



中国传媒大学  
COMMUNICATION UNIVERSITY OF CHINA



Institute for a Community  
with Shared Future  
人类命运共同体研究院



## Pakistan-China Relations in a Changing Geopolitical Environment



By Syeda Manal Tirmizi, Political Science & International Relations Scholar and PRCCSF Fellow (Peshawar), Pakistan Research Center for a Community with Shared Future (PRCCSF), Islamabad

*Published on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2023*

## **Introduction**

The dynamics of Pakistan-China relations elicit diverse perspectives depending on the context. While the Western viewpoint often analyzes the relationship through the lens of expediency and geopolitical considerations, the narrative in Pakistan and China takes on a more optimistic tone, encapsulated in



phrases like the friendship being "higher than the mountains" and "sweeter than honey"[1]. These expressions aim to convey the genuine substance of the relationship, transcending mere rhetoric. It's crucial to note that sustainable relationships cannot thrive between unequal partners solely driven by rhetoric. Despite this, China watchers often find the Pakistan-China relationship enigmatic, prompting a deeper exploration into historical references to provide context.

Establishing diplomatic ties in 1951, Pakistan and China initially had limited interaction during their formative years. Both nations grappled with conflicts in Kashmir and Korea while shouldering the responsibilities of nation-building. Viewing its Eastern neighbor as a perpetual security threat, Pakistan aligned with the US-led Western alliance against communism. This move raised suspicion in Beijing, but both countries navigated carefully to avoid actions deemed detrimental to their mutual interests. Notably, China



acknowledged Pakistan as the first Muslim country to recognize 'New China.' Chairman Mao Tse Tung, recognizing the strategic importance, instructed the development of relations with Pakistan as early as 1951 and, in 1956, emphasized its significance as "China's southwestern gate"[2]. This underscores the Chinese insight into the mutual strength derived from their distinctive worldviews.

### **Laying the Foundation in the 1960s**

In the early 1960s, Pakistan, despite being allied with the United States, grew disheartened with the U.S.'s favoritism towards India and its limited support on the Kashmir issue. This period coincided with the height of the Cold War, marked by the Sino-U.S. rivalry and the Sino-Soviet split, significantly altering the regional power dynamics. The escape of the Dalai Lama to India in 1959 heightened tensions between China and India. Faced with isolation, China's failed border negotiations with India in 1962 culminated in a conflict, while Pakistan and China successfully sealed a border treaty in 1963, with China conceding 750 square miles of territory. This event marked a turning point, as China, bitter over its experiences with India, gained a better understanding of Pakistan's security concerns.

The pivotal border treaty of 1963 significantly bolstered mutual trust between Pakistan and China. In 1964, Pakistan took a historic step by becoming the first non-communist country to initiate flights to China. The following year, Pakistan denounced the U.S.'s "Two China policy," solidifying China's perception of Pakistan as a reliable partner in

South Asia. The 1965 Indo-Pakistan war further strengthened their ties, with China providing full support as the U.S. lost favor in Pakistan due to punitive actions. The construction of the Friendship or Karakoram Highway in 1966, linking China's Xinjiang region with Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan, served as a crucial building block for future relations, playing a key role in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This decade of trust-building laid the groundwork for a significant partnership with global and regional implications.

Pakistan's shift away from the West after the 1965 war led to strained U.S.-Pakistan relations. In the late 1960s, Pakistan sought closer ties with the USSR, receiving its first steel mill and military equipment. Despite being a member of SEATO and the Central Treaty Organization, Pakistan asserted an independent foreign policy stance by building relations with both China and the USSR. Notably, improvement in U.S.-Pakistan relations was deferred until 1970-71.

### **Pakistan: The Crucial Link in Kissinger's Diplomacy Towards China**

Amidst evolving ties, China's interest in Pakistan's welfare led to substantial economic aid, surpassing US\$300 million despite China's internal challenges. This financial support, quantifiable in billions





today, facilitated Pakistan's development plans. China also maintained military assistance and contributed to building heavy industry capacity in Taxila during the late 1960s.

The pivotal year 1971 witnessed a multifaceted relationship. Pakistan, facing an existential crisis in East Pakistan, received diplomatic and military support from China. However, China, constrained by internal and geopolitical challenges, couldn't prevent Pakistan's breakup. In a diplomatic move, Pakistan played a crucial role in facilitating Henry Kissinger's secret visit to China in July 1971, fostering a reconciliation pivotal to President Nixon's historic visit in 1972. This diplomatic bridge, acknowledged by Chinese leader Zhou, showcased the significance of Pakistan in the geopolitics of the time.

Additionally, Pakistan supported China's UN membership in 1971, opposing the US proposal for dual representation. In the UNSC debate on the 1971 crisis, China's first veto in 1972 favored Pakistan. Subsequently, the relationship between Pakistan and China evolved, marked by high-level visits, institutionalized cooperation mechanisms, and landmark projects like the co-production of JF-17 fighter aircraft and civilian nuclear cooperation. The language used in official communications illustrates the historical evolution, culminating in a robust strategic partnership by 2018.

### **China-Pakistan: A Enduring Alliance**

Chinese diplomatic language is carefully chosen, using terms like "strategic" or "cooperative" for various countries. However, for Pakistan, a distinct term is employed:





"all-weather," highlighting the unique nature of this bilateral relationship. The Chinese leadership goes further, referring to Pakistan as an "Iron brother," underscoring their confidence in the enduring ties.

Leaders from both nations have invested deeply in this relationship, rooted at the grassroots level and guided by vision and idealism. Intellectuals, civil society, and the media have played pivotal roles in solidifying this friendship.

