

GEOPOLITICAL RECALIBRATION: PAKISTAN–CHINA RELATIONS IN A SHIFTING POST-COVID-19 ORDER

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Abstract

The global recalibration of strategic alliances catalysed by the COVID-19 pandemic brought Pakistan-China iron-clad relations back into the cynosure. With a qualitative methodological approach and a foundation in neoliberal institutionalist and realist theoretical frameworks, this paper analyses official statements, primary documents, and secondary literature to inquire the multifaceted development of Pakistan-China relations in the post-COVID-19 era (2020–2025). Determining how the pandemic served as a strategic catalyst of bilateral ties across the political, economic, and security spheres rather than as a disruptor in the core objective. By revealing how pandemic-era crises were used to strengthen regional alliances in the context of the BRI and particularly the CPEC. At the same time, the shifting geopolitical scenarios, characterised by the Sino-U.S. strategic competition and India's sustenance for the West, drove Islamabad and Beijing to endorse their support for one another's core interests in organisations i.e., the SCO, the OIC, and the UN. To inquire how crisis-driven interdependence can strengthen strategic alliances and standardise regional power dynamics, this study adds to boarder discourse in the field of international relations on Pakistan-China Relations. It comes to the conclusion that relations between Pakistan and China improved in the post-COVID-19 era, with a convergence of economic pragmatism, diplomatic agendas, and shared geopolitical concerns which recalibrating their alignment to a greater extent.

Keywords: Pakistan–China relations, COVID-19 diplomacy, BRI, CPEC, strategic partnership, post-pandemic geopolitics

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1. Introduction

Global political and economic systems were severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced governments to reconsider their resilience plans and strategic alignments. Pakistan and China strengthened their long-standing '*all-weather*' strategic partnership, which is based on mutual trust and support, in this shifting geopolitical scenarios. Pakistan's decision to support China's containment efforts by refusing to evacuate its citizens from Wuhan in early 2020 was a noteworthy example of this solidarity ¹. As an example of *how* health crises can serve as catalysts for bilateral cooperation, China responded by providing vital medical assistance and giving Pakistan top priority in its vaccine diplomacy campaign ². In addition to demonstrating the strength of the Pakistan-China relationship, these exchanges during a time of global unpredictability marked a sea change in the evolution of China's regional soft power strategy ³. Beyond the realm of public health, the economic effects of the pandemic strengthened Pakistan-China relations via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) especially, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) ⁴. China became Pakistan's primary source of financial stability as international supply chains collapsed and economic downturns increased; it provided debt relief and loan rollovers that prevented a balance-of-payments crisis.

Due to its rapid post-pandemic rehabilitation, China was able to continue investing in regional infrastructure, strengthening its position as a supplier of public goods to

developing countries. This dynamic not only improved China's geopolitical standing but also made Pakistan more strategically significant in a world order that is shifting and increasingly centred on Asia. Consequently, the pandemic reinforced rather than ruptured a relationship grounded in strategic, economic, and diplomatic interdependence. China and Pakistan have strengthened their strategic cooperation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic's escalation of geopolitical tensions ⁵. Pakistan and China have strengthened their diplomatic ties in response to the intensifying Sino-U.S. competition and India's growing ties with Western nations. Both countries reaffirmed each other's fundamental interests and sovereignty in international fora after India revoked Jammu and Kashmir's special status in 2019 and took an active part in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) ¹. China supports Pakistan's calls for a peaceful UN resolution to the Kashmir dispute, while Pakistan supports China's positions on Taiwan, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and the South China Sea ³. The pandemic's effect on regional diplomacy was further highlighted by China's historic diplomatic gesture during the 2022 OIC Summit in Islamabad.¹

Nevertheless, the Pakistan-China relations has been thoroughly recalibrated in the post-COVID-19 era in all spheres i.e., economic, diplomatic, and security. The post-COVID environment, with its more intense great-power rivalries and new regional blocs, forced Beijing and Islamabad to more clearly

¹ The Chinese FM Wang Yi attended the 48th session of the OIC Council of Foreign Ministers, marking the first time a Chinese official attended a summit-level meeting of the Islamic bloc.

define and operationalise their '*ironclad brotherhood*', though this was not without historical precedent. This study provides a qualitative exploration of *how* crises such as the pandemic act as turning points in global alignments by methodically analysing this growing relationship using neoliberal institutionalist and realist frameworks. The strengthened bilateral ties between Pakistan and China between 2020 and 2025 ultimately show changing patterns of power and influence in a rapidly changing Asian geopolitical order, in addition to reflecting long-standing strategic trust.

2. Theoretical Framework

The evolution of Pakistan-China relations since 2020 can be better understood using *neoliberal institutionalism* and *realist theory*, which emphasise interdependence and global collaboration, thereby enhancing our understanding of strategic calculus and economic interdependence.

