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## Bandwagoning under Structural Necessity: The China-Pakistan Strategic Alignment, 2010-2025

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### Abstract

*This article uses the lens of Structural Realism to shed light on the growing strategic convergence between China and Pakistan (2010-2025) and its linkage to the changing great power dynamics between the United States and China. Based on the neorealist logic of Waltz and Mearsheimer's extension of it, and the concept of bandwagoning within the Structural Realist tradition, the China-Pakistan relationship is not a contingent one or one driven merely by transactional considerations, but rather one that stems from enduring, overlapping interests: the mutual goal of checking India's regional dominance, China's desire for an alternate sea route to the Indian Ocean, and Beijing's interest in stability along the troubled western border. It explores how this alignment has been institutionalised through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, increased military cooperation, and Pakistan's parallel, more transactional, relationship with the United States, as well as the structural weaknesses (debt dependency and sovereignty limitations) that question the sustainability of the relationship. The article concludes that Structural Realism, combined with the notion of bandwagoning, offers a strong account of the stability of the alignment, and that structural complementarity does not rule out the asymmetries of dependency that it involves.*

**Keywords:** *Structural Realism, bandwagoning, China-Pakistan relations, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, alliance formation, South Asia*

### Introduction

The development of strategic ties between Pakistan and China is one of the many bilateral ties that have changed significantly in the wake of the US-China strategic competition that has escalated since 2010, and one of the most significant links for regional order in South Asia. The word “all-weather friendship” used for decades to refer to this relationship was somewhat loosely defined, but became somewhat institutionalised economically, militarily and politically during this period, setting it apart analytically from its earlier phases (Small, 2015). The most obvious example of this institutionalization is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which was announced in 2015 as China's flagship regional project in the Belt and Road Initiative,

and is projected to cost up to sixty-two billion United States dollars (across energy, transport, industrial and port infrastructure) at its peak (Rolland, 2017).

The article raises the question of why the China-Pakistan axis is so much stronger at the time when the United States and China are competing more fully on the international stage, and why it has remained strong despite the economic pressures and sovereignty concerns that have periodically arisen in the axis. The structural realism argument presented here is more convincing and, in particular, the concept of bandwagoning, which has grown out of the wider neorealist model. In contrast, the article contends that the alignment is neither a purely ideational "friendship" nor a narrowly transactional one that hinges on specific leaders, but one that relies on permanent structural complementarities, which ought to endure regardless of who leads on either side, simply because they are based on the mutual positions of the two states in the regional distribution of power.

From a more theoretical perspective the China-Pakistan case is also interesting because it is a particularly good example of the bandwagoning hypothesis in the structural realist school of thought. The empirical research of alliance formation in international relations has been focused on balancing behavior among similarly endowed states or on the choice of alliances by small states between two great powers in short-term situations. The relationship between China and Pakistan, on the other hand, carries with it a longstanding and stark capability imbalance, a focus on a third state rather than the aligning great power, and the sense that it has continued and grown under various governments and leaders. The pattern of deepening alignment in the case is challenging for bandwagoning theory because it occurs in a context much more stringent than the one most commonly studied in other cases in the literature on small-power alignment choices.

The article is organised as follows. The pertinent literature on the formation of alliances and bandwagoning and China-Pakistan relationship in particular is reviewed in section 2. Section 3 presents the Structural Realist theoretical framework and considers the notion of 'bandwagoning' and its relationship to 'asymmetric' relationships between a 'rising' great power and a materially weaker regional state. Once the alignment is realised through CPEC, Section 4 explains the economic institutionalization of the alignment. Its military aspect is explored in Section 5. Section 6 delves into Pakistan's parallel, more ambivalent history with the United States, as an example of structurally rational "hedging" in addition to primary alignment. Section 7 is dedicated to the structural fragilities of the relationship, especially those entailed by debt dependency and sovereignty constraints, and the final discussion considers overall explanatory power of the SR framework.