Beyond shared interests, both countries express a genuine desire to broaden their partnership. Pakistan deems its relationship with China as the cornerstone of its foreign policy, reciprocated by China, considering it a top priority. Mutual trust is evident in their support on crucial national issues, with Pakistan backing China on various global matters.

This alliance extends beyond geopolitics, embracing UN principles of non-interference, peaceful coexistence, and multilateralism. Both nations oppose hegemony and unilateralism, advocating for a fair and equitable international order.

In recent years, economic cooperation, especially through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), has taken center stage. The CPEC has addressed Pakistan's energy



shortfall and initiated key infrastructure projects, making China the largest investor and



trading partner. Despite challenges, the CPEC's scope has expanded, encompassing diverse sectors like agriculture, industry, and technology.

This economic partnership, devoid of hidden agendas, aligns with Pakistan's geo-economic foreign policy shift. Leveraging its strategic position, Pakistan aims to become a regional trade and energy hub, benefiting China and the broader region.

The CPEC, a groundbreaking initiative, not only signifies China's friendship but also reflects confidence in Pakistan's economic potential. Despite concerns, Pakistan clarifies that Chinese loans are a small fraction of its overall debt, with concessional terms and long-term maturity. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) associated with the CPEC also aligns with the shared goal of eradicating radicalism and extremism, resonating with the international community.

### **Pakistan's Stance Amidst US-China Rivalry**

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has unfortunately become entangled in the ongoing rivalry between the United States and China. A White House report in May 2020 asserted that the BRI could afford China "undue political influence and military access" [3]. The US strategy of containing China, a declared foreign policy objective, has cast a shadow on the BRI and, consequently, on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Anti-China sentiments were prevalent in discussions at recent international summits, with President Joe Biden framing the competition as a "contest between democracies and autocrats" at the G-7 Summit.



Independent analysts suggest that attempts to counter China's growing influence, particularly in South Asia, may backfire. Most countries, with China as a larger trading partner than the US, are reluctant to choose sides. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the AUKUS alliance are seen as potential sources of prolonged destabilization in the Indo-Pacific, fostering a new type of Cold War.

Noteworthy scholars argue that China, while seeking to reclaim lost glory, aims for fair representation in global political and economic structures rather than world dominance. Pakistan shares this perspective, advocating for a global order based on equal representation and win-win outcomes.

In the face of immense global challenges, wise choices are imperative. Managed competition between the US and China is deemed less harmful than confrontations carrying serious risks. Cooperation between the two nations is vital for addressing transnational issues, but current trends indicate a rivalry eroding the benefits of globalization.

Pakistan, navigating this crossfire, pursues constructive ties with both powers. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is considered a







crucial opportunity for Pakistan's economic development and is non-negotiable, aligning with American goals of regional connectivity and economic cooperation. Pakistan's economic strength is seen as pivotal for regional peace, stability, and counterterrorism efforts, making any opposition to the CPEC unpopular in the country.

### **Power Dynamics Unfolding in South Asia**

South Asia is witnessing a concerning power play within the larger Indo-Pacific context, driven by the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China. Home to a quarter of the world's population, South Asia holds unique geographical and resource significance for global trade and economic integration. Despite the region's creativity and diligence, it remains among the world's poorest and least economically integrated areas.

The unresolved disputes in South Asia, particularly the longstanding tensions between Pakistan and India over Kashmir, contribute to a volatile regional security environment. Pakistan seeks normal relations with India, urging bold initiatives to address disputes. However, an unfortunate narrative of power struggles and an aimless arms race has created a serious strategic imbalance.

The recent India-China border standoff further escalates the fragile security situation, posing a serious threat to regional peace. India's perception of China and Pakistan working together to encircle it is debunked, as both countries advocate for normal neighborly relations. Additionally, the Taliban's rise in Afghanistan introduces more



uncertainty, prompting a collective call from Pakistan and China for prudent handling of the situation.

To avert instability, international efforts are crucial to stabilize Afghanistan. China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and Central Asian countries can play a role in building a regional consensus for peace and reconciliation. The fear of Afghanistan becoming a sanctuary for global terrorist organizations underscores the importance of international engagement, humanitarian assistance, and respect for human rights. Pakistan and China emphasize the need for international support in Afghanistan's reconstruction, aligning with stability efforts such as the Central Asia-South Asia power project (CASA-1000) and the Trans-Afghanistan Pipeline.

### **Conclusion: Navigating Challenges for Regional Stability**

Amidst the volatility and unsettling developments in its neighborhood, Pakistan remains vigilant, understanding the imperative of maintaining its guard. Deep-seated mistrust and suspicion continue to plague relations between India and Pakistan, casting shadows on the prospects for lasting peace in South Asia. The need for a robust dispute resolution mechanism, whether through bilateral or multilateral means, is crucial for regional peace and security. The ongoing war of attrition carries the risk of crossing conventional thresholds, with the potential for inadvertent escalation.

In stark contrast, the Pakistan-China relationship shines as a beacon of cooperation in foreign policy. Marked by common views and shared interests, it serves as a model for



inter-state relations, emphasizing constructive roles for regional peace and stability. This partnership stands apart from power games, offering a potential blueprint for South Asian cooperation.

As strategic partners, both Pakistan and China confront the challenges of growing instability in their neighborhood. Aligned against hegemony, they advocate for peaceful resolutions to disputes. The significance of Pakistan-China relations in this context has heightened, with both nations choosing to cultivate a cooperative partnership aligned with their fundamental interests. Weathering storms, this unique friendship is poised to continue making constructive contributions to regional peace and stability.