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The Evolution of Neutrality in Contemporary International Relations: Exploring How States Balance Competing Global Powers

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ABSTRACT

Neutrality has traditionally been associated with non-participation in conflicts and avoidance of formal alignment, yet contemporary great-power competition has increasingly challenged this conventional understanding. This study examines how neutrality is understood and strategically managed within an increasingly multipolar international environment. A qualitative, interpretive research design was adopted, using purposive sampling to engage 15 respondents based in Pakistan with relevant academic or professional expertise in international relations, geopolitics, foreign policy, diplomacy and strategic studies. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Six major themes emerged: neutrality as an evolving strategy, great-power pressure and strategic balancing, strategic hedging, economic interdependence, security and sovereignty, and institutional diplomacy. The findings indicate that contemporary neutrality is increasingly characterized by selective engagement, relationship diversification, economic risk management, security flexibility and active diplomatic participation rather than complete disengagement. Strategic hedging emerged as an important mechanism through which states preserve room for maneuver while managing competing external relationships. The study contributes by conceptualizing contemporary neutrality as a dynamic strategy centered on strategic autonomy, flexibility and risk management rather than simple non-alignment.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background of Research

Neutrality has historically represented a distinctive position in international relations through which states seek to avoid direct participation in armed conflicts and refrain from military alignment with competing belligerents. Permanent neutrality further institutionalized this principle by establishing a long-term commitment to abstain from military involvement while preserving sovereignty and independent foreign-policy decision-making. Although neutrality was particularly significant during periods of major-power rivalry, its meaning has never remained completely static. Its interpretation has evolved alongside changes in the structure of the international system, the nature of warfare, and the strategic requirements of states. Neuhold (1982) highlighted the continuing relevance of permanent neutrality within contemporary international relations, while Agius and Devine (2011) questioned the assumption that neutrality had become obsolete, emphasizing instead its capacity for adaptation.

The transformation of the international system following the Cold War created new conditions for neutrality. Rather than eliminating strategic competition, the post-Cold War period eventually produced renewed rivalry among major powers and a more complex distribution of political, economic and military capabilities. The growing significance of multiple centers of power has contributed to an increasingly multipolar environment in which states face both opportunities for strategic diversification and pressures to position themselves within competing geopolitical structures (Aslam, 2025). Contemporary debates concerning the global order similarly emphasize the interaction among Western, Eastern and Southern power centers and the competition to influence the rules and institutions governing international affairs (Ikenberry, 2024). Renewed great-power rivalry further complicates conventional assumptions about clear blocs and stable patterns of alignment (Zhang, 2023).

Within this environment, neutrality increasingly appears less as complete disengagement and more as a flexible strategic practice. States may simultaneously maintain economic relations, diplomatic engagement and selective security cooperation with competing powers while avoiding exclusive dependence on any single actor. Radoman (2021) demonstrates the continuing relevance of military neutrality for smaller states, but contemporary neutrality increasingly encompasses economic, diplomatic and institutional dimensions as well. Pakistan provides a particularly relevant contextual setting for examining these dynamics because its strategic environment requires interaction with multiple major and regional powers. Examining perspectives from Pakistan can therefore contribute to understanding how neutrality is interpreted when states seek to preserve strategic autonomy amid competing global and regional interests.

1.2 Problem Statement

Traditional conceptions of neutrality generally distinguish between alignment with a major power and non-alignment or non-participation. However, contemporary international politics increasingly contains positions that cannot be adequately classified through this binary distinction. States may avoid formal military alliances while simultaneously maintaining substantial economic, diplomatic and security relationships with competing major powers. This has created conceptual overlap among neutrality, strategic hedging, soft balancing, institutional balancing and strategic autonomy. Agius and Devine (2011) demonstrate that neutrality has remained adaptable, while Figiaconi (2025) highlights the emergence of hedging as a category that challenges conventional distinctions between neutrality and alignment. Similarly, geostrategic in-betweenness can produce foreign-policy choices that combine engagement and avoidance rather than representing straightforward neutrality or alliance (Tyushka, 2025).

Despite these developments, the literature remains fragmented across separate theoretical perspectives. Soft balancing emphasizes indirect constraints on powerful states (Paul, 2018), whereas institutional balancing emphasizes the use of institutions and interdependence to

manage power asymmetries (He, 2008). Moreover, contemporary discussions of neutrality have not sufficiently captured how knowledgeable actors interpret these overlapping strategies in practice. Pavić (2026) further demonstrates the continuing transformation of neutrality, reinforcing the need for contemporary empirical investigation. A Pakistan-based qualitative perspective can therefore provide valuable contextual insight into how neutrality, strategic autonomy and great-power balancing are understood under complex geopolitical conditions.

1.3 Research Questions

RQ1: How is neutrality understood in contemporary international relations?

RQ2: How do states balance competing pressures from major global powers while preserving strategic autonomy?

RQ3: What political, economic, security and diplomatic factors influence contemporary neutrality strategies?

RQ4: How does contemporary neutrality differ from traditional neutrality and non-alignment?

RQ5: How does strategic hedging contribute to states' management of great-power competition?

RQ6: What mechanisms enable states to preserve strategic autonomy within an increasingly multipolar international system?

1.4 Research Objectives

RO1: To examine the evolution of neutrality in contemporary international relations.

RO2: To explore how contemporary neutrality is understood from a Pakistan-based perspective.

RO3: To identify the political, economic, security and diplomatic factors influencing neutrality strategies.

RO4: To examine the relationship between neutrality, strategic hedging and strategic autonomy.

RO5: To investigate how states use institutional and diplomatic mechanisms to manage competing global powers.

RO6: To develop a contemporary conceptual understanding of neutrality as a flexible strategic approach.

1.5 Significance of the Study

1.5.1 Theoretical Significance

The study is theoretically significant because it brings together several strands of international relations scholarship that are often examined independently. Neutrality has traditionally been associated with non-participation and military non-alignment, whereas balance-of-power approaches focus on how states respond to concentrations of power. Soft balancing and institutional balancing further demonstrate that states can manage power asymmetries through diplomatic, economic and institutional mechanisms without necessarily pursuing direct military confrontation. Strategic hedging adds another dimension by explaining why states may maintain relationships with competing powers simultaneously. Integrating these perspectives can provide a more comprehensive explanation of contemporary state behavior within a changing global order. The study therefore contributes to the broader evolution of international relations theory by examining how established concepts of power, order and strategic choice can be connected to changing patterns of state behavior (Groom et al., 2019; Miller, 2018).

1.5.2 Empirical Significance

Empirically, the study provides qualitative insights from 15 respondents based in Pakistan concerning the changing meaning and practice of neutrality. Rather than treating neutrality as an abstract legal or theoretical category, the research examines how informed participants understand strategic autonomy, great-power competition, economic dependence, security pressures and diplomatic flexibility. This Pakistan-based perspective is particularly valuable because states operating within complex regional and global environments may face simultaneous incentives to cooperate with, distance themselves from, or balance against different major powers. The findings can consequently contribute a contextually grounded perspective to the wider literature on multipolarity and changing global order.