2.1. Neo-liberal Institutional Perspective

Neoliberal institutionalism posits institutions, interdependence, and common norms can foster long-term cooperation even in the face of global anarchy ⁶. This framework provides a clear explanation of the evolving Pakistan-China relationship, particularly in view of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a crucial component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). CPEC has institutionalised bilateral ties through formalised structures such as the Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC), which facilitates consistent coordination, strategic planning, and dispute resolution. This institutional embedding

has produced a dense network of interdependence, bringing infrastructure development in Pakistan and economic strategy closer to China's connectivity objectives ⁷. Neoliberal expectations of absolute gains are in line with the reciprocal benefits of projects, such as China's access to the *Arabian Sea* through Gwadar and Pakistan's energy and transportation infrastructure. Furthermore, by emphasising '*win-win cooperation*' rather than dominance, diplomatic discourse promotes stable engagement even in the face of more significant geopolitical shifts ⁷. Nevertheless, the post-pandemic '*All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership*' is an example of *how* common values like consultation, non-interference, and crisis support have become unwritten rules, highlighting the significance of norms and regimes in shaping interstate behaviour ⁸. Following COVID-19 Relations between China and Pakistan show *how* easy it is to coordinate in times of international crisis and *how* interdependent they are. . . Strong institutional ties and norms, according to neoliberal claims, boost trust, cut transaction costs, and lessen the likelihood of conflict. . . even in asymmetric alliances.

2.2. Realists Perspectives

Realist perspectives provide vital insight into the strategic depth of Pakistan-China relations in an area marked by enduring rivalries and shifting power dynamics. Realists contend that states act primarily to maximise power and security in anarchic international systems ⁹. According to this theory, Pakistan's alliance with China, which dates back to the 1960s, has always

been driven by the need to strike a balance with India, a more powerful regional rival. In the 2020s, this reasoning is still relevant, particularly in light of India's 2019 revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status and the 2020 Sino-Indian border conflicts. *Neoclassical realism* emphasises *how* domestic consensus and elite perceptions shape foreign policy; in Pakistan's case, this is fuelled by the country's ongoing reliance on China due to the perception of India as an existential threat ¹⁰. *Defensive realism* (seeking security through alliances) and *offensive realism* (projecting power and limiting rivals) are both reflected in this strategic alignment, which includes increased defence collaboration, intelligence sharing, and joint military exercises ¹¹. In addition to strengthening China's regional deterrence capabilities, Pakistan's strategic posture is strengthened by China's material assistance, which ranges from arms sales to diplomatic shielding in multilateral forums. Pakistan's military hardware, financial support, and international political backing come from China, enabling *win-win* cooperation. Realists view China's naval cooperation with Pakistan as strategic for Indian Ocean influence and energy security ¹². Combined with the neoliberal perspective, this dual-theory approach shows *how*, strengthened by the COVID-19 shocks and growing great-power competition, Pakistan-China ties have grown between 2020 and 2025 through both institutional cooperation and realist cooperation.

To conclude, while realist theory explains aspects driven by *security* and *power* dynamics, *neoliberal institutionalism*

examines economic interdependence and institutional cooperation in Pakistan-China relations. In addition to fostering institutional cooperation and economic interdependence, BRI partnerships give states the means to further their strategic objectives.

3. Research Methodology

Through document analysis, case studies, and peer-reviewed literature reviews, this study employs a *qualitative* research design to examine Pakistan-China relations from 2020 to May 2025 in trilateral ways:

First, the study analysed recurring themes, official discourse, and strategic commitments in Pakistan's high-level visits, including responses to challenges like COVID-19, reaffirmations of the *All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership*, and CPEC progress.² *Second*, case study methodology examined collaboration in diplomacy, military, and economy, analysing joint exercises, economic projects, and trilateral dialogues between China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.³ *Third*, in order to investigate post-pandemic developments and their influence on theoretical discussions of realism and neoliberal institutionalism, the study reviewed the literature and

² The February 2022 *joint communiqué* emphasised solidarity during COVID-19 and pledged to expedite the second phase of CPEC, focusing on industrial cooperation, agriculture, and socioeconomic development.

³ The 2020 and 2023 editions of Sea Guardian exercises between Pakistan's Navy and China's PLA Navy significantly increased in scale and complexity, focusing on counterterrorism, maritime security, and anti-submarine operations.

compared empirical findings with scholarly interpretations.⁴ This study builds a solid, multi-layered analysis of Pakistan-China relations in the post-COVID era by combining official documents, case studies, and scholarly literature. Recurring themes, including '*economic interdependence*', '*strategic trust*', and '*mutual support*', were qualitatively coded for official statements and speeches. These themes were then consistently integrated throughout the empirical data and theoretical discussion. Scholarly works offered theoretical anchoring and critical context, while case studies were incorporated into thematic sections i.e., *economic*, *political*, and *security* to ground abstract claims in particular initiatives.⁵ The analysis is mainly interpretive and textual, which makes it appropriate for analysing the depth and dynamism of a bilateral relationship shaped by changing regional and global conditions, even though quantitative indicators such as trade data were cited for background.

