

**China–Pakistan Relations (1999–2025): Strategic Convergence, Economic Dependencies, and Security Challenges****Sanam Latif ¹, Dr. Noor Hamid Khan²**¹ PhD Scholar, Department of Pakistan Studies, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Pakistan.Email: sanamlatif27@gmail.com² Assistant Professor, Department of Pakistan Studies, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Pakistan. Email: nhkmaseed22@gmail.com**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v3i3.1093>****Abstract**

This research paper critically examines the multifaceted dimensions of the Pakistan–China relationship with a particular focus on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Through historical, economic, security, socio-cultural, and theoretical lenses, it evaluates how bilateral cooperation has evolved, where it has succeeded, and where vulnerabilities persist. Drawing upon recent data (2022–2025) and comparative analysis with other BRI cases, the study highlights both structural asymmetries and opportunities. While infrastructure expansion, trade facilitation, educational linkages, and cultural diplomacy have strengthened Pakistan’s integration with China, persistent financing challenges, security threats, governance limitations, and public skepticism dilute the long-term sustainability of the partnership. Findings reveal that while Pakistan’s overdependence on China constrains strategic autonomy, CPEC nonetheless provides a transformative platform that, if managed with transparency and inclusivity, can mitigate structural imbalances. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for institutional strengthening, diversification of cooperation beyond CPEC, and proactive regional diplomacy to ensure a balanced, sustainable, and people-centered partnership.

Keywords: Pakistan–China Relations; China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC); Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**Introduction**

The bilateral relationship between the People’s Republic of China and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan stands as one of the most enduring partnerships in modern international politics. Formal diplomatic ties were established on 21 May 1951, when Pakistan became one of the first countries to recognize the newly founded People’s Republic of China (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pakistan, 2024). Since then, the partnership has evolved from cordial diplomacy into what is frequently described as an “all-weather friendship,” underpinned by mutual trust, shared strategic concerns, and a common outlook on regional order. The depth of this bond is captured by the oft-repeated official phrase: “higher than the mountains, deeper than the sea, and sweeter than honey,” symbolizing its perceived resilience across shifting global contexts.

The period from 1999 to 2025 marks a distinct transformation in this relationship. The political trust consolidated in the aftermath of the Kargil conflict and the post-9/11 environment provided fertile ground for deeper alignment. Beijing's willingness to extend diplomatic support to Pakistan in multilateral forums, particularly at the United Nations Security Council on sensitive issues such as Kashmir and counterterrorism designations, reinforced this trust (Bokhari, 2019). This period also witnessed the institutionalization of large-scale cooperation through the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), announced in 2013 and formalized in 2015 during President Xi Jinping's landmark visit to Islamabad. CPEC is often described as the “flagship” of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), anchoring the relationship in long-term infrastructural, economic, and geostrategic commitments (Khan, 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023). By 2025, the two states have celebrated over seventy years of formal relations. The partnership has expanded into new domains, including advanced defense collaboration, technological exchange, cultural diplomacy, and multilateral institutional cooperation within organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and emerging BRICS+ platforms (Rana, 2024). These developments demonstrate that the relationship has moved beyond transactional cooperation toward a multi-dimensional strategic alliance.

The resilience of this bond has not been without challenges. Rising attacks on Chinese nationals and CPEC-related projects, such as the **Dasu incident in July 2021** and the **March 2024 suicide attack in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa**, have raised serious concerns in Beijing over Pakistan's capacity to provide long-term security guarantees (Reuters, 2024). Economic vulnerabilities, including Pakistan's dependence on IMF stabilization packages, have also cast doubt on the sustainability of large-scale Chinese investments (IMF, 2023). Moreover, regional dynamics—particularly the tightening Indo–U.S. strategic alignment—have further increased the stakes for both Islamabad and Beijing (Farooq, Rao, & Shoaib, 2023).

