



Pakistan's Relations with China: A Deepening Strategic Partnership

Khalil Ahmad

Assistant Professor, Department of Pakistan Studies, National University of Modern Languages
H-9 Islamabad

kahmed@numl.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

Pakistan-China relations have evolved from a Cold War-era strategic alignment into a comprehensive, multi-dimensional strategic partnership characterized by deep political, economic, military, and diplomatic convergence. Rooted in early diplomatic recognition (1951), the 1963 border agreement, wartime support in 1965 and 1971, nuclear and missile cooperation in the 1970s–1980s, and post-9/11 continuity, the relationship reached a transformative phase with the 2013 launch of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) under China's Belt and Road Initiative. CPEC has delivered substantial benefits adding over 13,000 MW of power capacity, generating more than 261,000 jobs, modernizing transport infrastructure, and positioning Gwadar as a strategic node while military exercises (e.g., Shaheen and Warrior series), intelligence sharing, and defense production (e.g., JF-17 jets) have strengthened Pakistan's deterrence capabilities. China's consistent diplomatic support on Kashmir, NSG membership, and UNSC vetoes, reciprocated by Pakistan's backing on Xinjiang, BRI, and the One-China policy, reinforces mutual reliability. However, asymmetries persist: Pakistan faces mounting debt exposure (China as a major creditor), security risks to Chinese nationals, localized resistance in Balochistan, and constrained negotiating leverage. In the post-2021 Afghanistan transition and intensified U.S.-China rivalry, the partnership functions as a counter-India axis and stabilizing quadrilateral with Afghanistan and Iran, yet risks over-dependence and regional polarization. This article provides a holistic assessment of the partnership's drivers, benefits, costs, and future trajectories, arguing that while it remains a cornerstone of Pakistan's foreign policy, sustainable deepening requires greater transparency, local inclusion, and strategic diversification to balance gains against emerging dependencies in a contested regional order.

Keywords: *Pakistan–China Relations, CPEC, Strategic Partnership, Geopolitical Balancing, Debt Sustainability, Regional Implications*

Introduction

In the evolving landscape of Asian geopolitics, few bilateral relationships have proven as resilient and strategically consequential as that between Pakistan and China. A striking recent development underscores this depth: during Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari's state visit to Beijing from February 4 to 8, 2025, both sides reaffirmed their commitment to upgrade the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into a multifaceted "growth, livelihood-enhancing, innovation, green, and open corridor," while pledging intensified security cooperation amid persistent threats to Chinese nationals and investments (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2025). This high-level engagement, which included talks with President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang, built on prior momentum from Premier Li Qiang's official visit to Pakistan in October 2024 and the 14th Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC) meeting in September 2025, signaling deliberate acceleration of an alliance often described as

"ironclad" (The Friday Times, 2025a). Bilateral trade reached \$23.06 billion in 2024, with China remaining Pakistan's largest trading partner and dominant import source, while cumulative CPEC investment has exceeded \$25 billion, generating over 261,000 jobs and contributing substantially to energy and infrastructure capacity (Wikipedia contributors, 2026). These tangible gains, however, only partially capture the partnership's breadth; joint military exercises such as the "Warrior-IX" counter-terrorism drills concluded in Pakistan in mid-December 2025 further solidified defense interoperability, illustrating a relationship that now spans political, economic, security, and cultural domains with few equivalents in contemporary international affairs (China Military Online, 2025).

The historical trajectory of Pakistan-China ties reveals a partnership forged in adversity and sustained by converging strategic imperatives. Diplomatic relations were established in 1950, with Pakistan among the first non-communist states to recognize the People's Republic of China (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2025). The 1963 border agreement amicably resolved boundary issues, laying a foundation of trust that deepened during the 1965 and 1971 Indo-Pakistani wars, when Beijing provided critical political and material support, including vetoing unfavorable UN resolutions. Covert nuclear and missile cooperation in the 1970s and 1980s enabled Pakistan to achieve strategic parity vis-à-vis India amid Cold War alignments (Ali, 2024). Post-9/11, despite Pakistan's alignment with the United States in the War on Terror, China offered unwavering backing, viewing Islamabad as a counterweight to Indian regional dominance and a vital node in its westward outreach. The 2013 launch of CPEC under China's Belt and Road Initiative marked a transformative shift, elevating the relationship from traditional strategic alignment to comprehensive economic-strategic interdependence (Ahmed & Chaudhry, 2025). This progression reflects shared threat perceptions India's rise, U.S. containment efforts toward China, and instability in Afghanistan while economic complementarity (China's surplus capital and technology matching Pakistan's infrastructure deficits and Arabian Sea access) has furnished the material foundation for deepening ties.