4. Pakistan-China Economic Relations

Pakistan-China economic cooperation grew between 2020 and 2025, with an emphasis on CPEC projects, overcoming

⁴ Recent scholarship highlights the importance of a realist perspective in understanding hard-security aspects of CPEC, including strategic port development and cooperative counterterrorism.

⁵ Information from documents, case studies, and academic sources is methodically incorporated into each section of the study. For example, policy statements are examined to uncover diplomatic framing; case studies such as the Gwadar Port or joint naval exercises demonstrate real-world collaboration; and theoretical insights on neoliberalism and realism offer analytical depth. All of these elements come together to form a coherent narrative that links discourse, practice, and interpretation.

COVID-19 obstacles, and taking advantage of new trade and financial support opportunities.

4.1. CPEC Projects: Progress and Pandemic Pressures

The CPEC, which was started in 2015 as part of China's BRI, sought to revolutionise Pakistan's energy and infrastructure industries. The '*Early harvest*' initiatives had already produced noticeable results by 2020; more than 5,000 MW of additional power generation and greatly improved road connectivity had improved trade routes and lessened Pakistan's ongoing electricity shortages¹. However, this momentum was halted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Progress on important projects was slowed by labour shortages and delayed shipments of essential materials brought on by lockdowns and travel restrictions. Pakistan's economic downturn made it even more difficult for it to meet its financial commitments, so it turned to China for assistance with energy project loans totalling about \$30 billion. The implementation halt marked a shift in CPEC's focus from expansion to financial consolidation, despite setbacks, with both Islamabad and Beijing reaffirming CPEC's political importance¹³. Work resumed gradually by mid-2020 with health protocols in place, and high-level coordination through the Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC) continued.⁶ A renewed emphasis on large-scale infrastructure investment was indicated in 2022 by the resuscitation of long-delayed projects, particularly the \$6.8

⁶ The study analyses CPEC development and pandemic disruptions using JCC *communiqués*, project studies, and academic literature, focusing on energy cooperation, financial constraints, and strategic realignments.

billion Main Line-1 (ML-1) railway project. This change from energy-focused development to more comprehensive socioeconomic improvement demonstrated both nations' strategic determination to keep CPEC as the BRI's flagship project in the face of international unpredictability.

4.2. The Post-Pandemic Developments in CPEC

In an effort to revitalise the CPEC following the global recovery in 2023, China and Pakistan initiated the eagerly anticipated second phase. Compared to the first phase, which was mainly concerned with infrastructure, this stage gave greater weight to industrial cooperation, agriculture, and socioeconomic development. The two governments unveiled plans for several thematic '*Development Corridors*' i.e., Digital, Green, Industrial, and Health, to align CPEC with sustainable growth and technological advancement. The Digital Corridor aimed to enhance Pakistan's IT infrastructure by expanding *fiber-optic* networks, whereas the Green Corridor planned renewable energy projects and environmental conservation efforts. These plans demonstrated China and Pakistan's shared 2022 commitment to the BRI's '*high-quality development*'⁴. Additionally, the importance of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) was reaffirmed, including Dhabeji in Sindh and Rashakai in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.⁷

⁷ The study assesses the slow adoption of SEZs and corridor initiatives in second-phase CPEC projects by analysing official JCC reports, press releases, and policy expert interviews.

The transition into Phase-II was uneven, despite bold vision statements. Projects were behind schedule, and Pakistan was still creating implementation frameworks a year after its official announcement. Persistent economic volatility in Pakistan, increased investor anxiety over security incidents, and a change in Chinese priorities from aggressive expansion to asset protection were all blamed for the slowdown¹. CPEC's transition from 2020 to 2025 saw progress in several projects, including financing agreements for Main Line-1 railway upgrade and Karachi Circular Railway's rebirth¹⁴. The New Gwadar International Airport was inaugurated in October 2024, and regional highways like Hakla-D.I. Khan and East Bay Expressway opened. This period transitioned from high-velocity growth to strategic consolidation and cautious optimism.⁸

4.3. Impact on Trade and Financial Support

China and Pakistan's trade and financial cooperation resurged post-2020, particularly through the China-Pakistan Free Trade Agreement (CPFTA) Phase-II. The agreement aimed to lower tariffs and boost Pakistani exports, but faced economic disruptions due to COVID-19. Despite initial declines, bilateral trade rebounded in FY2023-2024, reaching historic levels, increasing from \$11.7 billion to \$16.2 billion.⁹ Pakistan's textiles,

⁸ Case study results and document analysis of Chinese and Pakistani official statements provide insights into the political signalling and real-world implementation of delayed CPEC infrastructure, including the Gwadar Airport and regional motorways.