1.5.3 Policy Significance

The study also has practical significance for policymakers, particularly in smaller and middle-power states. Understanding neutrality as a flexible strategic approach may help governments diversify external relationships rather than becoming excessively dependent on a single major power. It can also encourage policymakers to combine economic diversification, diplomatic engagement, institutional participation and carefully calibrated security relationships to preserve strategic flexibility. Such approaches become increasingly important as the international system becomes more contested and states face competing demands from multiple centers of power (Ikenberry, 2024; Safa, 2026). For Pakistan and other states navigating complex geopolitical environments, the study may offer insights into maintaining sovereignty and strategic autonomy while continuing to participate constructively in international economic, diplomatic and security structures.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The contemporary evolution of neutrality can be explained through an integrated framework combining realism, balance of power, soft balancing, institutional balancing, strategic hedging and multipolarity. Classical realism views international politics as an environment in which states seek survival, security and national interests under conditions of uncertainty. Walt (1985) explains that states respond to perceived threats when determining external alignments, while Williams (2004) emphasizes that perceptions and ideas also shape how states understand power and national interest. These perspectives establish the foundation for examining why states may avoid rigid alignment when the international distribution of power remains uncertain.

Soft balancing extends this logic by suggesting that states can constrain or manage powerful actors through diplomatic, economic and institutional mechanisms rather than direct military confrontation (Paul, 2018). Institutional balancing similarly emphasizes the role of international institutions and economic interdependence in managing asymmetric power relationships (He, 2008). These approaches are particularly relevant to neutrality because a state can protect its interests without necessarily confronting a stronger power directly.

Strategic hedging provides an additional explanation for states that simultaneously maintain relationships with competing powers. Rather than choosing complete alignment or isolation, hedging seeks to minimize strategic risks through diversified relationships (Figiaconi, 2025). Tyushka (2025) similarly highlights the foreign-policy dilemmas of states positioned between competing powers. Finally, the emergence of multipolarity provides the structural context within which these strategies operate, as changing distributions of power create both opportunities and constraints for states (Aslam, 2025; Zhang, 2023). Accordingly, this study conceptualizes contemporary neutrality as a flexible strategy of strategic autonomy rather than a purely formal status.

2.2 Historical Evolution of Neutrality

Neutrality has historically represented a state's decision to remain outside armed conflicts involving other states while maintaining its sovereignty and avoiding participation in military confrontations. One of its most institutionalized forms is permanent neutrality, whereby a state adopts a continuing commitment to abstain from military involvement in particular conflicts and expects its neutral status to be respected internationally. Neuhold (1982) demonstrated that permanent neutrality retained relevance within contemporary international relations despite changes in the international system. This suggests that neutrality should not be viewed merely as a historical phenomenon associated with earlier European conflicts.

During the Cold War, neutrality acquired additional importance because international politics was organized around competing power blocs. Military neutrality allowed some states to avoid formal participation in opposing alliance structures, while non-aligned states sought greater freedom from the dominant geopolitical blocs. Although these positions differed in legal and political terms, both reflected an aspiration for greater foreign-policy independence.

The end of the Cold War generated arguments that neutrality had become increasingly obsolete because the bipolar confrontation that had shaped much of twentieth-century international politics had disappeared. Agius and Devine (2011), however, challenged the assumption that neutrality had simply become irrelevant. Instead, they emphasized its capacity to adapt to changing international conditions. In the twenty-first century, military neutrality remains relevant for states concerned with security autonomy, particularly smaller states with limited capabilities (Radoman, 2021). At the same time, Pavić (2026) identifies an ongoing transformation of neutrality, indicating that its contemporary meaning extends beyond traditional military non-participation. Neutrality can consequently be understood as evolving from a formal status toward a broader strategic practice involving diplomatic, economic, institutional and security considerations.

2.3 Neutrality, Non-Alignment and Strategic Autonomy

Although neutrality, non-alignment and strategic autonomy are frequently discussed together, they represent different approaches to managing external relationships. Their conceptual distinction is important because contemporary states may demonstrate elements of several approaches simultaneously.

Table 1: *Conceptual Distinction among Neutrality-Related Strategies*

Concept	Fundamental Principle	Typical State Behavior
Neutrality	Avoidance of participation or formal alignment in conflicts (Neuhold, 1982; Agius & Devine, 2011)	Non-involvement while maintaining sovereignty and diplomatic independence
Permanent Neutrality	Long-term formal commitment to neutrality (Neuhold, 1982; Radoman, 2021)	Institutionalized and legally recognized neutrality
Military Neutrality	Avoidance of military alliances or participation in military conflicts (Radoman, 2021)	Security independence and non-involvement in military alliances
Non-Alignment	Avoidance of exclusive bloc politics and dependence on competing power blocs (Agius & Devine, 2011; Radoman, 2021)	Flexible diplomatic relations with multiple powers
Strategic Autonomy	Capacity for independent decision-making and preservation of policy space (Miller, 2018; Ikenberry, 2024)	Selective partnerships and external engagement based on national interests
Strategic Hedging	Management of relationships with competing powers while avoiding excessive dependence (Figiaconi, 2025; Tyushka, 2025)	Simultaneous engagement, strategic ambiguity and risk diversification
Soft Balancing	Indirect management or constraint of powerful actors without direct military confrontation (Paul, 2018)	Diplomatic, economic and institutional cooperation to limit asymmetric influence
Institutional Balancing	Management of power asymmetries through international and regional institutions (He, 2008)	Multilateral engagement and institutional cooperation

Traditional neutrality primarily concerns non-participation, particularly in military conflicts, whereas strategic autonomy represents a broader capacity to independently determine national policy. A strategically autonomous state may maintain extensive economic, diplomatic or even security relationships with major powers without surrendering its ability to make independent decisions. Non-alignment similarly emphasizes freedom from exclusive bloc politics, but it does not necessarily require strict non-participation associated with neutrality.

Strategic hedging occupies an especially important position within this conceptual

spectrum. It allows states to engage multiple powers simultaneously while minimizing dependence on any single actor. This distinction is consistent with the contemporary literature, which increasingly recognizes that states can pursue flexible combinations of neutrality, balancing and engagement rather than adopting a single fixed position (Figiaconi, 2025). Soft and institutional balancing further demonstrate that states can manage asymmetries without adopting direct confrontation (Paul, 2018; He, 2008). Safa (2026) places these strategic choices within the broader challenge of managing multipolarity. Therefore, the present study treats these concepts as related but analytically distinct dimensions of contemporary foreign-policy behavior.

2.4 Great-Power Competition and Multipolarity

The structural environment of international relations has undergone significant transformation since the Cold War. The bipolar order of the twentieth century was followed by a period of concentrated American influence, but the subsequent redistribution of economic, political and military capabilities has contributed to a more complex international system. Earlier work on the post-Cold War order highlighted differences between core and peripheral positions within international politics, demonstrating that the distribution of power affects the strategic options available to states (Goldgeier & McFaul, 1992).

Contemporary developments increasingly point toward multiple centers of influence. The rise of China, the continued strategic significance of the United States, Russia's geopolitical role, and the growing importance of regional powers have complicated traditional assumptions concerning global hierarchy. Aslam (2025) associates twenty-first-century international relations with the increasing significance of multipolarity, while Zhang (2023) links renewed great-power rivalry to structural changes in polarity and strategic competition.

