security pressures while maintaining a declared non-alliance posture; and Kenya confronts regional instability and transnational security threats. Applying common analytical questions to these contrasting cases helps assess the framework's relevance across settings. The selection is illustrative, not random or representative of developing states generally.

The important period is about 2015-2025; earlier historical sources explain inherited commitments. The documentary evidence cited in the country sections was selected for its relevance to the four analytical dimensions, its identifiable authorship and date, and its ability to establish a specific claim. Formal agreements and government statements are prioritized for declared commitments, institutional reports for economic or security context, and peer-reviewed scholarship for interpretation and rival accounts. The cited material is a purposive documentary base, not the output of a comprehensive database search or systematically screened archive; consequently, no exhaustive inclusion count or formal coding reliability measure is reported.

Each case is examined through four common questions: (1) What external security risks are emphasized in official discourse? (2) What is the nature and depth of external defense cooperation? (3) How do important trade, finance, and development relationships constrain or expand policy options? (4) What domestic priorities and evidence of diplomatic independence help explain the observed pattern? Relevant observations include defense agreements, training and exercises, arms relationships, official strategic language, commercial exposure, and diplomatic positions. These are interpreted separately by domain rather than combined into a numerical alignment index.

Assessment proceeds in two stages. First, each country's security, economic, and diplomatic relationships are described separately using dated observations where available. Second, the proposed explanations are compared with plausible rivals: geography, inherited procurement and institutional ties, and the choices of major-power partners. Threat-based explanations would be more persuasive where documented security concerns precede deeper defense cooperation; economic-constraint explanations where commercial exposure accompanies selective accommodation; and domestic mediation where leadership or institutional changes coincide with shifts in policy despite relatively stable external

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conditions. The manuscript identifies suggestive consistency and counterexamples but does not reconstruct complete decision sequences, formally score hypotheses, or infer intent solely from public rhetoric. Agreements are evidence of announced commitments, not proof of implementation or causal motivation.

The documentary base is uneven across countries and more visible commitments may be overrepresented. Without a pre-specified search inventory, independent coding, or decision-level timelines, the analysis cannot systematically adjudicate rival explanations or establish causal effects. Future research could archive a dated and replicable source corpus, include disconfirming decisions, and compare arms transfers, trade concentration, and UN voting records where appropriate [36,40,41]. These datasets were not analyzed here.

5. Comparative Country Analysis

Recent research provides a more direct scholarly basis for interpreting Pakistan's cross-domain partnerships. Ali, Arshad, and Rogers [51] examine Pakistan's simultaneous strategic reliance on China and continued engagement with the United States. Jahanzaib and Ahmed [52] examine the China factor in Pakistan's geo-economic orientation, while Ali and Peng [53] emphasize geography as a durable explanation for China-Pakistan cooperation. The latter interpretation is an important rival to an explanation based solely on contemporary threat perception.

5.1 Pakistan

Pakistan's external alignment is strongly shaped by the security competition with India, including conventional military asymmetry, recurring crises, and nuclear deterrence. This setting makes defense technology, intelligence cooperation, and diplomatic support especially salient. The country's longstanding strategic relationship with China has combined security cooperation with major infrastructure and investment initiatives. Historical ties with the United States have also mattered, although their intensity and political reception have varied over time [19-21].

Official evidence adds a dated basis to the distinction between security cooperation and economic alignment. The Pakistan-China joint statement issued following Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's visit of 4-8 June 2024 reaffirmed bilateral security cooperation and the protection of Chinese personnel while describing an upgraded China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). It also identified the Main Line-1 railway upgrade and the Karakoram Highway realignment as priorities, with financing and implementation requiring further work [42]. These are documented policy commitments, not proof that all proposed projects were completed.

The joint statement of 15 October 2024 further linked bilateral political support with the five proposed CPEC corridors and financial cooperation [43]. A subsequent statement dated 6 February 2025 recorded more than a dozen cooperation documents covering CPEC, trade, science and technology, and other sectors [44]. The sequence illustrates how Pakistan's China relationship combines defense and diplomatic coordination with infrastructure and financial objectives. It does not, by itself, establish that economic dependence caused any particular defense decision.