The significance of the Pakistan-China relationship for Islamabad is multi-dimensional and existential. Strategically, China serves as Pakistan's most reliable counterbalance to India, providing diplomatic cover on Kashmir, consistent support in multilateral forums, and advanced military hardware that has constituted over 80% of Pakistan's arms imports in recent years (Ali, 2024). Economically, CPEC has alleviated chronic energy shortages, modernized transport networks, and positioned Pakistan as a potential transit hub linking China to the Middle East and Africa via Gwadar Port (Aamir, 2025). Militarily, joint exercises, intelligence sharing, and co-production (e.g., JF-17 fighter jets) bolster Pakistan's deterrence capabilities. Diplomatically, Beijing's "all-weather" commitment grants Islamabad a veto-wielding ally in the UN Security Council and a partner in resisting Western pressure on human rights or counter-terrorism matters. From China's perspective, Pakistan functions as an "iron brother," a secure corridor bypassing the Malacca Strait chokepoint, a stable foothold in South Asia, and a showcase for Belt and Road success (Reuters, 2026). Yet this interdependence is not without asymmetries: Pakistan's mounting external debt (with China as a major creditor), persistent security vulnerabilities for Chinese nationals, and constrained negotiating leverage highlight structural dependencies that complicate the narrative of pure mutual benefit (Aamir, 2025).

While the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has dominated recent scholarship, much of the literature remains fragmented concentrated on CPEC's economic viability, debt sustainability concerns, or localized security risks without fully integrating the broader spectrum of political alignment, military convergence, diplomatic coordination, and regional geopolitical

implications in the post-2021 Afghanistan transition and intensified U.S.-China strategic rivalry (Ahmed & Chaudhry, 2025). Existing studies frequently portray the partnership either as an exemplary model of South-South cooperation or as a cautionary case of debt-trap diplomacy, rarely delivering a holistic assessment that balances drivers and constraints within the current contested regional order. This article bridges that gap by examining the partnership's evolution and contemporary dynamics through a multi-dimensional lens, arguing that Pakistan-China relations have matured into a comprehensive strategic partnership propelled by converging geopolitical necessities, economic complementarity, and shared threat perceptions, yet tempered by inherent asymmetries, growing dependencies, and emerging uncertainties in an increasingly polarized Asian landscape.

Literature Review

The literature on Pakistan–China relations spans over seven decades, evolving from foundational diplomatic and strategic analyses in the Cold War era to contemporary examinations of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and broader geopolitical entanglements. Early works from the 1960s to 1990s focused on the emergence of the partnership as a counterbalance to India and the Soviet Union. Anwar Hussain Syed's seminal study (1974) detailed the diplomacy of entente cordiale, emphasizing mutual recognition of sovereignty and shared anti-Indian sentiment, while S.M. Burke's historical analysis (1973, updated 1990) framed Pakistan's outreach to China as pragmatic balancing amid U.S. unreliability. Yaacov Vertzberger (1987) examined the strategic convergence in the context of great-power rivalry, highlighting Beijing's provision of military aid during the 1965 and 1971 wars as pivotal in cementing trust. These foundational texts established the relationship as one of enduring alignment rooted in geopolitical necessity rather than ideological affinity, setting the stage for subsequent scholarship on nuclear and post-Cold War dimensions.

Post-9/11 literature shifted toward China's role in Pakistan's nuclear program and strategic balancing amid U.S.-led counterterrorism pressures. Studies highlighted covert assistance in uranium enrichment and missile technology during the 1980s–1990s, which enabled Pakistan's nuclear parity with India despite international sanctions. Paul's analysis (2003) situated this cooperation within balance-of-power politics, arguing that Beijing viewed Pakistan as a hedge against Indian dominance and U.S. encirclement. Post-9/11 works emphasized continuity despite Pakistan's U.S. alignment, with China maintaining diplomatic cover and economic support while avoiding direct entanglement in Afghanistan. Recent scholarship (e.g., Hiim, 2018) has revisited proliferation risks, portraying the nuclear dimension as a long-term strategic enabler rather than mere proliferation, though tempered by China's post-1990s non-proliferation commitments under international scrutiny.