### **Literature Review**

The academic literature on the relationship between China and Pakistan has undergone significant changes in the last few years in terms of its emphasis on the origins of the relationship based on mutual hostility towards India, to the emphasis on the economic and infrastructural aspects of the China-Pakistan Economic Cooperation Project (CPEC). There is, however, what is arguably the most comprehensive treatment of the relationship's historical course and nature, in Small (2015), who sees the relationship as a unique example of a great power aligning itself with a much weaker state, even though it was marked by substantial disparities in capability and sometimes conflicting interests. Hussain (2017) also looks at the specific issue of CPEC's sustainability and has early raised concerns of the security environment in the corridor and the reliance on Pakistani political stability to implement the corridor, some of which were anticipated to be a problem later in the corridor's implementation.

The second category of literature examines CPEC in the context of the Belt and Road studies. While situating CPEC in the broader context of China's Belt and Road initiative, Wolf (2020) systematically evaluates the conceptual foundation, implementation and probable economic effects of CPEC, with a close focus on the challenges that may arise in Pakistan. Gao (2023) builds this analysis in light of the political economy aspects of the corridor, focusing on its cost/benefit distribution between the two governments due to its financing mechanism. Meanwhile, Garlick (2020) places CPEC in a broader comparative context on how BRI has fared from Asia to Europe, providing a comparative comparison that can be used to evaluate the Pakistan case. The authors of Zajączkowski and Wolf (2014) offer a helpful background on the European view of Pakistan under the auspices of regional cooperation arrangements, a theme that overlaps Pakistan's external economic ties in the years leading up to the CPEC era, which are relevant to measuring the scope of the Chinese offer for the post-2015 period.

A third type of literature directly treats the theoretical aspect of bandwagoning. Schweller (1994) has offered an influential modification of the balance of power tradition that weaker states need not always balance against threatening powers but may often bandwagon for profit, joining a rising power and expecting to share in the benefits of the power's rise rather than simply seek security from it. A related but different notion is developed by Walt (1987), the balance of threat; the notion is that alignment isn't based just on capability, but on intentions, proximity, and offensive capability. This is a very useful refinement when applied to Pakistan's alignment with China and not just with capability. While an idea developed in a different field and outside of the South Asian context, the concept of hedging is a useful comparative lens on the more ambivalent, hedging-inflected aspect of Pakistan's ties with the United States that is explored in Section 6 of this article, as Kuik (2008) develops it in the context of the smaller states in Southeast Asia dealing with a rising China. In sum, this literature provides a compelling argument that the China-Pakistan case cannot be analysed with one theory, but rather with a combination of the structural bandwagoning theory with some focus on the specific economic and military mechanisms by which the alignment has been realized, the job for which the rest of this article will be dedicated.

### **Structural realism and the logic of bandwagoning**

Structural Realism as defined by Waltz(1979), sees the international system as an anarchic structure that forces states to secure their own security through self-help and that the distribution of capabilities among states is the chief determinant of their strategic behaviour. In this broad category, Structural Realist scholarship has distinguished two basic approaches that a weaker state can pursue when it faces a materially stronger or more powerful state: balancing and bandwagoning (Waltz, 1979).

For the analysis at hand it is particularly significant that bandwagoning was redefined by Schweller (1994). Bandwagoning is often not a tactic of weakness or fear it is a rational choice made for gain: When a weaker state aligns with a rising power, it can take advantage of some economic, security or diplomatic benefits that come with the power's rise. The Pakistani context is a case in point as the Chinese association can be explained only in relation to the Pakistani weakness vis-à-vis China and not towards Pakistan itself. Instead, the relationship has been better described as bandwagoning for gain, meaning that Pakistan has joined a growing China in the hopes of gaining from the Chinese government's economic development expenditures and from the Chinese great power's security capabilities in offsetting the conventional military dominance of India (Schweller, 1994).