The Pakistani case illustrates why alignment should not be reduced to a single patron. Security needs favor reliable defense cooperation, but economic stabilization, relations with international financial institutions, Gulf partnerships, and commercial access create additional priorities. Civilian and military institutions have not always weighted these objectives identically. This pattern is better described as a security-centered partnership with continuing efforts to retain other diplomatic and economic channels, rather than unconditional alignment across all issues.

The China relationship is especially significant because it spans domains that are analytically distinct. Defense cooperation and military technology can address the perceived security imbalance with India, while transport and energy investments respond to infrastructure needs. These motivations overlap but are not identical. Security collaboration may remain

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attractive even when particular commercial projects face fiscal, governance, or implementation criticism. It would thus be misleading to interpret every debate about investment as evidence of declining security alignment, or every defense initiative as endorsement of all associated economic arrangements.

Pakistan's relations with the United States demonstrate the importance of changing strategic context. Periods of close security cooperation have alternated with diplomatic friction over Afghanistan, counterterrorism, and competing regional priorities. This variability shows alliance reliability as a concern for a weaker partner. Domestic debate about sovereignty and the distribution of benefits from cooperation can further alter the political costs of alignment. An explanation needs to account for the perceived threat, the usefulness of external resources, and the legitimacy of the partnership within Pakistan. IMF reporting provides context for external financing constraints [35].

The case also illustrates why the term strategic autonomy should be used carefully. Maintaining ties with China, the Gulf states, multilateral lenders, and Western economies creates some diplomatic options, but these relationships do not provide interchangeable resources. A financial institution cannot substitute directly for a weapons supplier, and a commercial partner may be unwilling to offer security guarantees. The capacity to diversify is domain-specific. Pakistan's alignment consequently reflects an uneven portfolio of relationships not a uniformly balanced posture.

The regional setting has evolved alongside changing external priorities. Pakistan's strategic partnership with China has remained important, while Washington's regional posture shifted following the 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan. This change does not mean that Pakistan automatically changed camps, but that the relative value of counterterrorism, diplomatic access, and economic assistance changed across partners. A decision-level account should examine the terms and implementation of defense cooperation separately from broad public declarations of friendship. This matters because dependence may deepen in one domain while bargaining becomes more difficult in another.

Recent studies complicate the characterization of Bangladesh as simply neutral between major powers. Karim [54] interprets Bangladesh's engagement with India and China as hedging, whereas Yasmin [55] emphasizes Bangladesh's agency in its relationship with China. Al Amin [56] connects strategic hedging to the Sino-Indian rivalry and security concerns. These contributions support a more explicit distinction between documented patterns of diversified engagement and claims about deliberate strategic intent.

Pakistan also faces a domestic resource allocation problem. Defense readiness, energy imports, debt servicing, and social expenditure compete for constrained public resources. Foreign economic relationships can thus influence security choices even when the immediate military threat remains unchanged. IMF country reports and World Bank country assessments provide possible documentary inputs for examining the fiscal dimension [35,36]. These sources do not themselves establish that a particular security decision was caused by economic pressure; they identify a mechanism that requires further tracing.

5.2 Bangladesh

Bangladesh's foreign policy has frequently emphasized balanced engagement and the avoidance of unnecessarily antagonistic great-power commitments. Geographic proximity to India, relations with China, export dependence, infrastructure requirements, and the displacement crisis involving Rohingya refugees all shape its external environment. These pressures are not reducible to a single military threat, and development diplomacy has remained an important element of national security [22,23].

Bangladesh's differentiated external relations can be examined through dated agreements rather than inferred solely from general diplomatic language. The India-Bangladesh joint statement of September 2022 recorded an

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agreement on water withdrawal from the Kushiyara River alongside railway training and information-technology cooperation [45]. During the June 2024 state visit, India's prime minister identified cross-border rail connectivity, port access, electricity links and cooperation in digital and maritime sectors as concrete elements of bilateral relations [46]. These documents demonstrate the practical depth of neighborhood cooperation without establishing a military alliance.

Bangladesh simultaneously pursued a distinct relationship with China. The bilateral joint statement of 10 July 2024 announced a Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership and addressed investment, trade, infrastructure and wider cooperation [47]. Read alongside the Indian statements, this provides documentary support for cross-domain engagement with different major partners. The announcements establish stated priorities and agreed frameworks; they do not show that every initiative was implemented or that Bangladesh followed a coordinated hedging strategy. The political transition later in 2024 also cautions against assuming that commitments announced by one government represent unchanged policy preferences throughout the study period.