The CPEC era (2013–present) has dominated recent scholarship, with analyses centering on economic impacts, debt sustainability, and local agency versus Chinese dominance. Studies have documented CPEC's role in addressing Pakistan's energy deficits and infrastructure gaps, generating employment and FDI inflows, yet debates persist over debt-trap concerns and uneven benefits. Systematic reviews (Khan & Edwin, 2024) of agricultural trade narratives reveal mixed outcomes, with potential for export growth offset by structural asymmetries and local displacement. Critical assessments (Aamir, 2025) highlight broken promises in Balochistan, environmental degradation, and social costs, including insurgent backlash against perceived neo-colonialism. These works often employ dependency theory to critique power imbalances, arguing that CPEC reinforces structural subordination despite rhetoric of mutual benefit. Security and geopolitical dimensions have received growing attention amid U.S.-China rivalry and regional transitions. Literature examines the partnership as a counter-India axis,

with China providing diplomatic support on Kashmir and military hardware amid heightened border tensions. Analyses of the post-2021 Afghanistan landscape portray Pakistan-China coordination as a stabilizing triangle, though complicated by Taliban governance and cross-border militancy. Broader works situate the relationship within Indian Ocean competition, viewing Gwadar as a strategic node bypassing Malacca vulnerability. Critical and revisionist perspectives emphasize asymmetry, sovereignty erosion, and socio-environmental externalities, warning of debt burdens and localized resistance (Ahmed & Chaudhry, 2025). Despite this rich body of work, much scholarship remains siloed economic-focused on CPEC viability, security-oriented on balancing dynamics, or critical on dependency risks lacking integrated holistic assessments that combine political alignment, military convergence, diplomatic coordination, and regional implications in the post-2021 Afghanistan transition and intensified U.S.-China competition.

Objectives of the Study

1. To trace the historical evolution and key milestones of Pakistan–China relations from 1950 to the present, identifying the major turning points that shaped their strategic partnership.
2. To analyze the multi-dimensional drivers and motivations of the partnership, including geopolitical necessities, economic complementarity, and military-security convergence.
3. To assess the benefits, costs, asymmetries, dependencies, and emerging challenges for Pakistan, while evaluating the partnership’s impact on its foreign policy and regional positioning in a changing global environment.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design centered on historical-analytical case study methodology, with a primary emphasis on secondary data analysis to examine the evolution and dynamics of Pakistan–China relations. The approach is structured around process-tracing, which enables the systematic tracking of causal mechanisms and key events across the partnership's timeline from 1950 to 2025, with particular focus on the CPEC era since 2013. Secondary data forms the core of the analysis, drawing from a wide array of archival and published sources, including academic books, journal articles, think-tank reports, and policy papers from institutions focused on international relations and South Asian studies. Media analyses from English and Urdu sources in both countries supplement this, providing contemporaneous insights into diplomatic narratives and public perceptions. The analytical framework integrates neorealism as the primary lens to explore alliance formation, balancing strategies, and power asymmetries, while incorporating supplementary perspectives such as complex interdependence for economic dimensions and asymmetric alliance theory to assess dependencies. This multi-lens approach ensures a nuanced interpretation of the partnership's multi-dimensional nature political, economic, military, and regional without relying on primary fieldwork, allowing for a comprehensive yet desk-based evaluation grounded in existing scholarly and documentary evidence.

To maintain rigor, data selection prioritizes reliability and relevance, with sources cross-verified for triangulation to mitigate biases inherent in official narratives or partisan analyses. The time frame is delimited to key historical phases, enabling focused secondary analysis of pivotal milestones like border agreements, wartime support, nuclear cooperation, and CPEC implementation. Limitations include restricted access to classified documents on military aspects, which are inferred from declassified or secondary accounts, and the potential for source bias in state-affiliated publications. Nonetheless, this secondary data-centric methodology facilitates an objective, evidence-based assessment of the partnership's drivers,

benefits, costs, and future trajectories, emphasizing structural geopolitical imperatives while acknowledging emerging challenges in a shifting regional order.

Historical Evolution and Foundational Drivers (1950–2012)

The foundations of Pakistan–China relations were laid in the immediate post-independence era, characterized by pragmatic diplomacy and mutual recognition amid a bipolar Cold War world. Diplomatic ties were formally established on May 21, 1951, with Pakistan becoming one of the first Muslim-majority nations to recognize the People's Republic of China, a move driven by Islamabad's desire to diversify alliances beyond Western powers and Beijing's need for international legitimacy post-1949 revolution. This early engagement was marked by economic overtures, including Pakistan's export of cotton to China in exchange for coal, fostering initial trust. The pivotal 1963 Sino-Pakistani Border Agreement resolved 2,000 square miles of disputed territory in northern Kashmir, ceding 750 square miles to China in a deal that not only secured Pakistan's northern frontier but also signaled a strategic alignment against shared adversary India, which had recently clashed with China in the 1962 border war. Analytically, this period exemplifies neorealist balancing: Pakistan sought to counter Indian hegemony by aligning with a rising China, while Beijing gained a foothold in South Asia to encircle India and access warm-water ports. This foundational phase set the tone for enduring cooperation, transforming initial diplomatic courtesies into a strategic entente that withstood ideological differences and global pressures (Syed, 2022).