The argument presented in this article builds upon the more general structural realist claim that anarchy produces self-help behaviour and that the distribution of capabilities influences the

strategic calculations of every state, no matter what its regime type or ideology is (Mearsheimer, 2001). Capturing the theoretical sophistication of Snyder (1997) with respect to alliance politics, the difference between alliances for aggregation of force against an external threat and those for coping with the threat of abandonment and entrapment of the alliance member in an asymmetric partnership is also relevant in the China-Pakistan case. When applied to this case, the key point is that Pakistan's ability to be a small partner in an asymmetric alliance is helped by the structural foundation of threat perception shared with China, compared to India, which limits the risk of abandonment that is endemic to asymmetric alliances, as Snyder argues (Snyder, 1997).

The China-Pakistan alignment has grown stronger within the systemic context as described by the Power Transition Theory. The Power Transition Theory provides an additional complementary view of the systemic context in which the China-Pakistan alignment has intensified. Both Organski (1958) and Gilpin (1981) emphasize that a rising power's attempt to mold the regional order to its own benefit tends to focus on cultivating client and partner states that can be relied upon to make the rise of other powers difficult for the latter to handle at low direct costs to the rising power; the China-Pakistan alignment is a classic example of this, in that Pakistan's structural value to China is high primarily because it can be used to complicate and constrain India's position in the region at relatively low direct cost to China's position (Gilpin, 1981). This reading does not replace but complements the above developed bandwagoning framework, by placing Pakistan's bandwagoning decision in the wider systemic process of hegemonic transition, which is most importantly manifested in the broader China-U.S. rivalry.

To complement Mearsheimer's (2001) version of offensive SR, there is a complementary insight into China's side of the relationship provided by defensive SR. According to Mearsheimer, a rising great power with desire for regional influence has "structural incentives" to foster alliances with states that are capable of limiting the freedom of action of a potential rival if they become powerful enough, in this instance, an alliance with Pakistan, which limits India's freedom of action and therefore its ability to act as a regionally independent counterweight to Chinese influence. According to this logic, the Chinese side of the relationship does not require any specific Chinese leader's preferences, and therefore should be expected to last through changes of leadership, because the distribution of regional power is fairly stable, on Structural Realist theory, across such changes (Mearsheimer, 2003).

This case also has additional relevance to an argument presented by Walt (1987) for the refinement of a balance-of-threat. Walt says that states don't react to power as a total number, but to threat, which is determined by a combination of aggregate power, proximity, offensive capability and perceptions of intentions. Reapplied to the situation of the China-Pakistan case, this refinement will enable one to understand why Pakistan's structural alignment has been geared toward China rather than toward another external power of similar capability: China is geographically near, shares a direct interest in controlling India, and, unlike other external powers to whom Pakistan has attempted to look, has consistently refused to impose conditions on its support that Pakistani policymakers have found constraining in their relations with Western powers (Walt, 1987). Together, Schweller's bandwagoning-for-profit theory and Walt's balance-of-threat theory offer a theoretical framework for understanding the empirical record of the China-Pakistan alignment, which the rest of this piece uses.

### **Economic Institutionalisation of Alignment (CPEC)**

#### **CPEC's Strategic Rationale**

Importantly, the most significant institutional measure of the bilateral alignment discussed in this article is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, announced in 2015. The corridor involves an

extensive project of energy production, infrastructure development, industrial zones and port construction between Kashgar in China's Sino-Pakistani border region of Xinjiang and the Pakistani deep water port of Gwadar on the Arabian Sea (Small, 2015). Although frequently being talked about in a narrow economic sense, the rationale of CPEC is far more than its contributions to Pakistan's development. For China, the corridor is an alternative to the Straits of Malacca through which most of the country's energy imports and export trade currently passes to the Indian Ocean, lessening the dependency on the straits that is known as the 'Malacca Dilemma' (Miller, 2017, in another discussion of the broader Belt and Road connectivity initiative, places this 'Malacca Dilemma' amongst the key drivers of China's investments in connectivity westward and southward).