The country illustrates a strategy of differentiated engagement. Security and border questions give India particular importance, while China has been relevant to infrastructure and defense procurement and Western markets matter for export earnings. Domestic political transitions can alter diplomatic emphasis, yet structural economic and geographic constraints persist. The point is not that Bangladesh maintains equal distance from all partners, but that different policy domains produce different incentives for cooperation. Regional development and humanitarian indicators provide context, not a direct test of alignment motives [37,38].

Bangladesh's geography produces a distinctive asymmetry. Relations with India involve borders, transit, water management, energy, and security cooperation, making disengagement both impractical and costly. At the same time, infrastructure finance, industrial supply chains, and military procurement generate opportunities for engagement with China. Export dependence on Western markets creates another set of constraints. These relationships should not be aggregated into a single ranking of preferred powers because each serves a different policy function.

Domestic political change can affect the presentation and management of these relationships. Leaders may emphasize sovereignty, development, or neighborhood cooperation differently, but commercial contracts and geographic interdependence often survive political turnover. That continuity does not prove that domestic politics is irrelevant. Rather, domestic choices occur within a relatively narrow set of feasible alternatives. A closer comparison needs to distinguish which policies were actively selected by governing coalitions from those largely inherited from geography and earlier commitments.

Bangladesh also shows the limits of applying conventional alliance categories to states whose immediate priorities include climate vulnerability, migration, humanitarian displacement, and export competitiveness. These are national-security concerns in a broad policy sense, but they do not automatically generate military balancing. Diplomatic access to multiple partners can help mobilize resources and reduce dependence. A better description is diversified problem-solving unless documentary evidence shows a deliberate hedge against a particular strategic contingency.

The growth of the ready-made garment sector makes access to export markets central to Bangladesh's external economic position. The country must manage its immediate neighborhood while also maintaining commercially important relationships beyond South Asia. This creates a layered incentive structure: border and transit arrangements are geographically concentrated, whereas export markets and investment partners are more geographically dispersed. World Bank and Asian Development Bank country reporting can help trace the evolution of those economic dependencies [36,37].

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The Rohingya displacement crisis is a further reminder that national security is not exhausted by military rivalry. Refugee hosting affects public administration, humanitarian resources, border governance, and relations with Myanmar and external donors. UNHCR reporting offers a documented basis for studying these pressures [38]. Yet it would be inappropriate to infer a stable alignment preference from humanitarian cooperation alone. Assistance can be accepted from multiple donors without an exclusive strategic commitment, and public appeals for international burden sharing may serve a different purpose from defense diplomacy.

5.3 Vietnam

Vietnam combines a strong commitment to sovereignty with an active search for international partnerships. Disputes in the South China Sea make maritime security and relations with China especially sensitive. At the same time, China remains a major economic partner, while cooperation with the United States, Japan, India, and other states has expanded in various forms. Vietnam's official defense approach emphasizes avoiding military alliances and foreign bases, a position that distinguishes expanded cooperation from treaty alignment [24-26]. Historical analysis of the political economy of Sino-Vietnamese relations and maritime disputes supports this distinction [24,25].

Vietnam is thus an instructive case of selective engagement under strategic constraint. Its leaders seek external capacity and diplomatic support without accepting the full risks of alliance entrapment. Economic exposure discourages simple confrontation, while historical experience and domestic political commitments reinforce autonomy. The case supports a domain-specific understanding of alignment, but it also shows that strategic autonomy has practical limits when economic and security interests pull in different directions. Vietnam's external behavior is often described through the language of bamboo diplomacy, conveying firmness of national interest alongside flexibility in relations. The metaphor should not substitute for analysis. The critical question is how a state can resist maritime pressure while maintaining extensive trade and political contact with the actor it perceives as a principal source of concern. The answer involves the simultaneous costs of confrontation and the benefits of external capacity building. Neither a simple balancing nor a simple bandwagoning label fully captures this pattern.

Defense policy creates an important boundary condition. Vietnam has articulated principles against joining military alliances and hosting foreign military bases, while nevertheless expanding dialogue and practical cooperation with several partners. These commitments distinguish capacity building from treaty-based alignment. They can also serve a signaling purpose, reassuring neighboring powers that stronger bilateral ties are not automatically preparations for an offensive coalition. Whether such signals succeed depends on how other governments interpret them, not merely on Hanoi's declared intentions.