China's unwavering support during Pakistan's conflicts with India in 1965 and 1971 cemented the relationship as a cornerstone of Islamabad's security calculus. In the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War, Beijing issued stern warnings to New Delhi, mobilized troops along the Sino-Indian border to divert Indian forces, and supplied military hardware, including tanks and aircraft, which bolstered Pakistan's defenses. This assistance was not merely material; China's diplomatic stance at the United Nations and in global forums framed India as the aggressor, providing Pakistan with crucial international leverage. The 1971 war, culminating in Bangladesh's independence, saw even more pronounced Chinese backing: vetoes in the UN Security Council delayed resolutions calling for ceasefires, allowing Pakistan time to consolidate positions, while emergency arms shipments and vocal condemnation of Indian intervention reinforced Beijing's commitment. Analytically, these episodes highlight the partnership's instrumental value: for Pakistan, China's support mitigated isolation amid U.S. arms embargoes; for Beijing, it served to constrain Indian expansionism and assert influence in South Asia. This era transitioned the relationship from tentative diplomacy to a tested alliance, underscoring shared anti-hegemonic interests that would define future interactions (Burke & Ziring, 2021).

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a deepening of Pakistan-China ties through covert nuclear and missile cooperation, intertwined with the U.S.-Pakistan-China triangle against Soviet expansionism. Following Pakistan's 1974 nuclear test announcement in response to India's "Smiling Buddha," China provided technical expertise, uranium hexafluoride, and ring magnets for enrichment, enabling Islamabad to develop its program amid international sanctions. Missile collaboration included transfers of M-11 technology, enhancing Pakistan's delivery capabilities. This period coincided with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, forging a tripartite anti-Soviet front: the U.S. funneled aid through Pakistan, while China supplied weapons to Mujahideen via Pakistani channels, creating a shared covert network. Analytically, this cooperation reflected neorealist self-help in an anarchic system: Pakistan balanced nuclear asymmetry with India, China hedged against Soviet encirclement, and the U.S. leveraged the alliance for Cold War gains. However, asymmetries emerged—China's technology transfers were

conditional on non-proliferation assurances-highlighting the partnership's pragmatic, interest-driven nature rather than unconditional altruism (Khan, 2023).

Post-Cold War continuity in the 1990s sustained the "all-weather friendship" rhetoric despite Pakistan's deepening U.S. alignment and global shifts. As the Soviet Union collapsed, China navigated economic reforms and U.S. Unipolarity, while Pakistan faced sanctions over its nuclear program and Kashmir militancy. Yet Beijing maintained support, vetoing UN resolutions on Kashmir and providing diplomatic cover during the 1999 Kargil conflict. Economic ties grew modestly through joint ventures in infrastructure and defense production, while military exchanges persisted amid Pakistan's U.S.-led anti-terror coalitions. Analytically, this resilience underscores neorealist endurance of alliances formed under bipolarity: shared perceptions of Indian threat and U.S. unpredictability preserved the bond, with China's "iron brother" narrative reinforcing mutual reliability. Pakistan's dual alignments U.S. for counterterrorism aid, China for long-term security exemplified hedging, though it strained relations temporarily during U.S. pressures on Chinese proliferation. This era bridged Cold War foundations to 21st-century expansion, proving the partnership's adaptability (Small, 2020).

The key drivers underpinning Pakistan-China relations from 1950 to 2012 were rooted in shared threat perceptions, anti-Soviet/anti-India alignments, and China's strategic need for a South Asian foothold. Mutual apprehension toward India manifest in border disputes and wars drove convergence, with Pakistan viewing China as a balancer and Beijing using Islamabad to encircle New Delhi. Anti-Soviet imperatives in the 1980s amplified this, creating a united front against expansionism. China's motivations included securing its southwestern flank, accessing the Indian Ocean via Gwadar, and countering U.S. containment. Analytically, these drivers align with neorealist bandwagoning and balancing: weaker Pakistan bandwagoned with rising China for survival, while Beijing balanced regional powers through alliances. Economic complementarity emerged as a secondary driver, laying groundwork for CPEC. However, underlying asymmetries Pakistan's dependence on Chinese technology versus Beijing's geopolitical leverage foreshadowed future dependencies, highlighting the partnership's instrumental realism amid evolving global orders (Javaid, 2019).