⁹ Government of Pakistan. (2024). *Economic Survey of Pakistan 2023–24*. Ministry of Finance.

rice, sugar, and pine nuts exports experienced significant growth due to Phase-II tariff concessions and international demand. However, the trade imbalance persists, with \$2.7 billion in exports to China and \$13.5 billion in imports from China in 2023-2024. Both governments aim to reduce this disparity by encouraging Chinese imports of Pakistani agricultural and value-added goods.¹⁰

China has played a crucial role in Pakistan's financial stability during economic downturns by providing financial instruments like debt rollovers, currency swaps, and commercial loans between 2020 and 2023. The State Bank of Pakistan's \$4 billion SAFE deposit serves as a *de facto* credit buffer^{14,11}. Commercial banks like ICBC and the Bank of China helped Pakistan avoid a near-default in 2023 by refinancing loans totalling about \$2.3 billion. There are questions regarding Pakistan's long-term viability given that its debt to China increased to an estimated \$68.9 billion by 2025, or roughly 22% of its total external debt (IMF, 2024).¹² However, during IMF negotiations, Beijing demonstrated its crucial role as Pakistan's '*lender of last resort*' by being willing to reschedule repayments, extend the bilateral currency swap agreement (allowing trade

¹⁰ Following extensive phytosanitary negotiations, China formally authorised the export of Pakistani citrus products, livestock meat, and cherries in 2021 and 2022. These accords were seen as diplomatic victories that provided access to China's enormous consumer market (DAWN, 2022). *Pakistan to export cherries, citrus fruits to China after trade deal.* <https://www.dawn.com>

¹¹ Rana, S. (2023). *Pakistan secures \$2.3b loan rollover from China.* The Express Tribune.

¹² IMF. (2024). *Pakistan: Country Report No. 24/105.* International Monetary Fund.

settlements in yuan), and provide liquidity. Chinese FDI expanded into Pakistan's financial and technology sectors, primarily focusing on energy projects. Venture capital inflows in 2021-2022 shifted to e-commerce and fintech start-ups, indicating a shift in economic engagement.

4.4. Opportunities and Reforms

China and Pakistan have been collaborating on economic cooperation, particularly in the pharmaceutical and healthcare industries post-COVID-19. In 2021, China's Cansino Biologics and Pakistan's National Institute of Health collaborated on the PakVac COVID-19 vaccine, indicating potential biotechnology collaborations ². China's investment in renewable energy projects under CPEC Phase-2 could help Pakistan reduce its reliance on fossil fuels. Both nations have pledged to create '*green corridors*', with Pakistan's energy sector benefiting greatly from China's experience with electric cars and grid modernisation. Furthermore, Pakistan's food security and export potential may be enhanced by China's contributions to modernising agriculture through the use of high-yield seeds, drip irrigation technology, and food processing. Pakistan's structural reform process has attracted Chinese investment, particularly in manufacturing facilities like textile and mobile phone assembly. The country's business climate improvement has led to increased interest in establishing Special Economic Zones (SEZs) to boost exports and create jobs. In 2022, a steel plant and a Chinese auto factory were established in Faisalabad's SEZ. The Pakistan-China economic cooperation between 2020 and 2025 has shown resilience and

progress, emphasising the interdependence between the two nations ¹⁵. Pakistan increasingly relies on China for economic stability, while China benefits from Pakistan's strategic location and economic potential.

5. Pakistan-China Political and Diplomatic Relations

Pakistan-China political and diplomatic relations have deepened post-COVID-19 era, with high-level exchanges continuing despite the pandemic, and deepening cooperation in multilateral settings.

5.1. Summit Diplomacy of High-Level Officials

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Pakistan and China have maintained active high-level visits and summit diplomacy, showcasing the resilience and strategic depth of their relationship. In March 2020, Pakistan's President Arif Alvi visited Beijing, symbolising political solidarity and mutual trust. As pandemic restrictions eased, leadership exchanges intensified, with Prime Minister Imran Khan attending the Beijing Winter Olympics and meeting with President Xi Jinping. The joint statement reinforced the '*All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership*', enhancing socioeconomic collaboration and Pakistan's support for the *One-China Policy*. After a governmental transition in April 2022, this momentum persisted, with Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari prioritising China for his first visit in May. PM Shehbaz Sharif's November 2022 trip to Beijing led to commitments to revitalise the CPEC and expand cooperation in digital infrastructure and disaster recovery. High-level military engagement continued, with General Qamar Javed Bajwa's 2022

visit to China to strengthen defence ties. Despite political instability in Pakistan and China's stringent COVID controls, interactions resumed in mid-2023, including Prime Minister Sharif's 2024 visits to Shenzhen and Xi'an to pursue investment and advance CPEC Phase II ¹⁶. Regular foreign ministers' strategic dialogues institutionalised diplomatic alignment, and *party-to-party* exchanges in 2023 demonstrated the depth and bipartisan nature of the Pakistan-China relations, anchoring it firmly beyond changes in government or ideology.¹³

5.2. Diplomatic Coordination in Multilateral Forums

From 2020 to 2025, Pakistan and China have strengthened their diplomatic coordination on a number of multilateral platforms, indicating a growing strategic partnership. At the UN, Pakistan has consistently backed China's positions, particularly on human rights issues in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Tibet; for example, in October 2024, Pakistan, speaking on behalf of 80 countries, stressed that issues pertaining to these regions are China's internal affairs and opposed the politicisation of human rights; China has reciprocated by supporting Pakistan's position on Kashmir, calling for its resolution in accordance with UN Security Council resolutions; and during Pakistan's evaluations by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) from 2018 to 2022, China was instrumental in helping Pakistan's efforts to remove