Economic interdependence complicates the security picture further. Supply-chain links and market access make abrupt disengagement expensive, while concerns about maritime sovereignty create incentives to strengthen partnerships and domestic capabilities. The two pressures are not necessarily contradictory. They can encourage a division of labor across policy domains: cautious security diversification, continued commercial engagement, and a public emphasis on independent decision-making. Vietnam thus provides a particularly useful case for examining the difference between autonomy as a stated doctrine and autonomy as a practical capability.

Vietnam's relationships illustrate the distinction between the diplomatic elevation of a partnership and the creation of a military alliance. In September 2023, Vietnam and the United States announced a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. That diplomatic designation is consequential, but it should not be equated with a mutual-defense treaty. The 2019 Vietnamese defense white paper remains a useful statement of the country's declared non-alliance principles [26]. A later empirical study could compare the text of the 2023 joint

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statement with subsequent operational cooperation not assuming that a higher diplomatic label automatically changes alliance obligations.

Vietnam's foreign economic relationships also expose the difficulty of treating the state as a unitary actor with a single preference. Manufacturing exporters, defense planners, maritime agencies, and party institutions can attach different weights to stable relations with China and broader partnerships. Official trade and development reporting, including World Bank assessments, would help establish the economic context [36]. Even so, identifying strategic hedging would require evidence that leaders intentionally maintained alternative security options under uncertainty.

5.4 Kenya

Kenya's alignment incentives differ from those of the Asian cases. Regional insecurity, counterterrorism, instability in neighboring states, and maritime and trade interests are major concerns. Cooperation with Western security partners has coexisted with commercial and infrastructure relationships involving China and other actors. Kenya's role in East African diplomacy also gives regional institutions and peace operations a more prominent place in its external strategy [27,28]. The 2024 congressional notice and the State Department description clarify the legal character of the U.S. designation [32,33].

Kenya shows that security alignment can be functional rather than organized around a single great-power rivalry. Training, intelligence, regional stabilization, development finance, and market access can be pursued through different relationships. Domestic fiscal concerns and public debates about infrastructure obligations influence the acceptability of external economic commitments. The case thus broadens alliance analysis beyond military balancing to the governance of multiple external dependencies.

Country	Primary security concern	Typical external strategy	Key constraint
Pakistan	India-centered rivalry	Deep security cooperation plus wider economic diplomacy	Defense and financial dependence
Bangladesh	Border, regional and humanitarian pressures	Differentiated relations across partners	Geography and export exposure
Vietnam	Maritime sovereignty and China relations	Selective cooperation without formal alliance	Security–economic tension
Kenya	Regional instability and counterterrorism	Functional security partnerships and commercial diversification	Fiscal and regional obligations

Table 2 compares the four cases using common dimensions. It is a qualitative synthesis, not a coded dataset or an ordinal ranking.

Kenya's security partnerships arise in part from threats that are transnational rather than centered on a single rival state. Terrorist violence, border insecurity, and instability in the Horn of Africa generate demand for intelligence, training, equipment, and regional coordination. These tasks make operational interoperability and sustained assistance valuable. Yet they do not necessarily imply agreement with a partner on every international political issue. A functional security relationship can be extensive without becoming an exclusive geopolitical alignment.

The economic dimension is similarly differentiated. Infrastructure investment and external borrowing create development opportunities but also questions about debt service, procurement transparency, and the allocation of public resources. Western commercial relationships, international financial institutions, and Chinese investment

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thus interact with domestic fiscal politics. A government can seek security cooperation from one set of partners while negotiating economic projects with another, provided that the commitments remain politically and financially manageable. Regional macroeconomic reporting offers context for these fiscal constraints [39].

Kenya's regional role also matters. Participation in peace and security initiatives can increase diplomatic influence and provide a rationale for external assistance. This introduces a source of alignment behavior that is less prominent in narrow balance-of-threat models: states may cultivate partnerships to exercise regional leadership and support multilateral operations. The same behavior may be interpreted as external dependence or regional agency depending on the specific decision under study. Evidence of who initiated an operation and who controlled its objectives would help distinguish those explanations.

