

Pakistan's Increasing Relationships with China: Recent Trends and Perspectives

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Introduction

Due to historical and cultural links between the two nations, Pakistan and China enjoy a close relationship, frequently referred to as an "all-weather friendship." This bond has only gotten stronger in recent years, notably in the economic realm. China has made substantial investments in Pakistan as part of its Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to construct infrastructure and stimulate economic growth throughout Asia. This has resulted in increasing commerce between the two nations and the formation of a number of cooperative ventures in diverse industries, including energy and transportation. In regional and international venues, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the United Nations, the two nations also work closely together. Overall, it is anticipated that the connection between Pakistan and China will continue to expand in the following years due to their shared economic and political objectives.

Historical Background

When Pakistan made the decision to recognize the People's Republic in 1950, it was the beginning of the diplomatic relationship between the two nations. Despite this, the ties improved in the latter half of the 1950s and the 1960s, and ever since that time, both nations have worked together and supported one another in a variety of settings. Pakistan's hunt for a balancer in its ties with India came to an end when China entered the picture. Both nations often engage in high-level visit exchanges with one another. China offers Pakistan help in the areas of economics, the military, and technology. In return, Pakistan offers China support on matters relating to Tibet, Xinjiang, human rights, and other topics. Pakistan played a crucial part in bringing the United States and China closer together, and it was Pakistan that organized a covert visit by Kissinger to China to help smooth things over, followed by a visit by President Nixon. In addition, Pakistan backed and aided China in its efforts to build ties with various Muslim countries and organizations.¹

The leaders of Pakistan and China have continually fostered their relationship, which has now become deeply rooted at all levels. This connection is driven by a shared vision and idealism, and has been strengthened by the contributions of intellectuals, civil society, and the media. Chinese diplomacy is very careful with their language, and when referring to their relations with friendly countries, they use terms such as "strategic," "comprehensive," or "cooperative." However, for Pakistan, the Chinese leadership uses the term "all-weather" to highlight the unique and special nature of the bilateral relationship. They also refer to Pakistan as their "Iron brother," showing their confidence in the lasting nature of their friendship.²The China-Pakistan relationship is deep and covers almost all areas, including culture,

¹ Zeb Rizwan, "Pakistan-China Relations: Where They Go from Here," *UNISCI Discussion Papers* (2012).

² Masood Khalid, "Pakistan-China Relations in a Changing Geopolitical Environment," *NUS ISAS* 30 (2021).

education, economy, international politics, and defense. But the main thrust of the relationship is in the areas of the economy, defense, and international politics.

Pakistan-China Economic Relations

Much of the discussion on the Pakistan-China economic relationship revolves around the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is a part of China's massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) announced by Chinese president Xi Jinping in 2013.³ The purpose of the economic corridor is to strengthen the economic relationship between the two nations, which has been historically lackluster despite their strong political and strategic alliance.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is one of six economic corridors that make up the overland route of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also known as the Silk Road Economic Belt. The idea for the CPEC was first introduced by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang in 2013 and gained traction when the Chinese and Pakistani governments signed agreements worth \$46 billion during President Xi Jinping's visit to Pakistan in 2015. This amount was later increased to \$62 billion in 2017.⁴

Between 2015 and 2030, several initiatives have been scheduled to enhance Pakistan's energy infrastructure, transportation network, and industrial zones. These endeavors will be funded through both preferential loans and direct investment. Upon completion, the envisioned transportation system, including roads, pipelines, and railway lines, will link the city of Kashgar in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region to the port city of Gwadar in Pakistan's Baluchistan Province.⁵

The CPEC highlights Islamabad's growing focus on various development priorities, particularly power generation and road construction. According to World Bank estimates, from 2014 to 2019, projects under the CPEC with a cost of \$32 billion were either built or became functional, and studies on the feasibility of additional projects worth \$14 billion were finished.⁶

The CPEC presents a rare chance for Pakistan to address some of its persistent barriers to sustained economic growth, including its persistent energy shortages, inadequate transportation infrastructure, and connectivity, and inadequate industrial development. Pakistan companies, particularly diversified conglomerates, are actively pursuing access to Chinese finance and technology through joint ventures.