Security, Military, Diplomatic & Geopolitical Dimensions

The military and defense dimension of Pakistan-China relations has evolved into a robust pillar of their strategic partnership, characterized by extensive arms sales, joint exercises, training programs, and intelligence sharing that underscore mutual reliance in a volatile regional security environment. China's role as Pakistan's primary arms supplier is evident in its provision of advanced systems, including JF-17 Thunder fighter jets, Type 054A/P frigates, and ZDK-03 airborne early warning aircraft, which constitute over 70% of Pakistan's major weapons imports between 2019 and 2024. Joint exercises like the Shaheen air force series Shaheen-X in 2023 and the Warrior ground force drills, with Warrior-IX concluding in December 2025, focus on counter-terrorism, urban warfare, and interoperability, enhancing tactical coordination amid shared threats from militancy. Training exchanges involve Pakistani officers attending Chinese academies, while intelligence sharing on border security and extremism has intensified post-2021 Afghanistan, targeting groups like the East Turkestan Islamic Movement. Analytically, this cooperation exemplifies neorealist balancing: Pakistan hedges against Indian military superiority, while China secures a reliable ally for its southwestern flank and Indian Ocean access, though asymmetries persist with Pakistan's dependence on Chinese technology potentially limiting indigenous innovation.

China's diplomatic support for Pakistan has been a consistent feature of the partnership, particularly on sensitive issues like Kashmir, Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) membership, and

UN Security Council (UNSC) vetoes shielding Islamabad from international censure. On Kashmir, Beijing has repeatedly endorsed Pakistan's position, issuing statements condemning Indian actions in Jammu and Kashmir and raising the issue at the UNSC in informal consultations as recently as August 2023. China's multiple vetoes four times between 2009 and 2019 blocked resolutions designating Jaish-e-Mohammed leader Masood Azhar as a global terrorist until 2019, providing Pakistan diplomatic breathing space amid accusations of state sponsorship. In NSG waiver attempts, Beijing opposed India's 2016 bid for membership without parallel consideration for Pakistan, insisting on non-NPT criteria to maintain strategic parity. This support extends to broader multilateral arenas, where China has shielded Pakistan from FATF blacklisting pressures. Analytically, such backing reflects shared geopolitical imperatives: China leverages Pakistan to constrain India's regional ambitions and counter U.S.–India convergence, fostering a *de facto* axis that amplifies Beijing's influence in South Asia, though it risks entrenching Pakistan's isolation from Western capitals.

Pakistan's reciprocal support for China has solidified the partnership's mutuality, particularly on core issues like Xinjiang, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) endorsement, and measured silence on Hong Kong and Taiwan. Islamabad has consistently defended China's policies in Xinjiang, framing them as internal counter-terrorism measures and rejecting Western accusations of human rights abuses, as evident in Pakistan's co-sponsorship of a 2023 UN statement praising Beijing's approach. On the BRI, Pakistan's enthusiastic endorsement through high-level participation in BRI forums and promotion of CPEC as a flagship positions it as a vocal advocate, countering narratives of debt traps and emphasizing developmental benefits. Regarding Hong Kong and Taiwan, Pakistan has maintained discreet neutrality, avoiding criticism during the 2019–2020 Hong Kong protests and reaffirming the One-China policy amid Taiwan Strait tensions in 2024 statements. Analytically, this support underscores asymmetric reciprocity: Pakistan gains economic and security dividends, while China secures a Muslim-majority ally to legitimize its domestic policies and expand BRI's geopolitical footprint, though it constrains Islamabad's foreign policy flexibility on global human rights issues.

Regionally, the Pakistan–China partnership carries profound implications, forming a counter-India axis while shaping post-2021 Afghanistan dynamics and emerging quadrilateral alignments with Iran. As a counter-India bulwark, the alliance amplifies Pakistan's deterrence through Chinese arms and diplomatic leverage, exacerbating New Delhi's concerns over encirclement via CPEC's extension to Gwadar and potential dual-use facilities. In Afghanistan, post-Taliban resurgence, Beijing and Islamabad have coordinated on stability, with joint statements in 2023 urging inclusive governance and countering cross-border militancy, though divergent interests China's mineral extraction vs. Pakistan's security priorities complicate harmony. The nascent China-Pakistan-Afghanistan-Iran quadrilateral, discussed in trilateral forums since 2022, focuses on connectivity (e.g., extending CPEC to Iran via rail) and anti-terrorism, positioning the bloc as a counterweight to U.S.-India influence. Analytically, these dynamics reflect neorealist alliance formation: the partnership stabilizes Pakistan's western flank but risks regional polarization, potentially drawing in proxy conflicts amid Afghanistan's volatility and Iran's sanctions-evasion needs.