Kenya provides a concrete example of the distinction between privileged security cooperation and a collective-defense alliance. The United States designated Kenya a major non-NATO ally in 2024 [29,32]. This status can support particular forms of defense cooperation, but it is not equivalent to NATO membership or an automatic United States obligation to defend Kenya. The legal character of the designation matters because a study that counts it as a formal mutual-defense treaty would overstate the depth of alliance commitment.

Kenya's fiscal and development setting offers a separate explanation for diversified partnerships. Large infrastructure projects, public debt management, trade opportunities, and domestic debates about the distribution of development benefits can shape attitudes toward external economic engagement. African Development Bank and World Bank reporting provides context for these issues [36,39]. The connection to security policy should be assessed with caution: an external lender may influence fiscal options without controlling the government's decisions about regional deployments or counterterrorism cooperation.

5.5 Recent policy illustrations and their interpretive significance

Kenya's designation as a major non-NATO ally of the United States on 24 June 2024 provides a useful distinction between privileged security cooperation and a mutual-defense treaty. The presidential determination created a legal designation under United States law, but did not itself establish a NATO-style collective-defense obligation [29]. This development strengthens the case for disaggregating alliance status from security partnership. Kenya may deepen defense access and cooperation while maintaining separate commercial relationships; the designation alone does not establish that its overall foreign policy has become exclusive.

The recent literature also identifies competing mechanisms that this conceptual comparison cannot fully adjudicate. Studies of Pakistan emphasize strategic balancing, geo-economic priorities, and geography [51-53]; scholarship on Bangladesh variously stresses hedging, agency, and security competition [54-56]. Rather than treating these accounts as interchangeable, the conditional alignment framework specifies the kinds of decision-level evidence needed to distinguish them.

Vietnam's multidirectional diplomacy likewise offers a concrete illustration of strategic autonomy in practice. Storey's 2024 analysis of the visit by Russia's president to Hanoi describes an effort to preserve relationships with multiple major powers while avoiding support for Russia's war in Ukraine [30]. This is more informative than treating every diplomatic visit as evidence of alignment: the content of commitments, and the absence of commitments, matter as much as ceremonial contact. A second 2024 analysis notes the challenges of sustaining such autonomy when Russia and China become more closely aligned [31].

These two episodes provide observable examples, not a balanced event history across the four cases. They does not establish that the framework predicts policy outcomes generally. Their narrower value is conceptual: they show why analysts should distinguish legal security

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status, actual defense obligations, and public diplomatic behavior.

6. Discussion

We distinguish formal treaty alliance, legally designated security partnership and issue-specific policy alignment. Kenya's 2024 major non-NATO ally designation, for example, is a status under United States law that supports security cooperation; it does not itself create a mutual-defense treaty [32,33]. Vietnam's officially stated "Four No's" similarly distinguishes military cooperation from formal alliance commitments [34]. Conflating these institutional forms would overstate the extent of binding alignment.

The conditional portfolio argument generates potentially falsifiable expectations. If threat severity alone determined alignment, states with acute external risks should converge across military, economic and diplomatic domains. If economic dependence fully determined alignment, governments should avoid security relationships opposed by their principal commercial partners. The coexistence of cross-domain divergence suggests a role for domestic filtering and autonomy-seeking, although documentary process tracing is needed to determine whether these motives actually drove decisions.

The cases point to the usefulness of distinguishing demand for security assistance from the breadth of foreign policy alignment. Pakistan's acute rivalry gives external defense cooperation unusual salience, whereas Bangladesh's diversified concerns create incentives to distribute relationships. Vietnam shows the coexistence of maritime security anxiety and economic engagement with the same major power. Kenya illustrates a pattern in which counterterrorism and regional stabilization coexist with varied development relationships.

These patterns are consistent with the conditional alignment framework, but consistency is not proof of causation. Geography offers an alternative explanation: neighbors often remain unavoidable partners regardless of ideological or security preferences. Institutional continuity is another: inherited defense procurement and training systems may persist because switching suppliers is costly. Great powers also shape the options available to weaker states through assistance, conditionality, and market access. Future work should examine whether these alternatives explain more than the proposed domestic and economic filters.

