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Institute for a Community
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Pakistan–China at 75 (1951–2026):

Celebrating Cultural and People-to-People Exchanges



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Abstract:

The 75-year development of China-Pakistan ties is observed in this article, with a particular emphasis on the transition from merely strategic cooperation to the increasing significance of people-to-people and cultural contacts. It contends that maintaining cooperation in the face of shifting regional dynamics requires building social mutual trust through partnerships in education, the media, and tourism.



Introduction:

Pakistan and China's diplomatic partnership has transitioned from a basic regional neighbour policy to an **"All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership"**, as officially designated by both states. Widely characterized by their leadership as **"Iron Brothers"**, the relationship rests on substantial military, economic, and geopolitical linkages. Pakistan officially recognized the People's Republic of China (PRC) on **January 4, 1950**. Formal diplomatic channels opened on **May 21, 1951**.

The first official visit by a Pakistani political leader to the People's Republic of China was undertaken by Prime Minister Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy in October 1956. This landmark visit, made at the invitation of the Chinese government, laid the foundation for diplomatic and bilateral relations between the two countries.



In October 1956, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy was the first Prime minister of Pakistan to visit China.

At the invitation of the Chinese government, Prime Minister Suhrawardy traveled to Beijing to forge stronger diplomatic ties. This landmark visit was a foundational step in Sino-Pakistani relations. It was quickly followed by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai's reciprocal visit to Pakistan in December of the same year.



Diplomatic relations between states are often measured through treaties, trade figures, and defense pacts. However, durable partnerships require societal acceptance and mutual understanding. Pakistan-China relations offer a case study where cultural and people-to-people exchanges transformed elite-level diplomacy into grassroots affinity. This paper traces that trajectory across four phases: **foundation, consolidation, expansion, and institutionalization.**

Foundation and Diplomatic Opening, 1951–1970

Pakistan was the first Muslim-majority state to recognize the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1951.

Cultural engagement followed diplomatic recognition.



Landmark Political Visits:

Prime Minister Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy's visit to Beijing in October 1956 marked the first official visit by a Pakistani leader. At the invitation of the Chinese government, the visit established the normative framework for future exchanges. The 1963 Sino-Pakistan Boundary Agreement and Premier Zhou Enlai's 1964 visit to Pakistan further institutionalized high-level contact.



Marshal Chen Yi and
Foreign Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto

Sino-Pakistan Agreement – 1963

- The agreement was signed on 2 March 1963
- It demarcated the boundary between Pakistan and China
- Signed during the era of President Ayub Khan
- Officially called the Sino-Pakistan Agreement
- Related to border settlement in the disputed Kashmir region
- Signed by Marshal Chen Yi (China) and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (Pakistan)

Early Cultural Initiatives:

The 1950s and 1960s marked a vibrant era of cultural diplomacy between China and Pakistan, characterized by a robust exchange of art troupes, films, and literary translations. Chinese acrobatic and folk ensembles captivated audiences in Karachi, Lahore, and Dacca (now Dhaka), showcasing breathtaking bowl-balancing acts, jujitsu, and traditional dances that celebrated working-class cultures. These historic performances, hosted at major hubs like the Arts Council of Pakistan in Karachi and the Alhamra Art Centre in Lahore, were mirrored by cinema diplomacy, where Chinese documentaries and cultural films screened to packed



auditoriums. Simultaneously, literary masterpieces and poetry were translated into Urdu and Mandarin to foster deep academic empathy. This early momentum of soft-power diplomacy directly paved the way for the landmark 1965 Cultural Cooperation Agreement, cementing the foundations of their enduring “**Iron Brotherhood**”.

Consolidation through Education, 1970–2000

The post-1970 period shifted exchanges from state-sponsored performances to education and training.

Academic Mobility:

China began offering government scholarships to Pakistani students in the 1970s. By 2000, Pakistani students were pursuing degrees in medicine, engineering, and agriculture across Chinese provinces. Conversely, Chinese scholars came to Pakistan to study Urdu, Persian, and South Asian history. This created a cohort of professionals fluent in both societies.