In the great-power context, Pakistan navigates a delicate hedging strategy between the United States and China, profoundly impacted by U.S.-India strategic convergence. Islamabad's hedging involves maintaining U.S. economic aid and counter-terrorism cooperation while deepening defense and economic ties with Beijing, as seen in 2024 F-16 sustainment deals alongside CPEC Phase II advancements. The U.S.-India convergence through Quad, I2U2, and arms transfers has pushed Pakistan closer to China, viewing it as existential balancing against

encirclement. This dynamic heightens tensions, with U.S. sanctions on Pakistani entities for alleged missile proliferation in 2023 straining relations, while China's veto power offers protection. Analytically, neorealism explains this as bandwagoning with the nearer threat (India-U.S. axis) via alignment with China, though hedging preserves flexibility; however, over-dependence risks strategic entrapment, underscoring the partnership's role in Pakistan's multi-alignment amid bipolar U.S.-China competition.

The CPEC Era and Economic Pillar (2013–Present)

The genesis of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) marked a decisive inflection point in Pakistan-China relations, transforming a long-standing strategic alignment into a flagship economic partnership under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Announced during President Xi Jinping's historic visit to Islamabad in April 2013, CPEC was formally launched with an initial pledge of \$46 billion in investment, later revised upward to over \$62 billion by 2025, representing the single largest overseas commitment in China's outbound infrastructure diplomacy. The corridor was envisioned as a 3,000-kilometer network linking Kashgar in China's Xinjiang region to Gwadar Port on Pakistan's Arabian Sea coast, encompassing energy, transport, industrial, and digital connectivity projects. Xi's address to the Pakistani Parliament emphasized "win-win cooperation" and "common destiny," while Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif hailed it as a "game changer" for Pakistan's economy. Analytically, the 2013 announcement reflected converging structural imperatives: China sought to secure energy routes bypassing the Malacca Strait, access the Indian Ocean, and stabilize its western frontier through development in Xinjiang, while Pakistan desperately needed foreign investment to address chronic energy shortages, fiscal deficits, and infrastructure decay. This moment elevated the bilateral relationship from primarily military-diplomatic to comprehensive strategic-economic interdependence, setting the stage for one of the most ambitious bilateral projects in contemporary Asia (Hussain, 2024).

The scale and components of CPEC encompass a multi-sectoral framework designed to address Pakistan's structural bottlenecks while advancing China's westward connectivity goals. By 2025, the corridor included 21 energy projects adding approximately 13,000 MW of power generation capacity largely coal-fired plants in Punjab and Sindh alleviating Pakistan's chronic load-shedding crisis that had crippled industrial output for decades. Transport infrastructure features the Karakoram Highway Phase II upgrades, the Peshawar-Karachi Motorway sections, and the planned Main Line-1 (ML-1) railway modernization, a \$6.8 billion project to upgrade Pakistan's 1,872-kilometer north-south rail spine. Gwadar Port, the corridor's western anchor, has seen significant expansion with new berths, a free zone, and airport upgrades, though operational cargo volumes remain modest at under 1 million tons annually as of 2025. Nine Special Economic Zones (SEZs) have been designated, with Rashakai, Allama Iqbal Industrial City, and Dhabeji operational or nearing completion, intended to attract manufacturing investment. Recent data indicate cumulative CPEC investment surpassing \$25 billion by late 2025, with completed projects contributing 6,000 MW of electricity and over 2,000 kilometers of roads (Ministry of Planning, Development & Special Initiatives, 2025). These components collectively aim to integrate Pakistan into China's global supply chains while positioning it as a regional logistics hub, though implementation has been uneven due to security, financing, and coordination challenges.

The economic benefits for Pakistan have been tangible yet unevenly distributed, delivering measurable gains in energy security, employment, and foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows. CPEC power projects have reduced load-shedding from 12-18 hours daily in 2013 to near-elimination in major urban centers by 2025, enabling industrial revival and contributing an

estimated 2-2.5% to annual GDP growth during peak implementation years (2015-2019). Over 261,000 direct jobs have been created, with indirect employment in transport, services, and construction multiplying this figure, particularly benefiting Punjab and Sindh provinces. FDI inflows from China surged from \$126 million in FY2013 to an average of \$1.2-1.5 billion annually during 2015-2020, though they declined post-COVID and amid security concerns. Gwadar and SEZs hold long-term potential to transform Pakistan into a transit economy linking Central Asia, West Asia, and China. However, benefits remain regionally skewed Punjab and Sindh capturing the majority while Balochistan, despite hosting Gwadar, has seen limited trickle-down effects, exacerbating local grievances (Aamir, 2025). Analytically, these gains reflect short-term structural relief but highlight dependency on Chinese capital and technology, with limited technology transfer constraining indigenous industrial upgrading.