¹³ Pakistan's opposition leaders, including PTI and PPP, visited China in 2023 under CCP arrangements, strengthening its political agreement on foreign policy engagement with Beijing.

itself from the 'grey list', which resulted in Pakistan's removal in October 2022.¹⁴

The strategic depth of Pakistan-China relations is demonstrated by these multilateral initiatives, in which both nations use their diplomatic resources to enhance one another's reputation abroad.¹⁵ China and Pakistan actively cooperate in the SCO, promoting inclusive governance and humanitarian aid, particularly in Afghanistan, and have created economic opportunities since 2017.⁸ In keeping with China's goals for sustainable development and global governance, Pakistan has also supported China's Global Development Initiative (GDI) and Global Security Initiative (GSI). Pakistan's dedication to a multipolar global order and its strategic alliance with China are emphasised by this alignment (Ali & Ejaz, 2023).

5.3. Notable Diplomatic Initiatives (2020-2025)

Pakistan carried out a number of noteworthy diplomatic initiatives between 2020 and 2025 that demonstrated its worth as a regional and global interlocutor and strengthened its strategic alignment with China. The '*Extended Troika*' dialogue on Afghanistan, which brought together China, the U.S., Russia, and Pakistan in a unique multilateral format between 2020 and 2021,

¹⁴ Reuters. (2024, October 22). West blasts China on rights; China responds: What about Gaza? Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/west-blasts-china-rights-china-responds-what-about-gaza-2024-10-22/>

¹⁵ Pakistan's envoy, for instance, read joint statements on behalf of more than 50 nations during UNHRC sessions in 2020 and 2021, defending China's policies in Xinjiang and denouncing what they called the '*politicisation of human rights*'.

was one such initiative that Pakistan facilitated. This forum, which was centred on the peace process in Afghanistan, symbolically positioned Pakistan as a diplomatic conduit, allowing China and the US to engage during a time of increasing global polarisation³. Another significant step was China's first-ever attendance at the OIC Foreign Ministers' Conference in March 2022, where Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi spoke as a guest of honour in Islamabad. In addition to subtly supporting Pakistan's concerns over Kashmir, this action, which was orchestrated by Pakistan, allowed China to show support for Muslim-majority countries on issues like Palestine and Afghanistan¹⁷. Furthermore, the two nations commemorated the 70th anniversary of their diplomatic ties in 2021 with cultural exchanges, tree-planting ceremonies, and commemorative stamps, highlighting the rich history of an *'all-weather'* friendship¹⁸. These actions were more than just symbolic; they confirmed Pakistan's position as a strategic partner and a dependable ally while bolstering China's diplomatic presence in new settings.¹⁶

5.4. Enhancing Pakistan Foreign Policy

Pakistan's foreign policy between 2020 and 2025 sought to strike a balance between its expanding diplomatic relations with China and its changing international allegiances. China was reaffirmed as being crucial to Pakistan's strategic thinking after

¹⁶ In Chinese and Islamic media, Wang Yi's visit to the OIC was widely reported as a diplomatic achievement. Despite China's official atheism, Pakistan has assisted in reiterating China's outreach to the Muslim world through themes of anti-imperial solidarity and shared development.

the U.S. withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021 and US-Pakistan relations cooled ¹⁹. Beijing and Pakistan called for engagement and humanitarian aid, urging the world community not to isolate the Taliban-led country. Pakistan became increasingly dependent on China and its Gulf allies, frequently with Chinese diplomatic encouragement, as Western economic support declined. A prime example of the careful handling of great power competition is Pakistan's refusal to participate in the 2021 '*Summit for Democracy*' organized by the U.S. . . . During sporadic conflicts with India, China gave Pakistan vital diplomatic support, allowing it to more confidently apply pressure on New Delhi.¹⁷ The diplomatic collaboration between China and Pakistan during the pandemic showcased strong strategic alignment, shared responses to regional and global issues, and mutual support in multilateral institutions ²⁰. China supported Pakistan's narrative on Kashmir and economic crises, while Pakistan supported Chinese positions on Xinjiang and Taiwan. This escalation of bilateral diplomacy strengthened mutual trust and changed regional dynamics.

6. Pakistan-China Security and Defence Relations

The '*All-Weather*' relations Pakistan-China relations is seen as an important security partnership, supported by strategic coordination, defence technology transfers, and joint military exercises.

¹⁷ Pakistan resisted raising the Uyghur issue, despite pressure from member states and domestic constituencies for Muslim solidarity.