On a wider macroeconomic scale, CPEC is a representative example of Clarke's (2017) broader macroeconomic trend, whereby economic connectivity acts as a development promise and a means by which Beijing imposes enduring political and infrastructure ties on key states. Meanwhile, Winter (2021) elaborates on a similar idea in relation to the "geocultural" aspects of Chinese connectivity initiatives, highlighting that Chinese initiatives of connectivity tend to be supported by narratives of shared civilisational and historical links that provide a normative aura to the economic ties beyond just the narrow boundaries of commercial calculation, as is the case in official Chinese and Pakistani discourses on the China-Pakistan relationship as an "all-weather friendship". Some attention needs to be paid to the discursive dimension, however, and this to the character of the Chinese party-state itself: as Howell (2006) argues, the working implementation of projects like CPEC requires a complex array of state-owned enterprises, as well as provincial actors and policy banks, whose interests do not necessarily align perfectly with the central party-state's strategic goals. An additional corrective can be found in Callahan's (2010) account of the conflicts between optimistic and pessimistic versions of Chinese national self-perception, which suggests that Chinese external behaviour including push for alignment with Pakistan was in fact driven not only by an optimistic, great-power assertiveness but also by a perceived vulnerability and sense of encirclement, which helps explain the strategic premium that Beijing places on securing reliable regional partners (Callahan, 2010).

Gwadar's significance for China is further reinforced by the fact that a Chinese state-backed company is developing and running the port, a development which has led to ongoing speculation but not a definitive proof about the port's future naval applications (Gao, 2023). The corridor's structural significance is enough on its own: CPEC is the most focused single example of Belt and Road investment in any single country, something that cannot be explained without reference to the specific structural interests that make the corridor unique, compared with China's more dispersed economic relations in the rest of the region, which are defined by the presence of India (Garlick, 2020).

### **Environmental, Social, and Economic Sustainability of Infrastructure Development in Pakistan**

The CPEC solves the chronic energy shortage issue in Pakistan, which for a long time has been a major constraint on industrial development, and consequently on economic development in general (Wolf, 2020). The amount of investment pledged for the corridor far outweighed what Pakistan was likely to be able to secure from traditional multilateral or Western bilateral development finance in a similar time frame, and the relative speed of Chinese project implementation relative to the more cumbersome procedure of Western-backed development finance has also been mentioned by Pakistani officials as an additional advantage of the corridor (Hussain, 2017).

CPEC has also a strategic logic for Pakistan which is directly related to the structural bandwagoning framework developed in Section 3. Pakistan's major and constant security threat

during the entire period of study has been conventional military imbalance between Pakistan and India that Pakistani security planners have always tried to counter with nuclear deterrence and external alignment (Small, 2015). A strengthened economic ties with China, along with a strengthening of military cooperation discussed in Section 5, can help Pakistan to hedge against this imbalance without relying on Pakistan's own economic or military growth. Pakistani involvement in CPEC is best viewed, in this context, as not simply the quest for economic development for itself but as the economic aspect of a wider "bandwagoning" policy aimed at finding a great-power patron to limit the dominance of India in the region (Schweller, 1994). This is all the more remarkable given the relative continuity of public interest in the corridor despite shifts in government, and changes in domestic political agendas, which could be expected to have an impact on its perceived value if the corridor's value was primarily economic and not geopolitical and strategic.