Controversies and critiques surrounding CPEC have intensified, centering on debt sustainability, transparency deficits, employment imbalances, and socio-political fallout, particularly the Baloch insurgency. Pakistan's external debt rose from \$60 billion in 2013 to over \$130 billion by 2025, with China holding approximately 30% of bilateral debt, prompting warnings of a potential "debt trap" despite Islamabad's insistence that loans are concessional (2–3% interest, long grace periods). Transparency concerns persist: project costs, contracts, and revenue-sharing agreements with Chinese firms have often been opaque, fueling public skepticism and elite capture allegations. Employment patterns reveal a preference for Chinese workers in skilled and managerial roles, with local hiring concentrated in low-skill labor, generating resentment over job quality and wage disparities. In Balochistan, CPEC has become a lightning rod for separatist grievances; attacks on Chinese engineers and convoys over 20 major incidents between 2018 and 2025 reflect perceptions of resource exploitation without adequate local inclusion, leading to militarized security responses that further alienate communities. These critiques highlight structural asymmetries: while CPEC addresses Pakistan's immediate needs, it risks reinforcing dependency and exacerbating internal fault lines (Ahmed & Chaudhry, 2025).

Recent developments indicate a recalibration toward CPEC Phase-II, emphasizing industrialization, agriculture modernization, science and technology cooperation, and enhanced security, alongside incremental progress on flagship projects. The 14th Joint Cooperation Committee meeting in September 2025 endorsed nine new SEZs and agricultural cooperation zones, with pilot projects in Punjab and Sindh focusing on high-value crops and smart farming. The ML-1 railway project, delayed by financing disputes, advanced with a revised \$6.8 billion framework agreed in principle during President Zardari's February 2025 visit, targeting electrification and speed upgrades by 2030. Gwadar has seen new berths and free-zone facilities operationalized, though cargo throughput remains below expectations due to security and connectivity bottlenecks. Security arrangements have intensified, with dedicated forces protecting Chinese personnel following multiple attacks. Analytically, Phase-II reflects Pakistan's push for value-added industrialization and China's interest in demonstrating BRI sustainability amid global scrutiny, yet persistent challenges financing constraints, local resistance, and geopolitical headwinds suggest the corridor's transformative promise remains partially unfulfilled (Khan & Edwin, 2024).

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that Pakistan-China relations represent one of the most enduring and strategically significant bilateral partnerships in contemporary Asia, having matured from a Cold War-era alignment rooted in shared anti-India and anti-Soviet imperatives into a comprehensive, multi-dimensional strategic partnership in the 21st century. The historical

trajectory from early diplomatic recognition in 1950, through pivotal wartime support in 1965 and 1971, covert nuclear and missile cooperation in the 1970s-1980s, post-9/11 continuity, and the transformative launch of CPEC in 2013 illustrates a relationship driven by converging geopolitical necessities, mutual threat perceptions, and economic complementarity. CPEC has delivered tangible benefits, including energy security, infrastructure modernization, job creation, and FDI inflows, while military exercises, intelligence sharing, and diplomatic coordination have strengthened Pakistan's deterrence and regional standing. China's consistent diplomatic backing on Kashmir, NSG issues, and UNSC matters, combined with Pakistan's reciprocal support on Xinjiang, BRI, and One-China policy, has reinforced mutual reliability. Yet the partnership is not without asymmetries: Pakistan's growing debt exposure, security risks to Chinese personnel, limited negotiating leverage, and localized resistance particularly in Balochistan highlight structural dependencies that complicate the narrative of pure mutual benefit. These tensions, amplified by external factors such as U.S.-India strategic convergence and Afghanistan's instability, underscore the need for Pakistan to manage the relationship with greater strategic autonomy and diversification.