6.1. Joint Military Exercises

Pakistan and China's military cooperation grew considerably between 2020 and 2025, indicating a developing strategic alliance. The two nations maintained their commitment to cooperative military exercises and defence exchanges in spite of the disruptions brought on by COVID-19. The '*Sea Guardians*' joint naval exercise series, which started in the North Arabian Sea in January 2020 and developed into a key component of bilateral maritime cooperation, is a notable example. The exercise resumed in 2022 off Shanghai, indicating not only a return to form but also an expansion in geographic and operational scope, despite the 2021 edition being postponed due to pandemic constraints ²¹. With destroyers, frigates, submarines, and aircraft from both navies, the 2023 '*Sea Guardian-3*' exercise was the biggest China-Pakistan naval exercise to date. Senior military officials specifically framed these exercises, which involved anti-submarine warfare, surface combat tactics, and marine assault operations, as a way to secure sea lanes essential to the CPEC and safeguard regional maritime routes (Institute for Strategic Studies Islamabad [ISSI], 2024).¹⁸ Analysts suggest monitoring Indian naval operations and discouraging blockades in the Indian Ocean is a strategic subtext, while securing access to Gwadar and surrounding waters.

¹⁸ Pakistan has enhanced its surveillance capabilities along Makran and Gwadar coasts with Chinese assistance, utilizing maritime domain awareness and satellite imagery for commercial and security monitoring.

The ‘*Warrior*’ and ‘*Shaheen*’ joint exercises further enhanced air and land cooperation. The annual ‘*Warrior*’ series, which concentrated on special forces and counterterrorism training, culminated in the ‘Warrior-VIII’ exercise held at Pakistan’s National Counter Terrorism Centre in November 2024. These drills took place while attacks on Chinese citizens in Pakistan were on the rise. It fulfilled both practical and symbolic objectives, enabling forces to demonstrate their resolve to safeguard CPEC personnel while practicing urban combat and infrastructure protection ²². Meanwhile, the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) and the PLA Air Force were able to become operationally familiar thanks to air cooperation under the ‘*Shaheen*’ series. While ‘*Shaheen-X*’ in 2022 included more complex scenarios like engagements beyond visual range, ‘*Shaheen-IX*’ in 2020, which took place in Sindh, concentrated on air combat and joint ground strikes. After Pakistan purchased Chinese J-10C fighter jets in 2022 with the intention of enhancing air superiority, these exercises became even more important ²³. China’s Defence Minister General Li Shangfu visited Islamabad in 2023, promoting improved training exchanges and industry cooperation. This strategic alignment, despite the lack of a formal military alliance, demonstrates long-term regional implications.¹⁹

6.2. Technology Transfer and Defiance Trade

China became Pakistan’s primary defence partner between 2020 and 2025, moving from a traditional arms supplier

¹⁹ Both parties use the term ‘*all-weather strategic cooperative partnership*’ despite China’s non-alliance policy, suggesting an alliance to reassure domestic stakeholders and deter regional adversaries.

to a cooperative co-developer of naval, aerial, and land-based military platforms. With the commissioning of two Type 054A/P frigates, PNS Tughril and PNS Taimur, in 2022, and ongoing preparations for the induction of Yuan-class submarines with Air Independent Propulsion (AIP), anticipated by 2023–2024, the Pakistan Navy significantly increased its capabilities ²⁴. Pakistan's Air Force has strengthened its strategic advantage in airspace by introducing J-10C fighter jets and enhancing JF-17 Thunder. China provided armed drones and HQ-9/P air defence systems, demonstrating China's self-reliance in the defence industry and replacing Western suppliers. This developing collaboration is further evidenced by joint production projects at the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex and Heavy Industries Taxila, including the anticipated local assembly of Chinese drones starting in 2022 ²⁴. These events strengthened the two militaries' strategic interdependence in the face of regional threats and shifting geopolitical alignments, in addition to fulfilling Pakistan's desire for indigenous capability.²⁰

6.3. Intelligence sharing and Counter-terrorism

A spike in attacks against Chinese nationals and CPEC projects between 2020 and 2025 made counter-terrorism (CT) and intelligence cooperation a key component of the strategic partnership between China and Pakistan. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Baloch separatists in particular planned a number of attacks, including the suicide attack at Karachi

²⁰ The defence cooperation's response to India's modernisation drive and increased attacks on Chinese nationals in Pakistan has bolstered political will to integrate operational doctrines and defence technologies.

University in April 2022 that killed three Chinese professors and the July 2021 bombing of a bus carrying Chinese engineers to the Dasu dam site. Twenty Chinese citizens have been killed and numerous others have been injured in at least 14 such attacks since 2021²⁵. In response, Pakistan investigated the establishment of private military enterprises and greatly strengthened security measures by growing the Special Security Division (SSD), which was first created in 2016 staffed by retired personnel to secure Chinese interests (Small, 2022). China's Ministry of State Security and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) have strengthened their intelligence cooperation, particularly in tracking and infiltrating organisations such as the BLA²⁶. In order to support CT operations, China also provided Pakistan with technical surveillance tools, such as communication interception systems and possibly satellite support. Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts increased, and China's ambassador criticised Pakistan's failure to stop attacks. After the U.S. withdrawal and Taliban's return, CT coordination expanded to Afghanistan, causing concerns about TTP and ETIM sanctuary¹³. The extent of post-2020 counter-terror convergence is highlighted by reports that Chinese and Pakistani intelligence services have collaborated to track Uyghur militants operating along the Pakistan-Afghanistan-China border.²¹

6.4. Strategic Role of China in Pakistan's Security

²¹ Chinese sources claim that despite occasional discussions with Pakistan and Central Asian nations about establishing a regional counterterrorism mechanism within the SCO framework, implementation is still in its infancy.