³ Andrew Small, "First Movement: Pakistan and the Belt and Road Initiative," *Asia policy* 24, no. 1 (2017).

⁴ Andrew Stevens, "Pakistan Lands \$46 Billion Investment From China," CNN, April 20, 2015, <https://money.cnn.com/2015/04/20/news/economy/pakistan-china-aid-infrastructure>;

⁵ Shehryar Khan and Guijian Liu, "The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC): Challenges and Prospects," *Area Development Policy* 4, no. 4 (2019).

⁶ James Schwemlein, "Strategic Implications of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor," United States Institute of Peace, December 2019, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/12/strategic-implications-china-pakistan-economic-corridor>.

Additionally, new market players are appearing in Pakistan, and local firms are integrating China into their growth strategies as a crucial component.⁷

CPEC serves Chinese interests as well. Due to Pakistan's close proximity to markets in the Middle East and Africa, it can function as a major trading hub between China and these regions. The CPEC project will connect Pakistan's southern Gwadar port on the Arabian Sea to China's western Xinjiang area by a network of highways, trains, and pipelines, therefore enhancing connectivity between Beijing and the Middle East. Specifically, Middle Eastern oil might be unloaded at Gwadar and transferred to China via Baluchistan. It also provides Beijing with a direct land connection to the Indian Ocean region, where 70% of world oil flow occurs.⁸

Pakistan-China Political Relations

The economic relations between Pakistan and China came to the limelight only recently after China's announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and, as a result, the BRI's Pakistan-related component called CPEC. The political relationship between Pakistan and China is almost six decades old, going back to the 1960s.

The 1965 war between Pakistan and India increased Pakistan's distrust of the West in general and the US in particular because the US failed to aid Pakistan militarily. At his critical time, China supported Pakistan politically and, to some extent, militarily. China had already fought a border war with India in 1962. Since then, both countries have supported each other politically in the international arena and refrained from interfering in the internal affairs of each other.

The covert journey to China by US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in July 1971 was made possible thanks in large part to Pakistan, which played a key role in bringing two enemies together. President Richard Nixon referred to his week-long trip to China in February 1972 as "the week that altered the world." Kissinger was persuaded by Zhou to remember the "bridge" that had brought them together. The Americans' infamous "tilt" towards Pakistan during the 1971 Indo-Pakistan dispute suggests they took Zhou's counsel. The United Nations (UN) also admitted China as a member in 1971, and Pakistan vehemently backed that decision. When the US proposed a dual representation of China in September 1971, Pakistan objected. When Bangladesh's admission was being debated in the UNSC in 1972, China used its first veto in Pakistan's favor. The safe return of Pakistani POWs from India was China's condition for membership.⁹

Pakistan has been an important player in China's foreign policy for many years, serving as the foundation of that country's strategy in Central and South Asia. As a practical means of containing Indian dominance in the area, China has up to now, pursued a strategic alliance with Pakistan. With the

⁷ Muhammad Tayyab Safdar, *The Local Roots of Chinese Engagement in Pakistan* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Washington, DC, USA, 2021).

⁸ Mordechai Chaziza, "China–Pakistan Relationship: A Game-Changer for the Middle East?," *Contemporary review of the Middle East* 3, no. 2 (2016).

⁹ Khalid.

challenge provided by the US and India, its geopolitical enemies, Pakistan has recently grown in importance as a regional ally.

This was particularly the case after the Obama administration made the decision to pivot towards East Asia, turning the region into a crucial new front in the strategic rivalry between Washington and Beijing, as well as in China's strategic rivalry with India, and when it became imperative to address the terrorist threat posed by Uyghur Muslims.¹⁰

Pakistan-China Defense Relations

One of the cornerstones of the Pakistan-China strategic partnership is their military cooperation, which is overseen by the Pakistan-China Joint Military Cooperation Committee (PCJMCC). In June 2022, a top-level Pakistani military delegation traveled to China during a period of increasing tensions between China and the West. The two sides agreed to enhance their military ties and strengthen their strategic partnership in a difficult global environment. The high-level military engagement took place while Pakistan was also facing pressure from the West to denounce Russia's incursion into Ukraine.¹¹