The comparison also suggests that alignment is not adequately represented by a binary allied/nonaligned variable. Military access, intelligence cooperation, procurement, diplomatic voting, and investment may move in different directions. The label hedging should be used cautiously, however: diversification alone does not establish intentional insurance against uncertainty. Documentary evidence of explicit contingency planning or deliberate preservation of alternatives would strengthen that interpretation.

Theory	Principal expectation	What it explains well	Main limitation
Balance of power	Coalitions counter concentrated capabilities	Structural security incentives	Understates threat perception
Balance of threat	States respond to proximate, capable and aggressive actors	Regional rivalry	Understates domestic mediation
Neoclassical realism	Systemic pressure filtered by domestic institutions	Divergent responses to similar pressures	Risk of excessive flexibility
Foreign policy analysis	Decisions reflect leaders and institutions	Policy process and change	May underplay structural constraints

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Hedging/autonomy	States preserve options across competing partners	Mixed, cross-domain relationships	Difficult measurement

Table 3 highlights why the theories are complementary but not interchangeable.

6.1 Evidence, alternative explanations and discriminating observations

The framework generates discriminating expectations instead of simply redescribing the four countries. If balance of threat is the dominant mechanism, abrupt increases in perceived danger should precede deeper security coordination, even where trade remains unchanged. If economic dependence dominates, public diplomatic accommodation should be strongest on issues with identifiable market or financing exposure. If domestic political mediation is decisive, major leadership or coalition changes should be followed by a change in the language, instruments or visibility of alignment even without a corresponding shift in external capabilities. These patterns are distinguishable in principle, but the present documentary comparison does not provide sufficiently fine-grained chronological evidence to adjudicate them.

The cases also show a selection problem. Countries able to diversify partners may appear strategically autonomous because they already possess more bargaining power, stronger institutions or favorable geography. In that case, autonomy is partly a consequence of state capacity not an independent cause of policy choices. A future matched comparison should contrast states facing comparable threat levels but differing in fiscal resilience, procurement dependence and domestic political institutions. Such a design would offer a stronger test of the proposed mediating variables.

Across the four cases, a common pattern emerges: the domain in which a state experiences its most immediate vulnerability tends to shape the form of cooperation it values most. Pakistan prioritizes strategic deterrence and defense capacity; Bangladesh attaches considerable importance to economic and geographic management; Vietnam combines maritime-security concerns with deliberate avoidance of binding alliances; and Kenya emphasizes functional cooperation against regional and transnational insecurity. This pattern is compatible with the proposed framework, although the cases were selected to illuminate differences rather than to test a representative distribution of outcomes.

The analysis departs from a broad hedging explanation in one important respect. It does not presume that simultaneous relationships with competing powers necessarily represent a unified grand strategy. Instead, it asks whether those relationships arise from distinct ministries, economic constraints, inherited obligations, or an explicit decision to preserve options. A government can appear to hedge in aggregate even when no single actor coordinates the whole portfolio. This possibility gives foreign policy analysis a larger role than in accounts that infer strategy solely from external behavior.

Strategic autonomy should likewise be evaluated as a capacity, not simply a diplomatic aspiration. A government can declare nonalignment while depending on a single external supplier for essential military maintenance. Another may accept substantial defense cooperation yet retain multiple financing sources and room to dissent diplomatically. The observable question is whether a state can refuse a partner's request without incurring unacceptable security or economic costs. This standard is demanding, but it prevents rhetorical independence from being confused with practical freedom of action.

The cross-case comparison also identifies several plausible negative observations. Vietnam's non-alliance posture shows that concern about a powerful neighbor need not generate a binding military treaty. Bangladesh's economic diversification suggests that multiple external relationships can be maintained without a clearly documented hedging doctrine. Kenya's major non-NATO ally designation illustrates that a privileged defense status need not settle commercial alignment. Pakistan shows that

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close security cooperation can coexist with the continuing search for alternative financial and diplomatic channels. These observations do not falsify balance-of-threat theory; rather, they indicate that the dependent variable must be defined more precisely.

Future research could test the framework against the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, the World Bank's World Development Indicators, and UN General Assembly voting records [40,36,41]. Arms-transfer patterns would illuminate procurement dependence, but not alliance credibility. Economic indicators would show concentration and exposure, but not leaders' intentions. Voting data would reveal diplomatic convergence, but not its causes. The value of combining these sources is thus diagnostic: disagreement between measures can be evidence of domain-specific alignment rather than measurement error.