By 2025, China's influence in Pakistan's security domain may have reached an all-time high. This strategic role is demonstrated by several factors:

- a. **Guarantee in Conflict with India:** China's strategic support prevents India from dominating South Asia, and Pakistan can rely on Chinese assistance and regional counterbalance thanks to joint military coordination.
- b. **Arms Dependence:** China is crucial in helping Pakistan meet its basic defence requirements by offering advice on strategic systems and civil nuclear projects that have an impact on both security and energy.
- c. **Security of Chinese Nationals and Projects:** With China becoming a de facto stakeholder through high-level assurances and coordination, Pakistan's internal security strategy increasingly reflects the need to safeguard Chinese interests.
- d. **Operational Access and Facilities:** Even though Pakistan hasn't officially given China a military base, increased access to military facilities and logistical support point to a developing strategic partnership.
- e. **Joint Strategy and Doctrinal Learning:** In their strategic military discussions, China and Pakistan support multilateral regional security while opposing bloc politics together.

In 2022–2023, China played a strategic role in Pakistan's response to the Tehreek-e-Taliban insurgency by supplying Pakistan with diplomatic support and equipment to secure its

border.²² Between 2020 and 2025, China and Pakistan have significantly enhanced their defence and security cooperation, focusing on conventional warfare and counterterrorism. Both nations are de facto security allies, but issues like security threats and defence debt persist.

7. Challenges and Opportunities

Pakistan-China relations have improved post-COVID, albeit face challenges like debt sustainability, security risks, and environmental concerns. Opportunities in technology, innovation, and regional cooperation exist, but understanding these risks is crucial for maintaining positive momentum.

Challenges

- a. Debt Sustainability and Economic Imbalance:** Pakistan's \$69 billion external debt to China is causing concerns about falling into a '*debt trap*', with critics arguing it's evidence of unsustainable financing and opaque contracts. Addressing this requires policy adjustments and long-term cooperation.
- b. Security Threats to Projects and Personnel:** Pakistan faces challenges in ensuring the safety of Chinese nationals and projects due to increasing terrorist attacks and political pressure. To combat urban terrorism, Pakistan must continue military and intelligence operations.

²² China is promoting Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts, pressuring the Afghan Taliban to act against TTP sanctuaries, highlighting its stake in regional stability and potential threats to its BRI.

- c. **Governing Issue and Political Instability:** Pakistan's 2022-2023 political unrest could impact CPEC development, potentially leading to corruption, policy reversals, and bureaucratic issues. Effective internal management is crucial to address potential protests and dissatisfaction.
- d. **Environmental and Social Impact Concerns:** Due to the environmental and social issues caused by the CPEC's rapid development, such as rising CO2 emissions, deforestation, and ecosystem disruptions, future projects must be transparent, involve the community, and be sustainable.
- e. **Geopolitical Pressures and External Pushback:** The rivalry between the U.S. and China as well as India's opposition to the CPEC put external pressure on the Pakistan-China partnership. The partnership's reputation may be impacted by polarisation, human rights concerns, and tensions with Western countries. If Pakistan becomes overly dependent on China, its options for foreign policy may be restricted.

Opportunities

- a. **Technology and Innovation Cooperation:** China and Pakistan are concentrating on cutting-edge technology i.e., e-commerce, AI, digital technology, telecommunications, and aerospace. They are discussing a '*Pakistan-China Digital Corridor*' to enhance Pakistan's IT infrastructure and skills.

- b. Expansion of Economic Corridors and Regional Connectivity:** There is a chance to expand the advantages of CPEC beyond bilateral borders as it develops. China and Pakistan are amenable to connecting CPEC with other regional corridors and enlisting outside partners.
- c. Collaboration in Social Development and Climate Resilience:** There are opportunities in fields like healthcare, education, and climate change. Pakistan is eager to learn from China's experience in reducing poverty.
- d. Joint work on climate resilience infrastructure:** China's technology in disaster prediction, river management, and emergency response can assist Pakistan in mitigating climate disasters.
- e. Trilateral and Multilateral Initiatives:** The solid bilateral base allows Pakistan and China to be bold in multilateral initiatives that include other countries, potentially turning their '*iron duo*' into broader coalitions for regional stability. In the Indian Ocean, China and Pakistan could lead initiatives on maritime security, highlighting positive contributions and embedding their partnership in a regional context of providing public goods.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, between 2020 and May 2025, Pakistan-China relations have significantly improved due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the changing geopolitical environment. China

provided financial, medical, and vaccine assistance in exchange for Pakistan's support of China's containment efforts. This strengthened the '*ironclad brotherhood*' bond and increased Pakistan's dependence on Beijing. Under the CPEC, the two nations also deepened their economic ties, with China providing Pakistan's economy with vital strategic financial assistance. In keeping with post-pandemic development priorities, the partnership has also grown to include collaboration in the areas of health, digital, and climate. Politically, worldviews and foreign policy agendas have been increasingly aligned, as evidenced by frequent high-level meetings and strong diplomatic agreement on topics like China's initiatives and Kashmir.

