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Beyond CPEC: Pakistan–China Relations at 75 –
Building a Shared Future through Innovation, Connectivity, and
Human Development



By Ms. Aqsa Malik, PRCCSF Fellow, Pakistan
Research Center for a Community with Shared Future
(PRCCSF), Islamabad

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The 75th anniversary of the establishment of Diplomatic Relations between Pakistan and People's Republic of China is a symbolic celebration of an eternal friendship. It is a chance to think about one of the most amazing bilateral relations in contemporary international politics, and to imagine a future beyond the boundaries of conventional strategic co-operation. Pakistan and



China have been engaged in bilateral relationship since 21 May 1951 which is based on mutual trust, mutual respect for sovereignty and mutual commitment on the issues of development. International relations alliances have come and gone with the ebb and flow of geopolitical interests and needs, but over the past more than seven decades the relations between Pakistan and China have remained resilient and strong due to their ability to adjust to new challenges and maintain the core principles of friendship and cooperation.

In today's era of rapidly changing global dynamics, economic uncertainty, climate change and technological disruptions, the Pakistan-China relations need to transform as well. What will be the key to the next 75 years is how both countries will work together on innovation, education, green development, science, digital transformation and human capital. The future of this relationship is not just about road and port linkages; it's about the linkages of people, ideas, and opportunities.

The strategic relationship between Pakistan and China is based on strategic confidence that predates many of today's international relationship. In 1950 Pakistan was one of the first Muslim majority countries to accept the People's Republic of China and formal relations were established in 1951. This early recognition was a sign of Pakistan's desire to build a relationship with China in spite of international political polarization. Twenty years later Pakistan proved its diplomatic significance as it played the role of a go-between for the

United States National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger to visit Beijing in 1971. This led to President Richard Nixon's historic trip to China in 1972, which revolutionized global diplomacy. This episode is one of the most important and special occasions in the history of Pakistan's international relations and is a reflection of the high level of trust and cooperation between Pakistan and China.

The two countries have been supporting each other on the question of sovereignty and territoriality in their various policies for the last several decades. Pakistan has adhered to the concept of One-China in all the international forums and China has repeatedly offered Pakistan diplomatic, economic and humanitarian assistance during times of economic difficulty, natural disaster and regional security threats. This consistency has paved the way for the relationship to be dubbed, by both leaders, as an “All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership”, which has become a diplomatic term used to signal decades worth of practical cooperation.

In 2015 the launch of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which was a pivotal moment in the relationship between the two countries. CPEC is the flagship project of China's “Belt and Road” initiative which has transformed



Pakistan's development landscape. The investments in transport infrastructure, energy generation and industrial development have led to better connectivity and to the solution of structural problems. The travel time between the south and the central part of Pakistan has been shortened by the Multan–Sukkur Motorway, and the Karot Hydropower Project has added clean electricity to the national grid. During the critical energy crisis era, the Sahiwal Coal Power Plant was a significant factor to ease the dire energy crisis in Pakistan. Likewise, the Orange Line Metro Train in Lahore has given birth to Pakistan's first modern



urban rail transit system and has showcased the importance of strategic cooperation to enhance the lives of common people.

Gwadar Port is another achievement of CPEC. Gwadar was once a small coastal town but is now becoming a key port for Pakistan to link with regional and international markets. Improvements to the port with the completion of projects like the Gwadar East Bay Expressway have improved access to the port and strengthened its role in South Asia, Central Asia, Middle East and western China trade routes. Though development of Gwadar's economic potential is still a long way ahead, the long-term importance of this port is that it will help to make Pakistan a regional hub of commerce and connectivity.

But the real achievement of CPEC is not in terms of kilometres of highways built or megawatts of electricity produced. People are the ones who make prosperity; infrastructure creates opportunities. The roads, ports, and power plants are not transformative unless they foster industrial development, investment, jobs and enhance the standard of living. More focus needs to be given to the industrial cooperation, technology transfer, export-oriented manufacturing, agricultural modernization and institutional capacity building in the second phase of the CPEC. The future of the corridor depends on the success of Pakistan's efforts to build sustainable economic development.

The experience of development in China is instructive in this respect. Although its western appearance often surprises and impresses the world, the key to the Chinese miracle of economic development has been its investment in education, scientific research, technological innovation and human resources. The universities, the research institutions and industries collaborated to build an innovation ecosystem that can deliver world class technologies. Academic and scientific engagement with China coupled with transfer of some of China's development experience to Pakistan can be very fruitful.

Cooperation in the field of education is already one of the most solid foundations of bilateral relations. Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 more than 28,000 Pakistani students were pursuing higher education in China and Pakistan was one of the largest source countries of the world's students in China. These students have experience in engineering,

medicine, AI, agriculture, business and public policy. On their return to home countries they play their part in the development of economic and institutional systems in Pakistan and become a link between two societies.