### **Military dimension of the Alignment**

The institutionalization of China-Pakistan relationship has been taking place simultaneously in the economic and military spheres whose synergic effects have reinforced each other during the considered timeframe. Since 2010, arms transfer to Pakistan by China has grown significantly in quantity and sophistication since it became Pakistan's main supplier of advanced military equipment, such as co-produced fighter aircraft, naval frigates, missile systems and armored vehicles (Mearsheimer, 2014, discusses the broader logic of great-power arms transfer as an instrument of alignment-building, which is directly applicable to the Chinese case). These developments combined with an equal cooling of the Americans-Pakistani security relationship after the Osama bin Laden raid in 2011 and a deterioration of counterterrorism cooperation between Washington and Islamabad put a greater strain on the two countries' security relationship and made China an even more attractive security partner, where conditionality had not been a feature of America's security assistance to Pakistan (Mearsheimer, 2014).

In addition to the arms transfer, the military relationship has also evolved qualitatively, through joint military exercises, intelligence sharing and cooperation in the development of missile and nuclear technology, all of which indicate a more institutionalised relationship between the military and military that goes beyond arms sales (Fravel, 2019, situates this deepening in the general context of the Chinese military modernization and external security cooperation since 1949). Joint exercises in both naval and air fields have now become common occurrences in the bilateral relations and serve as both a mechanism of interoperability and an indicator towards the region and India of the durability of the alignment (Tsokhas, 2022, offers a helpful overview of the wider Chinese military-strategic literature to which this bilateral cooperation should be related).

The nuclear aspect of the relationship can be highlighted in its own respect because of its pivotal role in Pakistan's security policy. Although the exact nature of cooperation is not completely documented in open sources in Pakistan's quest for full-spectrum deterrence has been significantly aided by Chinese technical assistance over the years, both strategic and tactical (Mearsheimer, 2014). It is hard to explain this eagerness to support the most sensitive aspect of Pakistani security policy that no other country considers sensitive for its interests, other than in terms of the depth of shared structural interest in constraining India that underpins the grand alignment, China's. A commercial or business transaction based relationship would not be expected to last to the point of cooperation in a so sensitive and expensive field (Fravel, 2019). This military dimension is theoretically important in that it shows that the China-Pakistan partnership has gone beyond the usual arms-for-goods transactional relationship to an institutionalized cooperation that more closely resembles an alliance than any other partnership.

In a Structural Realist interpretation, the deepening is consistent with the bandwagoning logic discussed above: security gains from Pakistan's alignment with China have increased, and the incentive structure for continued and further alignment rather than for a shift back to a more balanced or diversified set of external security relationships has been strengthened accordingly (Walt, 1987).

### **Pakistan's Ambivalent Relationship with the United States: Hedging Alongside Alignment**

What is needed is not only to catch the process of Pakistan's growing integration with China, but also its ongoing, though less positive, engagement with the United States in order to explain Pakistan's structural position. During the same period, Pakistan had sustained good economic and diplomatic relations with Washington, which included a dependence on the International Monetary Fund for balancing the payments from time to time, an institution that remains significant to Americans, and continuing security cooperation on counterterrorism issues, especially in the lead-up to the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan in 2021 (Hussain, 2017).

This does not seem to be an example of mere inconsistencies or strategic confusion; rather, it can be understood as hedging, a concept originally developed by Kuik (2008) in the context of the Southeast Asian region which is applicable to the Pakistani context. In this context, hedging is a policy of a smaller state deliberately not to go overboard for any one of two great powers but to find ways to retain access to benefits provided by both while simultaneously lowering the risks of aligning exclusively with either one or the other. This is a structurally rational approach that Pakistan has been taking with the United States as it is increasingly adopting a China-centric policy in its security strategy.

The asymmetry in depth of Pakistan's relationship with China and the more conditional and transactional relationship with the United States is an important empirical finding itself. American support to Pakistan has been structured more around the need for cooperation on specific policy issues, notably counterterrorism, than around China's relatively unconditional support, which is tied closely to the common structural interest in limiting India, rendering the relationship more vulnerable to periodic breakdowns (Small, 2015). This is in keeping with the structural logic outlined in the earlier section 3, where China's interests in the relationship are more directly and permanently attuned to Pakistan's core security interests than are those of the United States, another factor contributing to the relative stability and institutionalisation of the China relationship.