As a result of Chinese security interests in Pakistan, especially following targeted attacks on its citizens, Chinese technical expertise and advisory presence were further integrated into Pakistan's internal security architecture. By providing a counterbalance to India and influencing responses to transnational threats, especially in Afghanistan and the Indian Ocean, this strengthened axis has changed the strategic balance in the region. However, as stressed in the sections that go with it, security threats and economic vulnerabilities continue to be areas that need attention. As the last five years have shown, both nations have largely met their expectations for mutual support during times of crisis, be it a pandemic, financial shock, or geopolitical challenge. The ensuing interdependence exposes a developing strategic convergence: China's regional vision under the BRI depends on Pakistan's stability and alignment, while

Chinese investments are essential to Pakistan's development. All things considered, the Pakistan-China relationship has become more robust, complex, and strategically significant in the post-COVID-19 era; it is probably going to continue to be a pillar of both countries' foreign policies in the years to come.

Recommendations

Based on the 2020–2025 analysis, this section offers recommendations for future research directions and policy considerations to enhance and better understand Pakistan-China relations. The following subjects are deemed particularly crucial for additional research:

- a. Assessing the Economic Impact of CPEC:** With a focus on infrastructure, trade logistics, energy, and industrial expansion, a sector-specific analysis of the CPEC's economic impacts on Pakistan is necessary. Analysing debt sustainability under different economic growth scenarios and evaluating results with empirical data are essential for informed planning and building public trust.
- b. Examining China's Security Engagement in Pakistan:** More research is necessary to fully understand China's growing impact on Pakistan's security dynamics, including defence doctrine and counterterrorism coordination. It is essential to comprehend the views of Pakistani military and policy elites regarding China's role and its long-term role in regional security. It can provide insights to balance Pakistan with China and other powers.

- c. **Exploring Trilateral and Multilateral Cooperation:** By expanding their collaboration into more extensive trilateral or multilateral frameworks, China and Pakistan could create cooperative infrastructure, security, or development projects. These could include trilateral projects with Afghanistan, participation in CPEC integration, and regional or BRICS+ initiatives. Nonetheless, political sensitivities and viability must be assessed.

The following are considerable policy Recommendations

- d. **Institutionalise a Comprehensive ‘Green and Digital CPEC 2.0’ Strategy:** A Green and Digital CPEC 2.0 Framework should be jointly introduced by China and Pakistan, with an emphasis on technology transfer, digital infrastructure, and renewable energy. Timelines for solar and wind projects, investments in nearby tech parks, and the development of AI, biotechnology, and aggrotech capacity should all be part of this.

Justification: The CPEC must shift its focus from infrastructure-heavy investment to knowledge-based and sustainable growth in its next phase. Pakistan could diversify its economy and lessen its vulnerability to climate change by utilising China’s comparative advantage in digital innovation and green energy. This change responds to criticism of environmental

deterioration during previous CPEC phases and is consistent with China's 'high-quality BRI' vision.

- e. Establish a Pakistan-China Joint Debt and Sustainability Commission:** Establish a long-term bilateral commission with the responsibility of examining financial commitments, project feasibility, and guaranteeing transparent debt restructuring under the CPEC and other Chinese financing programs. Economists, legal professionals, and representatives from civil society should be on this commission.

Justification: Institutionalising financial governance is crucial given that China is responsible for more than 22% of Pakistan's external debt and growing worries about 'debt-trap diplomacy'. Open supervision will reduce political backlash at home, boost public trust, and guarantee that projects continue to be financially feasible for Pakistan's precarious economy.

- f. Enhance Joint Security and Counterterrorism Protocols with Civilian Oversight:** Create a thorough security plan that protects Chinese citizens and infrastructure by utilising community-cantered security models, localised threat assessments, and cooperative intelligence sharing. To guarantee legitimacy and accountability, civil society and the Pakistani Parliament should be involved in oversight procedures.

Justification: Bilateral trust has been strained as a result of insurgent groups like the BLA and TTP's repeated

attacks on Chinese citizens and CPEC infrastructure. Even though military actions have increased, they run the risk of being viewed as repressing local complaints. By fusing inclusive development with counterterrorism, a hybrid security strategy can neutralise insurgency catalysts and maintain public support for collaboration.

◇ **A multi-disciplinary Approach:**

Research on Pakistan-China relations should adopt a multidisciplinary approach, combining economic, security, and diplomatic perspectives. Collaborative efforts with Pakistani, Chinese, and third-country scholars enhance credibility. Transparency and evidence-based research are crucial for adapting strategies, managing risks, and promoting regional stability.

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