Ikenberry (2024) conceptualizes contemporary global politics through the interaction of the West, East and South, emphasizing competition over the future direction of global order. Safa (2026) further argues that international relations increasingly involve the simultaneous management of multipolarity and forms of influence that do not fit neatly within conventional power-pole classifications. For states outside the principal centers of power, this environment can generate both opportunities and vulnerabilities. Multiple powerful partners may provide greater diplomatic and economic choices, but simultaneous relationships with competing powers can also produce contradictory expectations and external pressures.

Consequently, contemporary neutrality operates in a more complicated environment than traditional neutrality. States must increasingly determine not simply whether to remain neutral, but how to preserve strategic flexibility while managing economic dependence, security concerns and diplomatic expectations. Multipolarity therefore provides an important structural explanation for the growing relevance of flexible balancing strategies.

2.5 Small and Middle Powers, Security and Military Neutrality

Small and middle powers occupy a particularly important position in debates concerning neutrality because their limited material capabilities can make direct competition with major powers costly. States with relatively smaller military and economic resources may seek strategies that minimize exposure to great-power rivalry while preserving access to external resources, markets and security relationships. Neutrality can therefore serve as one mechanism for reducing strategic vulnerability, although its effectiveness depends on the broader international environment.

Military neutrality remains particularly significant for states seeking to avoid formal military commitments. Radoman (2021) demonstrates that military neutrality continues to provide a viable strategic option for small states in the twenty-first century. However, neutrality does not automatically eliminate vulnerability. A formally neutral state may remain economically dependent on powerful partners or geographically exposed to regional security threats. Permanent neutrality similarly requires more than political declarations because its sustainability depends upon institutional

arrangements and international recognition (Neuhold, 1982).

The balance-of-power perspective further suggests that states respond to perceived threats rather than simply reacting to aggregate power. Walt (1985) shows that threat perceptions influence alignment behavior, while soft balancing provides weaker states with mechanisms for managing powerful actors without engaging in direct military confrontation (Paul, 2018). This creates space for strategies that combine neutrality with selective diplomatic and security cooperation.

For Pakistan, this literature offers a particularly relevant contextual lens. Pakistan occupies a strategically important position within South Asia and interacts with multiple major and regional powers whose interests do not always converge. Consequently, examining neutrality from a Pakistan-based perspective provides an opportunity to explore how strategic autonomy is understood in an environment where security concerns, economic interests and diplomatic relationships intersect. Pakistan should not, however, be treated as a conventional case of permanent neutrality; rather, its relevance lies in illustrating the broader challenges faced by states seeking flexibility amid competing geopolitical pressures.

2.6 Strategic Hedging and Geostrategic In-Betweenness

Strategic hedging has become increasingly important for explaining foreign-policy behavior that does not correspond to straightforward alignment or neutrality. Conventional alignment theories often assume that states eventually choose a preferred power based on security calculations. Hedging challenges this binary assumption by emphasizing the deliberate maintenance of relationships with multiple competing powers. A state may deepen economic relations with one major power while maintaining diplomatic, political or security cooperation with another. The purpose is to reduce uncertainty and avoid the costs associated with excessive dependence.

Figiaconi (2025) identifies hedging as particularly relevant to contemporary understandings of neutrality because some states simultaneously demonstrate characteristics of non-alignment and active international engagement. This creates an important conceptual distinction. Traditional neutrality generally emphasizes non-participation, whereas hedging may involve extensive engagement with competing actors. Nevertheless, both can serve the broader objective of preserving strategic flexibility.

Tyushka (2025) develops the related concept of geostrategic "in-betweenness," emphasizing the dilemmas faced by states located between competing geopolitical powers. Such states must frequently manage contradictory economic, diplomatic and security incentives. Their foreign-policy choices can therefore involve calibrated cooperation rather than exclusive alignment.

Institutional balancing reinforces this argument because states can use international organizations and economic interdependence to manage asymmetric relationships (He, 2008). Soft balancing similarly provides mechanisms for limiting excessive influence without direct confrontation. Pavić (2026) further demonstrates that neutrality itself is undergoing transformation, reinforcing the need to understand contemporary neutrality through more flexible strategic categories.

Thus, hedging can be regarded as one possible contemporary manifestation of neutrality, but the concepts should not be treated as synonymous. Neutrality primarily concerns non-alignment or non-participation, whereas hedging involves active diversification of relationships. The present study therefore examines whether contemporary neutrality is increasingly understood by informed actors as a continuum of strategic flexibility rather than a fixed foreign-policy status.

2.7 Ideas, Norms and Narratives in Foreign Policy

Material capabilities and structural power are important for explaining state behavior, but they do not fully explain how states interpret their strategic environment. Foreign-policy decisions are also influenced by ideas concerning sovereignty, national identity, legitimacy, historical experience and appropriate

international conduct. Williams (2004) demonstrates the importance of ideas within classical realism, particularly in explaining how political actors construct interpretations of power and national interest.

Critical and interpretive approaches further emphasize that international relations concepts are not neutral analytical categories but are shaped by historical and political interpretations. Linklater (1992) challenges conventional assumptions within international relations theory and emphasizes the importance of examining how theoretical categories are constructed. Groom et al. (2019) similarly demonstrate that international relations has developed through competing interpretations of power, order, identity and political action.

This ideational dimension is especially relevant to neutrality. Two states may pursue similar external policies while describing them through different political narratives. One may characterize its approach as neutrality, another as strategic autonomy, and another as balanced diplomacy. These differences are not merely semantic because they can influence domestic legitimacy and international expectations.

The importance of conceptual clarity is also relevant to conflict management. Pietrzak (2024) emphasizes the role of ontological clarity in understanding conflicts and developing appropriate approaches to their management. Applied to neutrality, this suggests that researchers should distinguish between formal neutrality, strategic hedging, non-alignment and balancing rather than treating all intermediate positions as identical.

Consequently, understanding contemporary neutrality requires attention to both material conditions and the meanings actors attach to foreign-policy behavior. This study therefore adopts an interpretive sensitivity while retaining a structural understanding of power competition. The perspectives of the Pakistani respondents are particularly useful in this regard because they can reveal how neutrality and strategic autonomy are interpreted within a specific geopolitical and historical context.

2.8 Contemporary Global Order and Strategic Diplomacy

Contemporary global politics is increasingly characterized by competition over the rules, institutions and values that shape international order. Power is no longer exercised exclusively through military capabilities. Economic influence, technological capacity, diplomatic networks, international institutions and normative leadership have become important dimensions of geopolitical competition. Miller (2018) emphasizes the relationship between values and power in the construction of global order, demonstrating why international stability cannot be reduced to material capabilities alone.

Ikenberry (2024) similarly identifies increasing competition among the West, East and South over the direction of global order. Such competition creates complex choices for states seeking to preserve independent foreign policies. Strategic diplomacy can become an important mechanism through which states maintain relationships across competing power centers without committing themselves exclusively to one side.