Language and Media:

Direct PIA flights between Islamabad and Beijing, initiated in 1963 facilitated travel. Pakistani cinema of the 1960s-70s found audiences in Xinjiang due to cultural and linguistic affinities. Radio Beijing’s Urdu service, launched earlier, became a key source of information and cultural content for Pakistani listeners.



Expansion under CPEC, 2013–2025

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, launched in 2013, expanded exchanges from elite to mass scale.

Workforce and Community Integration:

CPEC brought thousands of Chinese engineers, technicians, and families to Pakistan. Cultural orientation programs, Urdu language training for Chinese workers, and community festivals in Gwadar, Islamabad, and Lahore aimed to reduce cultural friction and build local goodwill.



Youth and Digital Diplomacy:

Both governments designated multiple "**Pakistan-China Friendship Years**". Youth exchange delegations, joint film projects, and university moot courts became regular. Social media platforms enabled direct interaction between Pakistani and Chinese influencers, bypassing traditional state media.

Heritage Diplomacy:

Joint research on Silk Road archaeology, Gandhara art exhibitions in Chinese museums, and conservation projects highlighted shared civilizational history. This "heritage diplomacy" reframed the relationship beyond contemporary geopolitics.



Gandhara Art Exhibition

Institutionalization and 2026 Outlook

By 2026, people-to-people ties have become a stated policy priority for both Pakistan and China, marking a shift from elite-level diplomacy to citizen-centric engagement.

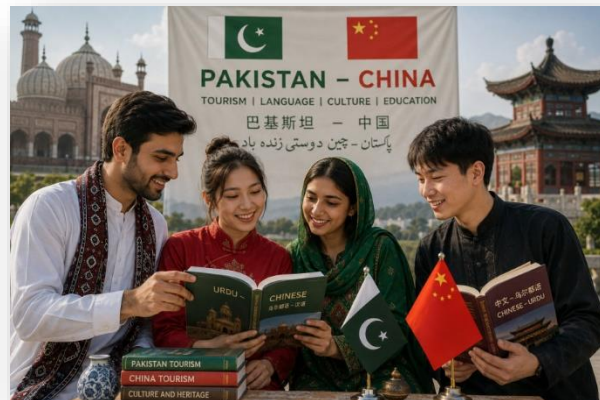
The scale of interaction is now substantial: over 28,000 Pakistani students are studying in China, making Pakistan one of the largest sources of international students there, while new joint degree programs between universities continue to expand academic collaboration.

This educational bridge is supported by a growing cultural infrastructure. Confucius Institutes operate in Karachi, Islamabad, and Lahore, while Urdu and English programs run in Kashgar and Urumqi, and Mandarin is now taught in more than 100 schools and colleges across Pakistan. Annual platforms such as the Pakistan-China Cultural Caravan, bilateral film festivals, and “**sister city**” partnerships between Lahore-Guangzhou and Karachi-Shanghai provide recurring venues for grassroots contact and artistic exchange.

Tourism has also emerged as a key connector, driven by eased visa policies and direct air links that have increased traveler flow in both directions. Chinese interest in Pakistan’s Buddhist heritage sites and northern areas is growing, while Pakistanis increasingly visit China for business, education, and leisure. Reflecting this momentum, official discourse in 2026 increasingly frames the relationship as

“**citizen-centric,**” with both foreign ministries

emphasizing that the long-term resilience of the **“All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership”** depends as much on societal bonds, shared experiences, and everyday interactions as it does on strategic and economic interests.





Conclusion:

From 1951 to 2026, Pakistan-China relations demonstrate that cultural and people-to-people exchanges are not peripheral to diplomacy, but constitutive of it. Early political visits and cultural troupes laid symbolic groundwork. Education and language training built a professional bridge. CPEC scaled engagement to societal levels. The institutionalization phase now seeks to make citizen interaction self-sustaining. The "**Iron Brothers**" narrative, coined by political leaders, has been internalized by students, workers, artists, and tourists. In this sense, the most durable outcome of 75 years of diplomacy is not an agreement, but a relationship between people. Future research should assess the long-term impact of these exchanges on public opinion, mutual perceptions, and bilateral resilience.

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