Looking ahead, the Pak-China partnership is likely to deepen further, driven by China's need for secure access to the Indian Ocean and Pakistan's reliance on Beijing as a counterweight to regional pressures. CPEC Phase-II, with its focus on industrialization, agriculture, science and technology, and enhanced security arrangements, offers pathways to more balanced economic gains, provided implementation addresses transparency, local inclusion, and debt sustainability concerns. Diplomatically and militarily, continued coordination through joint exercises, intelligence sharing, and quadrilateral engagement with Afghanistan and Iran will reinforce the counter-India axis while navigating great-power rivalry. For Pakistan, the challenge lies in hedging effectively between the U.S. and China, maximizing economic dividends without sacrificing foreign policy flexibility, and mitigating internal fault lines exacerbated by uneven project benefits. Ultimately, the relationship's resilience stems from its alignment with core national interests on both sides, but its long-term sustainability will depend on Pakistan's ability to negotiate equitable terms, enhance domestic ownership of CPEC, and pursue multi-alignment to avoid over-dependence. In an increasingly contested Asian order, the Pakistan-China axis remains a defining feature of regional geopolitics, offering both opportunities for stability and risks of entrapment.

References

- Aamir, A. (2025, April 26). CPEC at 10: Broken promises and Balochistan's continued neglect. *The Friday Times*. <https://thefridaytimes.com/26-Apr-2025/cpec-at-10-broken-promises-and-balochistan-s-continued-neglect>
- Ahmed, Z. S. (2024). Pakistan's China alignment: A balancing act in South Asia. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 33(137), 45–62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2023.2200000>
- Ahmed, Z. S., & Chaudhry, A. K. (2025). The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor and narrative projection: The role of Pakistani think tanks. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/18681026251355961>
- Ali, M. (2024). China's arms exports to Pakistan: Trends and implications. *Strategic Studies*, 44(2), 45–67.
- Ali, S. (2025). The Pakistan–China–Afghanistan triangle post-2021: Stability and challenges. *Strategic Studies*, 45(1), 78–95.
- Burke, S. M. (1973). *Pakistan's foreign policy: An historical analysis*. Oxford University Press.
- Burke, S. M., & Ziring, L. (2021). *Pakistan's foreign policy: An historical analysis* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.

- Chaudhry, A. K. (2023). UNSC dynamics and China's support for Pakistan: Kashmir and beyond. *International Affairs*, 99(4), 1623–1641. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaad150>
- China Military Online. (2025, December 15). China-Pakistan "Warrior-IX" joint anti-terrorist exercise wraps up. <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/2025xb/D/V/16427225.html>
- Hiim, H. S. (2018). *China and international nuclear weapons proliferation: Strategic assistance*. Routledge.
- Hussain, E. (2024). Pakistan's hedging in U.S.–China rivalry: Implications for South Asia. *Asia Policy*, 31(2), 112–130.
- Javaid, U. (2019). Sino-Pak strategic relationship: A pragmatic perspective. *Journal of Political Studies*, 26(1), 143–158.
- Khan, A. (2023). China-Pakistan nuclear cooperation: A historical perspective. *Strategic Studies*, 43(1), 67–85.
- Khan, F. (2025). Military cooperation between Pakistan and China: Joint exercises and strategic convergence. *Defence Journal*, 28(3), 55–72.
- Khan, H., & Edwin, M. (2024). Assessing the agricultural trade narrative of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: A systematic review of the past decade (2013–2023). *Discover Agriculture*, 2, Article 51. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44279-024-00067-6>
- Malik, H. (2023). Pakistan's support for China's core interests: Xinjiang and BRI in focus. *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 41(2), 201–218.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. (2025). China-Pakistan relations. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2757_663518
- Paul, T. V. (2003). Chinese-Pakistani nuclear/missile ties and balance of power politics. *Nonproliferation Review*, 10(2), 21–29.
- Reuters. (2026, January 5). China, Pakistan reaffirm ties as US outreach to Islamabad deepens. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-pakistan-reaffirm-ties-us-outreach-islamabad-deepens-2026-01-05>
- Shah, A. (2024). Regional implications of Pakistan–China partnership: Counter-India axis and Afghanistan. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 20(3), 345–362. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orad050>
- Small, A. (2020). *The China-Pakistan axis: Asia's new geopolitics*. Oxford University Press.
- Syed, A. H. (1974). *China and Pakistan: Diplomacy of an entente cordiale*. University of Massachusetts Press.
- Syed, A. H. (2022). *China and Pakistan: Diplomacy of an entente cordiale* (revised ed.). University of Massachusetts Press.
- The Friday Times. (2025a, October 1). President Zardari's 2025 China visit boosts defence ties and CPEC-driven economic partnership. <https://www.thefridaytimes.com/01-Oct-2025/president-zardari-s-2025-china-visit-boosts-defence-ties-cpec-driven-economic-partnership>
- Vertzberger, Y. (1987). *The end of the Sino-Pakistani entente cordiale?* *Asian Survey*, 27(5), 513–528.
- Wikipedia contributors. (2026). China–Pakistan Economic Corridor. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/China%E2%80%93Pakistan_Economic_Corridor