Due to western reluctance to provide Pakistan with advanced weapons, it now heavily relies on China for military equipment. Only recently, China provided Pakistan with J-10 fighter jets. Pakistan is the only country to have been provided the warplanes since their induction into the Chinese military, showing deepening military ties between the two sides. Pakistan buys all sorts of military equipment from China. The list includes drones, air defense systems, frigates, tanks, and many other weapons for its army, navy, and air force. According to western analysts, China assisted Pakistan in acquiring nuclear capability as well. China also helped Pakistan to develop its missile program.¹²

The main reason behind the defense cooperation between China and Pakistan is their shared rivalry with India. Both China and Pakistan have simmering territorial disputes with India. Pakistan and India have been at loggerheads over the Himalayan region of Kashmir since 1947 and have fought several wars over it. China and India have clashed over Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh regions since 1962. As India shares long borders with both China and Pakistan, these two can get India engaged on two fronts stretching its resources thin. As Pakistan now buys most of its military equipment from China, their forces' interoperability is increasing daily.

Other Areas of Cooperation

Although the thrust of the China-Pakistan relationship revolves mainly around economic, political, and defense ties, cooperation in other areas like education and culture is also growing. The number of Pakistani students studying in China is rapidly growing and has surpassed the other traditional destination of Pakistani students like the UK, The US, and Australia. Chinese and Pakistani businesspeople are increasingly learning each other's culture, especially languages, to reduce the communication barrier.¹³

¹⁰ Chaziza.

¹¹ <https://jamestown.org/program/china-pakistan-relations-the-all-weather-partnership-navigates-stormy-times/>

¹² <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2361207/pakistan-china-vow-to-step-up-defence-cooperation-despite-challenges?amp=1>

¹³ Safdar.

The Caveats: Although the relations between China and Pakistan are strong and stable, there are also some sticking points. The pace of CPEC projects has slowed down considerably, and Pakistan's current economic crisis has contributed to the deceleration of CPEC construction. It can no longer afford infrastructure loans in addition to Beijing's economic decline. When Sharif visited Beijing in November of last year, he publicly demanded a \$6.3 billion debt rollover. China has not stated if it will approve the request, despite having placed a two-year suspension on Sri Lanka's debt payments.

Last year, China did not protest India's exclusion of Pakistan from a high-level discussion on the margins of a virtual BRICS summit with other developing nations. China, which hosted the event, may have helped Pakistan. Beijing may see the present Pakistani leadership as too unstable to cooperate with. Officials in China are also growing increasingly concerned about security threats in Pakistan, which is suffering an alarming increase in terrorism. Recent assaults in Pakistan have targeted Chinese assets and nationals. Following Sharif's November 2017 meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing, a Chinese foreign ministry statement highlighted that Xi had "expressed his deep worry for the safety of Chinese people in Pakistan."¹⁴

Conclusion

Despite some issues, the China-Pakistan relationship is strong and on an upward trajectory. Current geopolitical conditions compel China and Pakistan to maintain their relationship. Growing U.S.-India security relations unify Beijing and Islamabad in their fear of New Delhi, their mutual adversary. Increasing U.S.-China competition restricts collaboration between Pakistan and the United States, increasing Islamabad's economic and military reliance on Beijing. In the midst of a strengthening China-Russia alliance, Pakistan seeks a closer relationship with Russia. Even the most intimate relationships encounter hiccups, but the China-Pakistan relationship contains safeguards to prevent it from deviating too far off course as argued by Michael Kugelman a renowned South Asia expert writing in the Foreign Policy magazine.¹⁵In a very recent report by the United States Institute of Peace, Sameer Lalwani another South Asia expert maintains that Pakistan China relations are at a threshold alliance level, that is, just short of a formal alliance only because of China's eschewal towards entering formal alliances¹⁶. These analyses make a compelling case that the future of the Pakistan -China relations is bright.

¹⁴ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/09/china-pakistan-cpec-infrastructure-economy/>

¹⁵ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/09/china-pakistan-cpec-infrastructure-economy/>

¹⁶ <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/03/threshold-alliance-china-pakistan-military-relationship>