Diplomatic engagement can also contribute to international stability by preserving channels of communication when relations among major powers deteriorate. Yeldos (2023) emphasizes convergence of interests and strategic diplomacy as mechanisms supporting stability in international affairs. This perspective challenges the assumption that neutrality necessarily involves passive disengagement. A state may avoid military alignment while actively participating in mediation, multilateral diplomacy and international organizations.

Safa (2026) further highlights the challenge of managing multipolarity alongside non-polar forms of influence. This indicates that states operate within overlapping networks of economic, diplomatic and institutional relationships rather than within clearly separated blocs. Strategic diplomacy consequently becomes an important instrument of autonomy.

Contemporary neutrality can therefore encompass active diplomatic engagement. Rather than withdrawing from international affairs, states may seek to maximize diplomatic

options, communicate with competing actors and participate in multilateral institutions while maintaining sufficient distance from direct great-power confrontation. This multidimensional understanding provides an important foundation for interpreting neutrality in contemporary international relations.

2.9 Peacebuilding, Conflict Management and the Diplomatic Dimension

The literature on peacebuilding and conflict management provides a useful contextual perspective for understanding the non-military dimensions of contemporary neutrality. Although peacebuilding scholarship does not directly define neutrality, it demonstrates how states and organizations can pursue stability through dialogue, mediation, reconciliation and diplomatic engagement. These approaches are relevant because neutrality does not necessarily require political passivity or withdrawal from international affairs.

Imtiaz et al. (2026), in examining peacebuilding narratives in conflict zones involving Afghanistan and Pakistan, highlight the significance of narratives and practices surrounding peacebuilding within complex conflict environments. Their work is particularly relevant to the present study because it illustrates how diplomatic and peace-oriented approaches can coexist with difficult security environments. For states seeking to avoid direct military alignment, diplomatic engagement can represent an alternative mechanism for managing external tensions.

This distinction also helps separate neutrality from isolation. Isolation involves significant withdrawal from international relationships, whereas contemporary neutrality may involve active diplomatic participation. A neutral or strategically autonomous state can potentially serve as a mediator, communication channel or participant in multilateral initiatives while avoiding direct involvement in military confrontation.

Pietrzak (2024) provides a complementary conceptual perspective by emphasizing clarity in understanding conflict and its management. Applied to neutrality, this suggests that non-military engagement, mediation and conflict management should be recognized as potentially compatible with strategic autonomy without automatically being classified as neutrality itself.

The diplomatic dimension therefore broadens the understanding of contemporary neutrality. Neutrality can involve selective engagement, peace-oriented diplomacy and institutional participation alongside security restraint. For states operating within complex geopolitical environments, these mechanisms can help preserve international relevance while reducing the risks associated with exclusive alignment.

2.10 Gaps in Existing Research

The preceding literature demonstrates that neutrality remains relevant but requires reinterpretation within contemporary international relations. A conceptual gap persists because traditional scholarship largely approaches neutrality as a formal legal, political or military status, whereas recent scholarship suggests that its meaning is becoming more flexible and strategically constructed (Neuhold, 1982; Agius & Devine, 2011; Pavić, 2026). An integration gap also remains because neutrality, strategic hedging, soft balancing and institutional balancing are generally examined through distinct theoretical perspectives, despite their potential interaction in states' efforts to preserve strategic autonomy (Paul, 2018; He, 2008; Figiaconi, 2025). An empirical gap is evident in the comparatively limited qualitative attention given to how informed actors interpret neutrality, particularly in terms of perceptions, strategic reasoning and changing geopolitical constraints. A contextual gap further exists regarding Pakistan-based perspectives on neutrality and strategic balancing, despite the country's exposure to complex security, economic and diplomatic relationships. Finally, renewed multipolarity and great-power competition challenge conventional distinctions between alignment and neutrality, creating a contemporary geopolitical gap that warrants further investigation (Ikenberry, 2024; Zhang, 2023). Taken together, these gaps justify a qualitative examination of contemporary neutrality beyond the neutrality-versus-alignment binary. The present study addresses this need through interviews with 15 respondents based in Pakistan and reflexive thematic analysis

of their perspectives on neutrality, strategic autonomy, hedging, economic balancing, security and diplomatic engagement.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach and Design

The study adopted a qualitative, interpretive research design to explore how knowledgeable participants understand the evolution of neutrality within contemporary international relations. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study focused on meanings, perceptions, interpretations and strategic reasoning rather than testing predetermined causal relationships. The research examined participants' perspectives regarding neutrality, strategic autonomy, strategic hedging, great-power competition, economic balancing, security considerations and diplomatic strategies. The interpretive orientation allowed the study to examine how participants constructed meanings around changing geopolitical conditions and how they distinguished contemporary neutrality from traditional neutrality and non-alignment. Qualitative approaches are particularly appropriate for investigating complex social and professional phenomena where participants' interpretations constitute an important source of knowledge (Ashraf et al., 2025; Rehmat et al., 2025a).

3.2 Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was employed to identify information-rich participants with relevant academic or professional knowledge of international relations and strategic affairs. The study included 15 participants based in Pakistan. Participants were selected because of their expertise or professional experience in international relations, foreign policy, geopolitics, strategic studies, diplomacy, international political economy, security studies and global governance. The selection strategy sought diversity across professional backgrounds rather than statistical representation of the wider population. This approach was appropriate because the research required participants capable of providing informed interpretations of complex geopolitical developments and strategic choices. Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research when participants are deliberately selected because their knowledge and experiences are particularly relevant to the phenomenon being investigated (Ashraf et al., 2025; Rehmat et al., 2025b).

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the 15 selected participants. An interview protocol was developed around eight principal areas: contemporary neutrality, great-power competition, strategic autonomy, economic interdependence, security pressures, strategic hedging, diplomatic balancing and institutional mechanisms. The semi-structured format ensured that broadly comparable issues were discussed with all participants while allowing respondents to elaborate on issues they considered particularly significant. Follow-up questions were used to clarify responses and explore relevant ideas emerging during the interviews. This approach was particularly appropriate for the present research because neutrality and strategic balancing involve complex interpretations that cannot easily be captured through fixed-response instruments. Semi-structured interviews also provide participants with sufficient space to explain their reasoning and connect geopolitical developments with broader foreign-policy considerations (Ashraf et al., 2025; Rehmat et al., 2025a).

3.4 Data Analysis

The collected interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The analysis followed the six broad phases associated with Braun and Clarke's approach: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for potential themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analytical narrative (Braun et al., 2022). Initially, the interview material was reviewed repeatedly to develop familiarity with participants' perspectives. Meaningful segments relating to neutrality, strategic autonomy, great-power competition, economic interests, security considerations, hedging and diplomatic balancing were then coded. Related codes were subsequently grouped into broader thematic patterns. The emerging themes were reviewed against the coded material and the overall research questions to ensure conceptual coherence. The final themes were then defined

and interpreted in relation to the existing international relations literature. This process was iterative rather than strictly linear, allowing movement between data, codes, themes and theoretical interpretation. The systematic use of thematic procedures supports analytical transparency in qualitative research (Byrne, 2022), while careful consideration of reflexivity and theme development is essential to the quality of thematic analysis (Hole, 2024).