### **Structural Vulnerabilities: Debt Dependency and Sovereignty Constraints**

Despite the above structural complementarities, the China-Pakistan axis is beset with vulnerabilities and the long-term sustainability of this arrangement requires careful analysis. The issue of debt dependency stands out among these questions. The financing for CPEC has been largely through commercial or near-commercial rate loans provided by the Chinese policymaking banks and not grants or highly concessional financing, which has resulted in debt-service obligations that, at some junctures during the time of this study, represented a significant portion of Pakistan's total external debt (Rolland, 2017). At times, this debt burden has focused Pakistani governments' attention on maintaining harmonious relations with Chinese creditors, limiting their ability to renegotiate specific project terms, such as certain power-purchase agreements with guaranteed returns, and how much regulatory control they have over CPEC-linked special economic zones, even in cases where Pakistani officials and analysts have voiced concerns about these terms (Wolf, 2020).

There are broader academic questions about these dynamics that are raised by the concept of "debt-trap diplomacy," the idea that China intentionally designs infrastructure projects to create

unsustainable debt obligations to it which can then be used as a bargaining chip for strategic concessions. The Pakistani case is no exception to this, and supports the view of debt entrapment as a 'deliberately engineered outcome' only very weakly, if at all, given the pattern of debt restructuring and deferral that has characterized China's response to Pakistani debt distress (Rolland, 2017). There is also some evidence that supports the more nuanced version of the argument: financing structures facilitated by BRI lead to the debt crises of recipient states, and once the debt crises occur, negotiations tend to work in favour of the Chinese commercial and strategic interests but come at the cost of the borrowing state's ability to exercise its sovereign policy autonomy (Gao, 2023).

Another weakness relates to the security setting of the corridor. Large parts of the CPEC route go through areas where there is intermittent insurgent and separatist activity, which has required the Pakistani government to deploy its own security forces to safeguard Chinese nationals and assets on the project, and has occasioned tensions in the bilateral relationship when nationals have been the target of attacks (Hussain, 2017). The internal instability of Pakistan adds another structural interest in the stability of the country to the already dominant structural logic of the alignment, while China's own concerns about instability along its Xinjiang border reinforce this structural logic but also makes the relationship somewhat more vulnerable, as a capability-based account of the relationship would tend to underestimate.

#### **Explanatory Power of SR and Bandwagoning (Discussion)**

The empirical evidence reviewed in this article provides good evidence for a Structural Realist, or more narrowly a bandwagoning, explanation of the China-Pakistan alignment. The defining characteristics of this relationship: China's disproportionate investment in Pakistan relative to a commercial assessment of comparative return, China's qualitative enhancement of military cooperation over arms sales, and the continued alignment despite shifts in Pakistani and Chinese leadership can all be better understood as enduring structural complementarities than as contingent or personality-based factors (Schweller, 1994; Mearsheimer, 2003).

The emergence of new great powers and the alliances that they develop should also be understood as predictable reactions to changes in the distribution of capabilities as opposed to historically contingent anomalies that need to be explained separately, as Waltz (2000) later reflected in his international system studies in the post-Cold War period. In this light, the China-Pakistan relationship is not a unique or regional phenomenon but a specific case of a broader structural trend: a rising power building enduring ties with states which can limit the scope of its principal regional rival a trend which would be predicted by Structural Realism to be a recurring feature of geopolitical relationships in other parts of the world where similar structural dynamics are in place.

In the meantime, the analysis warns of being misled by a simple interpretation of the relationship as a structural harmony without qualifications. As stated in Section 7, although the alignment from a macro level is a structurally rational one from the point of view of both sides, it is not without its asymmetries, typical of a great power and a much weaker state. Though bandwagoning, in Schweller's (1994) terms, is a strategy undertaken with the expectation that a gain will be distributed evenly between the two, that is not always the case in the China-Pakistan relationship, and a purely capabilities-based approach is likely to overlook the costs of such a strategy.

