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## **The Future of Pakistan–China Relations in a Changing World Order**



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The relationship between Pakistan and China has over seventy years been referred to as superior to the mountains and the depth of the oceans. The phrase has become so overused that it even contains the danger of being a



catchphrase. However, taking a closer look at the course that was followed by the initial diplomatic overtures to the present-day unpredictable world order, one must admit that the bond has endured significant transformations and now has to endure an even more challenging period of collaboration. It is not whether the relationship will survive or not, but what form it has to take in a new world order.

During the initial decades, Pakistan and China were mostly strategic allies. Pakistan became one of the earliest to acknowledge the new Chinese state and emerged to be a solid ally in the problematic neighbourhood. China provided diplomatic assistance to the major regional security matters and the territorial issues of Pakistan. Hostility and cooperation in terms of defending as well as sharing intelligence and joint standpoints in the global forums threw down a root of trust. The alliance over the years has been characterized due to the security issues, symbolism and mutual concerns of the region's competitors.

In the course of time, symbolism was replaced by harsh economic reality. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) became the landmark of this change. Ports, power plants, transportation systems and other infrastructure were meant to transform strategic goodwill



to good shared wealth. As far as Pakistan is concerned, CPEC offered the country to be relieved of the old problems of energy shortage and an opportunity to rebrand itself in regional trade. To China, Pakistan presented an access into the Arabian Sea, the new trade path and a stable partner in the center of South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East.

However, roads, ports, and power projects cannot be the sole future of the relations between Pakistan and China. There is a shift of the world order surrounding the two countries. There is also increasing strategic competition between great powers, new alliances are being established and economic nationalism is also increasing. Pakistan cannot get away with the purely conventional friendship rhetoric in this environment. It has to spell out what it wants for a new age of cooperation with China and what it is willing to give up in its turn.

One issue is how to strike between economical reliance and the actual partnership. The frequent financial crises and dependence on foreign debt experienced in the past in Pakistan beg the question of sustainability of massive projects in the country. The opponents refer to the debt load and transparency deficiency, whereas the proponents point at the long-term advantages. The truth is in the middle between these perceptions. Pakistan must have Chinese investment but it must also have reforms to see such investment transformed into permanent growth as opposed to temporary alleviation. The future of the relationship will depend on whether Pakistan will be able to become better in governance, help investments without compromising on sovereignty, which will further expose it to a volatile stable environment to draw Chinese and other international partners.

Regional strategy is another dimension that is important. The rise of India, the unstable Afghanistan, and the changing aspects of the Gulf all influence the Asian perception of the role of Pakistan and China. In the situation of strategic pressures, Pakistan will still need Chinese diplomatic and security assistance. In the meantime, China is an aspiring force in the world with diverse interests that at times must be balanced carefully. It pursues some stable relations with the various regional actors including



those that might not have the same views as Pakistan. So, Pakistan should not expect that previous alignment patterns are always tenacious. Islamabad should exercise adult diplomacy with Beijing in understanding that friendship is now in a wider multidimensional regional chess board.

Along with geopolitics, both technology and economics are fast developing. China is leading in digital technology, AI, sophisticated manufacturing, and green energy. Pakistan boasts of a young population, an emerging digital economy, and undiscovered human capital. At least a true new wave of collaboration will be achieved by leaving a rather limited scope on the construction and heavy-infrastructure investments behind, and investing more in knowledge, research, and innovation. In the next few decades, joint universities, research centers, technology parks, agricultural modernization, digital finance



and startup ecosystems may change the relationship and ensure that Pakistan has diversified its economy and interdependence between the two countries.

The future cooperation will also be shaped by security. The Chinese nationals and projects have been attacked in Pakistan and this is tragic and politically harmful. They destroy confidence and impede investments. Pakistan needs to view the security of the foreign partners as an element of its national security rather than as a marginal concern that is undertaken by temporary interventions. This necessitates more resolute local control over project regions, an improvement in complete intelligence integration, and more effective communications with feeling excluded or threatened communities. China on the other hand should understand the local sentiments and environmental and social issues and development should not leave the locals behind.

The contact between people is still a weak point in the relationship. Officials, soldiers, and business elites interact quite often whereas ordinary citizens of both states are introduced to each other mostly through limited media. The partnership needs to be made more human in order to be able to enter a new era. Familiarity contrary to the official discourse can be generated by the leadership of expanded scholarship programmes, cultural exchange, tourism, collaboration between media and joint media production, and also by learning the language. A joint effort with the opinion of the people on both ends will be much stronger in spite of the inevitable political and economic strains.

Finally, pragmatic decisions but not dictum's will determine how Pakistan and China relate. Pakistan will need to choose whether to remain as a security partner and recipient of aid or



be an economic and innovation partner, with more agency. That needs home reforms, political soundness and a future vision that goes through government shifts. China would need to consider its distance in assisting Pakistan to evolve its frail economy into a strong and productive nation as it takes care of its international allocation.

I see this relationship as existing at an exclusive place of opportunity. The history of seventy-five years of cooperation has created a trust base, which many other states would be proud of. But with the world and regional changes, previous engagement



practices are no longer adequate. In case Pakistan carries out meaningful reforms and China considers Pakistan rather than a strategic resource, i.e. as the partner in joint prosperity, future collaboration will be less one-sided, innovative, and helpful to the common people living on both ends.

There will still be tension, misunderstanding and external pressure in the future. However, when both parties have the willingness to change and adjust and, in addition, to investing not only funds but creativity in the collaboration, then the new era of cooperation can become more than the slogan. It may characterize an association that fosters stability, development and dignity to a world order that is still seeking new moorings.