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The study followed fundamental ethical principles associated with qualitative research. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed about the purpose and general scope of the study before their interviews. Participants were informed that they could decline to respond to questions they considered uncomfortable or politically sensitive and could withdraw from participation in accordance with the study's ethical procedures. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process. Because the study addresses politically sensitive issues including foreign-policy preferences, international alliances, strategic competition and national interests, particular care was taken to avoid unnecessary disclosure of personal or institutional identities. Participants were therefore assigned codes from P1 to P15 rather than being identified by name. Interview information was treated as confidential and intended exclusively for research purposes. The reporting of findings was also designed to avoid associating potentially sensitive political opinions with identifiable individuals.

3.6 Participants' Profile

The study comprised 15 participants based in Pakistan who possessed academic, professional or research experience relevant to international relations, foreign policy, geopolitics, diplomacy, strategic studies, international political economy, security affairs and global governance. Participants were purposively selected to provide variation in professional background and area of expertise. The sample included university academics, policy researchers, geopolitical analysts, foreign-policy specialists, strategic affairs experts and professionals working in related areas.

To maintain anonymity, participants were assigned identification codes ranging from P1 to P15. Personal names, institutional affiliations and other directly identifying information were excluded. The participants’ profiles provide a structured representation of the expertise required for the research and demonstrate the diversity of perspectives incorporated into the thematic analysis.

Table 2: *Participant Profiles*

Participant	Professional Category	Area of Expertise	Experience	Primary Relevance to Study
P1	University Academic	International Relations and Geopolitics	15 years	Great-power competition
P2	Foreign Policy Specialist	Foreign Policy and Diplomacy	12 years	Strategic autonomy
P3	Strategic Affairs Expert	Security and Strategic Studies	18 years	Military neutrality
P4	University Academic	Global Politics	11 years	Multipolarity
P5	Policy Analyst	Foreign Policy and Policy Analysis	9 years	Strategic hedging
P6	Security Studies Specialist	International Security	16 years	Security balancing
P7	Diplomatic Affairs Researcher	Diplomacy and International Affairs	10 years	Diplomatic balancing
P8	Geopolitical Analyst	Geopolitics and Regional Affairs	13 years	Great-power rivalry
P9	Political Economy Specialist	International Political Economy	14 years	Economic interdependence
P10	University Academic	Regional Politics	17 years	Regional balancing
P11	Policy Researcher	Strategic Studies	8 years	Strategic autonomy
P12	University Academic	Global Governance	14 years	Institutional balancing
P13	Geopolitical Analyst	International Affairs	10 years	Great-power competition
P14	Foreign Policy Researcher	Diplomacy and Foreign Policy	7 years	Neutrality and alignment
P15	University Academic	International Politics	20 years	Contemporary neutrality

The participant profile demonstrates deliberate variation across academic, policy, diplomatic, security and geopolitical expertise. Six participants were categorized as university academics, while the remaining respondents represented policy analysis, foreign-policy research, diplomacy, strategic affairs, security studies, political economy and geopolitical analysis. Such diversity was considered useful because contemporary neutrality involves interconnected political, economic, security and diplomatic dimensions.

Participants with international relations and geopolitical expertise contributed perspectives concerning great-power competition and multipolarity, while foreign-policy and diplomatic specialists provided insights into strategic autonomy, neutrality and diplomatic balancing. Security specialists contributed perspectives concerning military neutrality and security balancing. The political-economy perspective supported examination of economic interdependence, while global-governance expertise contributed to the analysis of institutional balancing and multilateral engagement.

The variation in professional experience, ranging from approximately seven to twenty years, further provided a broad base of informed perspectives. The purpose of this variation was

not to establish statistical differences between participants but to enhance the richness of the qualitative data. Each participant was therefore treated as an information-rich contributor rather than as a representative of a particular demographic category.

4. Findings and Discussion

The thematic analysis of interviews with 15 Pakistan-based participants generated six major themes concerning the evolution of neutrality in contemporary international relations. The findings indicate that neutrality is increasingly understood not as a rigid condition of non-participation but as a flexible strategic approach through which states seek to preserve autonomy while managing competing external pressures. Participants' perspectives emphasized the changing nature of the international system, particularly the consequences of multipolarity, renewed great-power rivalry, economic interdependence and changing security requirements. Across the six themes, neutrality emerged as a multidimensional strategy involving selective engagement, strategic hedging, economic diversification, security flexibility and institutional diplomacy.

4.1 Theme 1: Neutrality as an Evolving Strategy Rather Than a Fixed Status

The first theme demonstrates that contemporary neutrality is increasingly perceived as an evolving strategic practice rather than a permanently fixed foreign-policy status. Participants generally distinguished traditional neutrality from the more flexible forms of strategic behavior observed in contemporary international relations. Traditional neutrality was associated with avoiding participation in conflicts and maintaining distance from military alignments, whereas contemporary neutrality was understood more broadly in terms of preserving decision-making autonomy while maintaining selective relationships with different international actors.

Participants also highlighted an important distinction between neutrality and non-alignment. Non-alignment was generally associated with avoiding formal bloc politics, while contemporary neutrality was interpreted as allowing greater flexibility in economic, diplomatic and security relationships. This suggests that a state may cooperate with different powers without necessarily abandoning its broader objective of strategic autonomy.

The findings therefore support the view that neutrality has not simply disappeared from international relations but has undergone conceptual transformation. Earlier debates questioned whether neutrality remained meaningful following the Cold War, particularly as international politics became increasingly characterized by complex forms of interdependence and cooperation (Agius & Devine, 2011). More recent scholarship similarly identifies significant transformation in the meaning and practice of neutrality under contemporary geopolitical conditions (Pavić, 2026). The participants' perspectives reinforce this transformation by presenting neutrality as a continuum of strategic choices rather than a binary distinction between alignment and non-alignment.

4.2 Theme 2: Great-Power Competition Creates Pressure for Strategic Balancing

The second theme concerns the increasing pressure generated by renewed great-power competition. Participants perceived the contemporary international environment as one in which states face competing political, economic and security expectations from major powers. Rather than operating within a relatively predictable bipolar structure, states increasingly encounter overlapping centers of influence and competing strategic initiatives.

Five interconnected pressures were particularly evident: pressure to choose sides, security dilemmas, economic pressure, diplomatic pressure and strategic uncertainty. Participants emphasized that great-power rivalry can constrain the foreign-policy choices of smaller and middle powers because relationships with one major actor may influence their relations with another. Consequently, maintaining strategic space requires continuous adjustment rather than a single permanent alignment decision.

The findings are consistent with arguments concerning renewed structural rivalry and changing polarity. Zhang (2023) argues that

renewed great-power rivalry can be understood through changes in the distribution of international power, while Ikenberry (2024) emphasizes competition among different global political spaces and competing visions of international order. From the participants' perspective, multipolarity therefore does not necessarily eliminate balancing behavior. Instead, it increases the complexity of balancing because states may need to respond simultaneously to several powerful actors.