#### **Policy Implications**

Another aspect that is worth considering is the regional balance of power balance. As far as the China-Pakistan axis operates as a way to limit India's freedom of manoeuvre at a comparatively low direct cost, the durability of the alignment has implications for the broader United States-

China competition discussed in the accompanying analysis of the dynamics of India's own strategic trajectory. China-Pakistan-economic cooperation and development accords would force India to focus part of its strategic energies and defence budget on the west side of its border while it tries to shore up against China in the north and in the sea. The China-Pakistan-economic cooperation and development accords would have a counterweight effect on India's focus on the west side of its border, while it is seeking to balance against China on the northern and sea borders, thus reinforcing and complementing to the extent of the greater economic competition between Washington and Beijing. So policymakers looking at the regional balance of power in South Asia would be best served not to view the China-Pakistan and the India-United States relationship separately as bilateral phenomena; indeed, the basis of the analysis in this article is that the two are structurally interdependent and each reflects the incentive structure operating on the other set of actors.

This analysis leads us to some analytical implications that are not prescriptive. First, it is important to note that if the alignment is based on a stable set of structural interests, and not short-term leadership preferences, it is unlikely that the alignment will significantly diminish when the leadership of either capital changes. Secondly, the debt dependence cycle outlined in section 7 indicates that Pakistan must be able to access external finance from a wider variety of sources and renegotiate the terms of existing CPEC contracts in a more transparent manner in order to be regarded as economically sovereign in the long run. This is in line with the hedging logic that is already observed in Pakistan's relationship with the United States and international financial institutions (Kuik, 2008). Third, the continued presence of low level insecurity in the area along CPEC suggests that long-term stability of the corridor will require a significant amount of domestic Pakistani governance capacity that is outside of the scope of Structural Realism but which will have a direct impact on the trajectory of the relationship.

### **Conclusion**

This article has suggested that the intensification of the China-Pakistan strategic enmeshment since 2010 until 2025 can be explained by the Structural Realist framework, and more particularly by the notion of bandwagoning for profit (Schweller 1994), which was elaborated by Walt (1987) with his notion of balance-of-threat. The alignment is based on stable and overlapping strategic interests: China's desire to counter India's regional military dominance and ensure India has other routes to the Indian Ocean, and Pakistan's quest to balance the conventional military dominance of India with the patronage of a great power that does not have to be tied to conditions of its own choosing. The institutionalization of this alignment through CPEC, and the more conditional hedging process with the United States, both show how a materially weaker state can take a rational path of alignment with a rising great power, but one that is structured around a long-term relationship. Together, these demonstrate how a materially weaker state can follow a rational course of action, pursuing a long-term relationship of alignment with a rising great power, in the case of Pakistan with Great Britain. Meanwhile, the structural vulnerabilities discussed in this article—debt dependency, sovereignty limitations and the potential for security threats in the implementation of CPEC—suggest that structural complementarity cannot completely remove asymmetries of dependency from such an alignment, which future studies on great-power-client relationships will benefit from systematically adding to an existing bandwagoning framework.

Overall, the China-Pakistan case provides an interesting example of the analytical possibilities of interpreting bandwagoning in Schweller's sense that is, as a rational strategy adopted not in fear but in anticipation of mutual benefit and this is a strategy that can be analyzed with care in other parts of the contemporary international system, where dependence on a single patron is a

structural weakness. The durability of the China-Pakistan alignment will likely also hinge on the persistence of the underlying structural interests identified in this article, and any decline in these interests whether driven by a shift in the India-Pakistan relationship, a significant reduction in China's reliance on overland access to the Indian Ocean, or the resolution of instability in China's west will likely be expected to be sufficient to seriously undermine the alignment, on the logic developed herein.

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