Capacity building efforts could be enhanced by increasing joint degree programmes, faculty exchanges, joint research initiatives and university partnerships, which could promote knowledge sharing and develop a new generation of scholars with the ability to tackle shared problems of development. The future of Pakistan-China cooperation should be innovation. AI, robotics, biotechnology, renewable energy, advanced manufacturing and digital finance are transforming the global economy. Over time, China has become one of the world's top innovators in these areas, investing in research and development. Pakistan has a young population which is technology driven, and it can greatly benefit from more cooperation with Chinese universities and technology firms. Thousands of Pakistani students have already been trained in cloud Computing, cyber security, Artificial Intelligence and digital communications through ICT Academies and Seeds for the Future programme by Huawei. All these



initiatives demonstrate the potentiality of technological partnerships for equipping Pakistan's young people with the skills needed to cope with the challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and to boost the country's digital economy. Another positive opportunity for Pakistan and China to strengthen cooperation in response to climate change is in the field of climate change finance. Despite its negligible contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions, Pakistan continues to be one of the most vulnerable countries to climate-induced disasters. The floods that occurred in 2022 showed the urgent need to make climate resilience and sustainable development a priority. China, being the largest



manufacturer of solar panels, electric vehicles, and renewable energy technologies, has a lot of expertise to offer Pakistan to move towards a greener economy. Joint investments in solar energy, wind power, climate-smart agriculture, water conservation, and environmental research would not only enhance Pakistan's energy security but also contribute to global efforts to combat climate change. There is also a need for collaboration across the healthcare system to be improved. COVID-19 pandemic exposed the humanitarian aspect of Pakistan-China relations, with China extending assistance in the form of vaccines, medical machinery, and expertise in Pakistan during one of its toughest public health crises. Cooperation should be extended through pharmaceutical production, biotechnology research, telemedicine, disease monitoring and medical training. Cooperative research centres in the fields of infectious diseases, maternal health, nutrition, and digital healthcare have the potential to greatly enhance the health of the population in both countries. People-to-people connections are vital to the success of any strategic partnership. Thus, cultural diplomacy has been playing an ever growing role in the relationship between Pakistan and China. The Confucius Institutes at the National University of Modern Languages (NUPAL), the University of the Punjab and the University of Karachi have been able to reach thousands of Pakistani students and help them learn Mandarin and appreciate Chinese culture. Concurrently, Pakistan's long-term cultural assets such as ancient Buddhist sites in Gandhara, majestic landscapes of Hunza and Skardu, and cultural traditions, also have many attractions to lure Chinese tourists and build cultural awareness. Tourism, cooperation between the media, artistic exchanges and youth programmes can foster friendship beyond formal diplomatic relations. Regional cooperation, economic integration and peace building are the shared goals between Pakistan and China. Their cooperation signals the potential for cooperation, not conflict, in an era dominated by geopolitical rivalries and competition over infrastructure, trade, and development. Both countries have the potential to play a important role in achieving peace and prosperity in Asia through promoting regional connectivity and cross-border trade, while strengthening mutual respect and shared development. In the process of Pakistan and China marking their seventy five years of diplomatic ties, they have to brace themselves



for future challenges. Pakistan must also enhance governance, institutional capacity, human resource development and foster an atmosphere conducive to maximizing the benefits of bilateral cooperation. On the other hand, the Chinese can keep on helping Pakistan with technology transfer, industry cooperation, education exchange and sustainable investment. How well both nations convert political goodwill into opportunities that will benefit the average person is going to be a key factor in the durability of the relationship. The first seventy-five years of Pakistan - China relations was a period of strategic trust and friendship. The next 75 years are to be celebrated for scientific breakthroughs, technological advancements, educational achievements, sustainable development and shared prosperity. Knowledge, innovation and human capital connect societies, while roads and ports connect territories. Going forward, Pakistan and China have a special opportunity to take action and achieve tangible results in education, technology, climate action, healthcare, and economic transformation; the two countries are expected to use their shared expertise to take their partnership to the next level, as President Xi Jinping's vision of a “community with a shared future for mankind” guides international cooperation. The seventy-fifth anniversary is thus not only a celebration of history but an invitation to envision the future. In the future, if these two countries keep on mutually building trust after seven decades and promote innovation, inclusion, and sustainability in their relationship, Pakistan-China relations will not only be among the strongest bilateral ties but a model of international cooperation in the twenty first century. What may yet derive from this friendship – not just the vision of governments, but the desire and talent of the Pakistani and Chinese people – is yet to be seen.