The findings suggest that contemporary neutrality becomes particularly difficult when great-power competition intensifies. However, they also indicate that rivalry can increase the value of strategic flexibility because states may seek to avoid becoming excessively dependent on any single power.

4.3 Theme 3: Strategic Hedging as a Mechanism of Contemporary Neutrality

The third theme identifies strategic hedging as a central mechanism through which states can maintain flexibility amid competing global powers. Participants associated hedging with multiple partnerships, strategic ambiguity, risk diversification, simultaneous engagement and avoidance of exclusive alignment. Rather than treating neutrality as complete disengagement, participants viewed contemporary strategic behavior as involving carefully managed relationships with different powers.

Strategic hedging allows states to pursue cooperation with competing actors across different domains. For example, a state may maintain economic relations with one major power while developing diplomatic or security cooperation with another. Such behavior does not necessarily represent inconsistency. Instead, it can be understood as an effort to distribute risks and maximize strategic options.

This finding corresponds closely with contemporary conceptualizations of hedging as an intermediate category between neutrality and alignment. Figiaconi (2025) specifically examines hedging as a category connected to neutrality, suggesting that the boundaries between traditional neutrality and contemporary strategic behavior have become increasingly fluid. Tyushka (2025), through the concept of geostrategic "in-betweenness," similarly demonstrates how states situated between competing powers face incentives to preserve flexibility rather than commit exclusively to one side.

The findings nevertheless suggest that hedging and neutrality should not be treated as identical concepts. Neutrality may represent a broader normative or strategic orientation, whereas hedging describes a particular mechanism through which states manage uncertainty and competing relationships. Contemporary neutrality can therefore incorporate hedging without being completely reducible to it.

4.4 Theme 4: Economic Interdependence Shapes Foreign-Policy Neutrality

The fourth theme demonstrates that contemporary neutrality cannot be understood independently of economic relationships. Participants identified trade dependence, foreign investment, market access, infrastructure development, economic diversification and economic vulnerability as important influences on foreign-policy choices.

Economic relationships can simultaneously constrain and expand strategic autonomy. High dependence on a particular market, investor or source of infrastructure financing may reduce a state's ability to maintain neutrality when geopolitical competition intensifies. Conversely, diversification of trade and investment relationships can provide greater flexibility and reduce the risks associated with dependence on a single external power.

Participants therefore perceived economic neutrality not as complete economic detachment but as an effort to maintain diversified external relationships. This finding reinforces the institutional-balancing perspective developed by He (2008), which emphasizes the importance of economic interdependence and institutional strategies in managing power asymmetries. Economic considerations can also complement rather than replace traditional security balancing.

Paul (2018) similarly demonstrates that states may employ non-military mechanisms to constrain or manage relationships with powerful actors. The present findings extend this logic by emphasizing that economic diversification can

become a component of strategic autonomy. A state seeking neutrality may therefore need to diversify not only its diplomatic and security partnerships but also its economic dependencies.

Consequently, contemporary neutrality emerges as partly dependent on the material capacity of states to maintain alternative economic options. Where economic dependence is excessive, diplomatic flexibility may become difficult to sustain.

4.5 Theme 5: Security and Sovereignty Remain Central to Strategic Autonomy

The fifth theme establishes that despite the increasing importance of economic and diplomatic considerations, security and sovereignty remain central to contemporary neutrality. Participants identified national security, military capabilities, security partnerships, strategic vulnerability and defense autonomy as major considerations influencing states' strategic choices.

The findings indicate that neutrality does not necessarily mean the absence of security relationships. Rather, states may seek security arrangements that preserve sufficient room for independent decision-making. Participants therefore distinguished between security cooperation and complete strategic alignment. Selective security partnerships may be considered compatible with strategic autonomy when they do not create excessive dependence on a single external actor.

This interpretation is consistent with the literature on military neutrality and small-state strategy. Radoman (2021) demonstrates that military neutrality remains relevant to the strategic behavior of smaller states, although its practical meaning varies according to security environments. The findings further support the balance-of-power perspective associated with Walt (1985), according to which states respond to perceived threats and changes in the distribution of power through different forms of balancing behavior.

The participants' perspectives suggest that sovereignty functions as a central objective underlying neutrality. Strategic autonomy is valuable because it allows states to retain greater control over decisions affecting national security and foreign policy. Consequently, neutrality may be maintained when it strengthens sovereignty but become difficult to sustain when external security threats significantly exceed a state's independent capabilities.

4.6 Theme 6: Diplomacy and Institutions Enable Flexible Balancing

The sixth theme emphasizes the role of diplomacy and international institutions in enabling states to maintain strategic flexibility. Participants highlighted multilateral diplomacy, international institutions, diplomatic engagement, peacebuilding, conflict management and institutional balancing as important non-military mechanisms through which states can manage competing external pressures.

The findings suggest that neutrality does not necessarily require diplomatic isolation. On the contrary, active diplomatic engagement may be essential for sustaining neutrality. States can participate in international institutions, maintain dialogue with competing powers and support multilateral mechanisms while avoiding exclusive strategic commitments.

Institutional engagement can therefore provide states with additional strategic space. He (2008) demonstrates how institutional mechanisms can contribute to balancing strategies under conditions of economic and political asymmetry. Similarly, Yeldos (2023) emphasizes the role of strategic diplomacy and convergence of interests in promoting international stability. From this perspective, diplomacy allows states to manage disagreements without immediately translating political competition into strategic alignment.

The findings also provide a useful connection with peacebuilding and conflict-management literature. Imtiaz et al. (2026) demonstrate the importance of narratives and practices surrounding peacebuilding in conflict-affected contexts. Although peacebuilding is not synonymous with neutrality, the emphasis on dialogue, mediation and non-military engagement provides a useful contextual basis for understanding how diplomatic strategies can contribute to stability.

Thus, contemporary neutrality appears to depend not on withdrawal from international institutions

but on active and carefully calibrated participation within them.

Table 3: *Thematic Analysis of Findings*

Main Theme	Categories	Subcategories	Interpretation of Findings	Theoretical Connection
Theme 1: Evolving Neutrality	Changing meaning of neutrality	Traditional neutrality, flexible neutrality, selective engagement, strategic autonomy, non-alignment	Neutrality is increasingly interpreted as a dynamic strategic practice rather than a rigid status	Neutrality theory; strategic autonomy
Theme 2: Great-Power Pressure	Strategic constraints	Rivalry, pressure to choose sides, security dilemmas, economic pressure, uncertainty	Intensifying competition increases the need for strategic balancing and foreign-policy flexibility	Balance of power; multipolarity
Theme 3: Strategic Hedging	Relationship diversification	Dual engagement, strategic ambiguity, risk diversification, multiple partnerships	States can reduce dependence and uncertainty by maintaining relationships with competing powers	Strategic hedging
Theme 4: Economic Balancing	Economic interests	Trade, investment, markets, infrastructure, diversification, dependence	Economic relationships significantly influence the ability of states to maintain strategic autonomy	Institutional balancing; economic interdependence
Theme 5: Security and Sovereignty	Strategic protection	Defense, sovereignty, military capability, security partnerships, vulnerability	Security concerns remain central to decisions concerning neutrality and strategic autonomy	Realism; balance of power; military neutrality
Theme 6: Institutional Diplomacy	Diplomatic mechanisms	Multilateralism, international institutions, diplomacy, peacebuilding, conflict management	Institutions and diplomacy provide mechanisms for maintaining flexibility without exclusive alignment	Institutional balancing; strategic diplomacy

4.7 Synthesis of Findings

The six themes collectively indicate that contemporary neutrality is best understood as a multidimensional and adaptive strategic approach. The findings do not support a simple interpretation in which neutrality means complete disengagement from international politics. Instead, neutrality appears to involve an ongoing effort to preserve strategic autonomy while managing relationships with competing external actors.