7. Policy Implications

For developing states, the principal policy challenge is not to avoid partnerships but to manage their costs. Defense cooperation can strengthen deterrence, yet should be evaluated against abandonment, entrapment, and long-term maintenance dependence. Economic diplomacy should assess concentration risks instead of assuming that investment and trade are politically neutral. Where feasible, procurement diversification, regional institutional engagement, and transparent assessment of major commitments can preserve room for policy adjustment.

External partners should likewise avoid treating every commercial or diplomatic relationship with a competitor as a security defection. Such expectations can narrow the bargaining options of smaller states and increase incentives for rhetorical neutrality or opaque arrangements. A more durable partnership recognizes that developing governments must balance immediate security needs against domestic legitimacy and development objectives.

Governments can use a domain-by-domain risk review before entering major commitments. In defense, the review should examine interoperability, sustainment costs, technology access, and the possibility of entrapment. In economic policy, it should consider concentration of export markets, repayment obligations, and exposure to coercive disruptions. In diplomacy, it should identify which commitments are legally binding and which are politically reversible. This approach is more useful than a general declaration that the country should align or remain neutral.

Institutional coordination is also important. A foreign ministry may promise strategic flexibility while defense procurement or infrastructure finance creates long-term dependence. Periodic joint reviews involving diplomatic, defense, trade, and finance officials could reveal these inconsistencies before they become difficult to reverse. Such reviews should not be interpreted as a call for equal distance from all powers; unequal threats and unequal benefits often justify unequal relationships.

8. Limitations and Future Research

We offer an interpretive comparison not a systematic test. It does not assemble a comprehensive primary-source archive, code annual alignment behavior, or establish counterfactual causal effects. The four cases differ in geography, state capacity, and threat type, which is useful for conceptual comparison but complicates strong inference. Future studies could pre-register case-selection criteria, collect official agreements and voting records over time, distinguish arms procurement from operational dependence, and trace specific decisions through leadership changes. Additional cases in Latin America and the Middle East would test the framework's regional portability.

Another limitation is temporal aggregation. A relationship described as close over a decade may include sharp crises, policy reversals, and changes in domestic leadership. Future studies could construct decision-level timelines instead of assuming that alignment is stable throughout the observation period. It should also test negative cases in which strong threat perceptions did not lead to closer security cooperation, or substantial economic dependence did not produce diplomatic accommodation. Such evidence would clarify the conditions under

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which the proposed mechanisms fail. The documentary examples cited here support descriptive statements about official commitments and published assessments, but do not establish that each state adopted a consciously coordinated cross-domain strategy. Assertions about intent are consequently framed as interpretations rather than proven motivations.

9. Conclusion

National security helps explain why developing states seek external partners, but it does not uniquely determine whom they align with or how far that alignment extends. Balance-of-threat theory clarifies the pressure created by dangerous neighbors; neoclassical realism and foreign policy analysis illuminate the domestic institutions and decision processes that translate pressure into action; and hedging scholarship draws attention to the strategic value of preserving alternatives. The cases of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Kenya show that security, economic, and diplomatic relationships can be deliberately differentiated.

Our contribution is to conceptualize foreign policy alignment as a conditional portfolio not a fixed binary choice. This perspective avoids equating commercial interdependence with military loyalty or informal defense cooperation with a binding alliance. It also cautions against treating all diversified foreign policies as hedging without evidence of strategic intent. Future empirical research can test the framework by following concrete alignment decisions over time and assessing whether perceived threats, domestic incentives, economic vulnerability, and available alternatives predict observable shifts. For policymakers, the central lesson is that durable national security depends not only on obtaining external support but also on retaining the institutional and economic capacity to make independent choices.

This also matters for how researchers study alignment. Researchers should avoid forcing complex foreign relationships into an allied-versus-neutral dichotomy when the observable commitments differ in scope, duration, and legal force. Distinguishing military, economic, and diplomatic alignment makes it possible to ask sharper questions about when security threats dominate, when domestic constraints intervene, and when diversification reflects purposeful risk management not administrative fragmentation. The framework is provisional, but it offers a transparent basis for comparative research that can be challenged with additional cases and more systematic evidence.

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