The thematic findings can be summarized through the following conceptual expression:

Contemporary Neutrality = Strategic Autonomy + Selective Engagement + Hedging + Economic Diversification + Security Flexibility + Institutional Diplomacy

This formulation suggests that neutrality has increasingly become a process of strategic management rather than a static foreign-policy position. Strategic autonomy represents the underlying objective, while selective engagement, hedging, economic diversification, security flexibility and institutional diplomacy represent mechanisms through which that objective can be pursued.

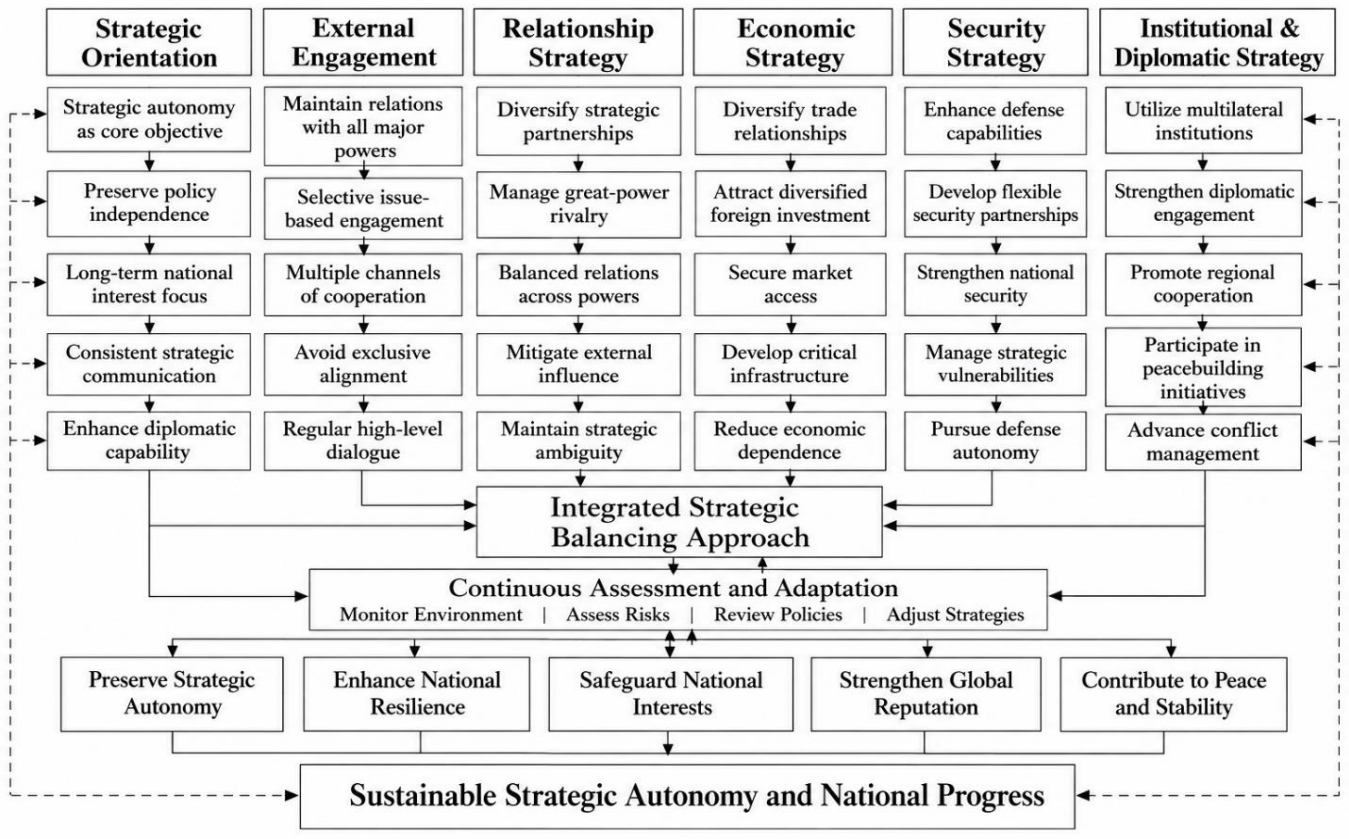
The findings further support a conceptual continuum:

Traditional Neutrality → Non-Alignment → Strategic Autonomy → Hedging → Selective Alignment

The continuum should not be interpreted as a universal linear progression in which every state necessarily moves from one category to another. Instead, it represents a spectrum of strategic behavior. A state's position may shift depending on changes in security pressures, economic dependence, great-power rivalry, domestic priorities, regional dynamics and diplomatic opportunities.

This interpretation corresponds with the emerging literature that treats hedging and neutrality as increasingly interconnected categories of strategic behavior (Figiaconi, 2025). It also complements the concept of soft balancing, whereby states can manage powerful actors through non-military mechanisms rather than direct military confrontation (Paul, 2018).

Figure 1: *Proposed Action Plan for Advancing Strategic Autonomy Through Contemporary Neutrality and Integrated Strategic Balancing*



4.9 Discussion

The findings demonstrate that neutrality remains relevant in contemporary international relations, but its meaning has changed substantially. Rather than representing complete withdrawal from international politics, contemporary neutrality appears increasingly associated with strategic autonomy, selective engagement and flexibility. This finding is consistent with the broader argument that neutrality should not simply be considered a "dead" concept but should instead be reconsidered in light of changing international conditions (Agius & Devine, 2011). The continuing relevance of military neutrality

further supports the argument that neutrality can adapt to changing strategic environments rather than disappear entirely (Radoman, 2021).

The strong relationship between neutrality and strategic hedging is particularly significant. Participants' emphasis on multiple partnerships, risk diversification and avoidance of exclusive alignment corresponds with emerging conceptualizations of hedging as a form of contemporary neutrality (Figiaconi, 2025). The findings also reflect the notion of geostrategic in-betweenness, where states positioned between competing powers seek to preserve room for maneuver rather than commit permanently to one side (Tyushka, 2025).

At the structural level, renewed great-power competition appears to be an important driver of this transformation. The contemporary distribution of power creates pressures for balancing while simultaneously providing states with multiple external options (Zhang, 2023). Ikenberry (2024) similarly identifies competition among different global centers as a defining feature of the changing international order. From this perspective, multipolarity creates both opportunities for strategic diversification and risks associated with competing external expectations.

Economic interdependence further complicates neutrality. The findings suggest that states cannot separate foreign-policy autonomy from economic relationships. Institutional balancing provides a useful explanation because economic interdependence can be used to manage power asymmetries while preserving diplomatic options (He, 2008). Soft balancing similarly demonstrates that states can respond to powerful actors through indirect and non-military mechanisms (Paul, 2018).

Security remains another foundational dimension. Strategic autonomy cannot be sustained when states lack sufficient capacity to manage major security vulnerabilities. This reinforces the realist emphasis on power and survival while demonstrating that contemporary balancing can involve diplomatic, economic and institutional mechanisms rather than military competition alone.

Finally, the findings support a broader understanding of global order in which states increasingly operate across West, East and South rather than within rigid geopolitical blocs. Miller (2018) emphasizes the continuing relationship between values and power in global order, while Safa (2026) highlights the challenge of balancing multipolarity with non-polar forms of international instability. Taken together, the findings suggest that contemporary neutrality is best conceptualized as an adaptive strategy through which states seek to preserve sovereignty and strategic autonomy while navigating an increasingly fragmented and competitive international system.

5. Conclusion, Implications and Future Directions

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined the evolution of neutrality in contemporary international relations and explored how states can balance competing global powers while preserving strategic autonomy. Based on the thematic analysis of perspectives from 15 Pakistan-based participants, the study concludes that neutrality remains relevant, but its meaning and practical expression have undergone substantial transformation. Rather than representing complete disengagement from international politics, contemporary neutrality increasingly appears as a strategic process through which states manage competing relationships while attempting to preserve decision-making autonomy.

The findings demonstrate that this transformation is closely associated with the emergence of a more complex and increasingly multipolar international environment. Renewed great-power competition creates political, economic and security pressures that make exclusive alignment potentially costly for states seeking flexibility. At the same time, the availability of multiple external partners can create opportunities for states to diversify their relationships and reduce excessive dependence on any single power. The contemporary relevance of neutrality therefore lies partly in its capacity to accommodate selective engagement rather than isolation.

Strategic hedging emerged as an important mechanism within this transformed understanding of neutrality. States can maintain relationships with competing powers, diversify risks and preserve alternative strategic options without necessarily committing themselves permanently to one geopolitical camp. Economic interdependence also plays a significant role because trade, investment, infrastructure and market access can both constrain and expand strategic autonomy. Similarly, security considerations remain fundamental because neutrality is difficult to sustain when states face substantial vulnerabilities that exceed their independent capabilities.

The findings further indicate that diplomatic and institutional engagement can support neutrality rather than contradict it. Participation in multilateral institutions, diplomatic dialogue and conflict-management mechanisms can provide states with additional strategic space while reducing the need for exclusive alignment. Neutrality should therefore be understood as an adaptive continuum incorporating varying degrees of non-alignment, strategic autonomy, hedging and selective engagement.

The Pakistan-based perspective provides a useful contextual contribution to this discussion, particularly because Pakistan operates within a complex regional and international environment involving multiple competing interests. However, the findings should not be interpreted as representative of all states or all foreign-policy contexts. Overall, the study argues that contemporary neutrality is best understood as an active strategy of strategic autonomy, flexibility and risk management within an increasingly competitive international system.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

The study offers several theoretical implications for contemporary international relations scholarship. First, it contributes to the reconceptualization of neutrality by demonstrating that neutrality can be understood as a dynamic strategic practice rather than exclusively as a fixed legal or foreign-policy status. This interpretation expands traditional understandings of neutrality and accommodates changing patterns of international interaction.

Second, the findings establish a conceptual connection between neutrality and strategic hedging while maintaining a distinction between the two. Hedging can be understood as one mechanism through which strategic autonomy may be pursued, rather than as a complete substitute for neutrality.

Third, the study integrates material and ideational dimensions of foreign policy. Strategic behavior is influenced not only by power, security and economic interests but also by sovereignty, legitimacy, identity and ideas concerning appropriate international conduct. This complements realist and critical approaches that emphasize the importance of ideas in the construction of international political behavior (Williams, 2004; Linklater, 1992).

Fourth, the study extends strategic-autonomy thinking by positioning autonomy as a central objective underlying contemporary neutrality strategies. This interpretation recognizes that international relations involve both material constraints and conceptual choices concerning sovereignty and political agency (Griffiths et al., 2008; Miller, 2018). The emphasis on conceptual clarity also responds to broader debates concerning how international relations concepts should be differentiated and applied to complex geopolitical conditions (Pietrzak, 2024).

5.3 Practical Recommendations

The findings generate several practical recommendations for states navigating competing global powers. First, policymakers should diversify economic relationships to reduce excessive dependence on any single external partner. Trade, investment and infrastructure relationships should be assessed not only according to short-term economic benefits but also according to their potential strategic implications.

Second, states should strengthen diplomatic capabilities and maintain communication channels with competing powers. Active diplomacy can provide strategic flexibility and reduce the likelihood that geopolitical competition will force premature alignment. Third, greater use should be made of multilateral and regional institutions as mechanisms for

dialogue, cooperation and institutional balancing.

Fourth, states should develop flexible security arrangements that protect national interests without unnecessarily creating permanent dependence on a particular power. Fifth, domestic economic resilience should be strengthened because strategic autonomy becomes difficult when external economic vulnerability is excessive.

Sixth, governments should establish systematic strategic-risk assessment mechanisms capable of monitoring changes in great-power competition, economic dependence, regional security and diplomatic relationships. Finally, policymakers should distinguish neutrality from diplomatic isolation. Contemporary neutrality can involve active international participation, selective cooperation and multilateral engagement while preserving the capacity for independent foreign-policy decisions.

These recommendations are particularly relevant to Pakistan and other states operating in strategically competitive environments, although their application should be adapted to each state's institutional capabilities, security environment and economic structure.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions

The study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the sample consisted of only 15 participants, which is appropriate for an in-depth qualitative inquiry but does not permit statistical generalization. Second, all participants were based in Pakistan, meaning that the findings reflect a particular national and geopolitical context rather than a cross-national perspective. Third, the analysis is based on informed perceptions rather than direct observation of state-level foreign-policy decision-making. Participants' interpretations may therefore reflect their professional perspectives and subjective understandings of geopolitical developments.

Fourth, international politics is rapidly changing, meaning that the relevance and practical meaning of neutrality may evolve as great-power relationships change. Finally, the study does not quantitatively measure the degree of neutrality, hedging or strategic autonomy demonstrated by individual states.

Future research should therefore compare Pakistan with other South Asian states and examine whether similar patterns emerge across small and middle powers in different geopolitical environments. Cross-national qualitative studies could provide greater comparative depth, while mixed-method research could combine expert perspectives with quantitative indicators of trade dependence, military alignment, diplomatic voting patterns and economic relationships. Future studies could also develop and empirically test measures of neutrality and examine the proposed continuum from traditional neutrality through non-alignment and strategic autonomy to hedging and selective alignment.

Further research should investigate how US-China strategic competition and Russia-West rivalry influence different dimensions of neutrality. Comparative studies could also distinguish more clearly between economic and security motivations for hedging. Such research would help determine whether contemporary neutrality represents a durable transformation of international relations or a context-dependent strategy shaped primarily by particular configurations of power.

Conflict of Interest

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