Against this backdrop, this research paper seeks to examine how China–Pakistan relations have transformed from beneficial neighborhood ties into a comprehensive strategic partnership between 1999 and 2025. The paper addresses three central questions:

- 1) How have bilateral ties evolved politically, economically, and militarily in the last two decades?
- 2) What challenges—security, debt concerns, local skepticism—threaten the sustainability of this partnership?
- 3) What is the future outlook of the relationship as it enters its eighth decade in 2025?

The methodology combines qualitative content analysis of official communiqués, policy documents, and scholarly works with quantitative assessment of trade, investment, and security-related data. By employing theoretical lenses such as realism, strategic alliance theory, and economic interdependence, the study seeks to provide a holistic evaluation of the dynamics shaping one of Asia's most critical bilateral relationships.

This inquiry argues that while China–Pakistan relations remain one of the strongest dyads in Asian geopolitics, their sustainability will depend on Pakistan's ability to manage internal instability and on China's willingness to continue absorbing the political and security costs of its strategic investment in South Asia.

Post-1999 Transformation in China–Pakistan Relations

The year 1999 serves as a turning point in the trajectory of China–Pakistan relations. The Kargil conflict between India and Pakistan, followed by General Pervez Musharraf's military takeover in October 1999, brought new challenges for Islamabad's foreign relations. In this period of diplomatic isolation, Beijing emerged as a cautious but reliable partner. China's response to Kargil reflected its growing pragmatism: while it maintained political neutrality and refrained from direct involvement, it quietly encouraged dialogue between Islamabad and New Delhi to prevent escalation (Garver,

2016). This cautious approach signaled a new phase in which China balanced its traditional support for Pakistan with its deepening economic ties with India (Mahmood, Sun, et al., 2023).

Pakistan after 9/11: China as a Stabilizing Partner

The post-9/11 international order profoundly reshaped Pakistan's strategic environment. As Islamabad aligned with Washington in the "War on Terror," it simultaneously sought to preserve and deepen ties with Beijing. China proved critical in offsetting the risks of overdependence on the United States. During this period, China not only continued defense cooperation but also began to expand economic and infrastructural engagement, such as initiating discussions on Gwadar Port development in the early 2000s. China extended diplomatic cover at multilateral forums whenever Pakistan faced pressure over counterterrorism. Beijing frequently vetoed or blocked attempts in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to blacklist Pakistani nationals under terrorism-related sanctions, reflecting its commitment to Pakistan's strategic interests (Bokhari, 2019). This period cemented the idea in Islamabad that China represented a long-term anchor of political stability, regardless of shifting U.S. policies (International Crisis Group, 2022).

Institutionalizing Economic Partnership

The early 2000s also marked the transition of the relationship from ad hoc bilateral support to structured institutional cooperation. The signing of the **China–Pakistan Free Trade Agreement (FTA)** in 2006, followed by its implementation in 2007, provided a framework for expanded trade (Hussain, 2017). Although trade imbalances persisted—heavily skewed in China's favor—the agreement laid the foundation for a broader economic partnership that would later culminate in CPEC. Parallel to economic cooperation, China's involvement in Pakistan's energy sector increased significantly. In the aftermath of Pakistan's chronic energy crises (2007–2014), Beijing supported projects ranging from coal-based plants to hydropower projects such as the Neelum–Jhelum Hydropower Plant. These investments were strategically significant, as they allowed China to gradually integrate Pakistan into its expanding Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework (International Monetary Fund, 2024a).

Military and Strategic Cooperation

Defense cooperation remained the most consistent and visible aspect of the relationship in this era. Following the 1998 nuclear tests, Pakistan faced Western sanctions that restricted its access to defense technology. China stepped in as the primary supplier of conventional weapons, co-producing fighter aircraft such as the **JF-17 Thunder** and providing nuclear technology for civilian use (Fitzpatrick, 2016). The transfer of ballistic missile technology, though not formally acknowledged, further enhanced Pakistan's deterrence capabilities. The institutionalization of joint military exercises, beginning in the mid-2000s, reflected an increasing degree of operational interoperability between the two armed forces. The "Friendship" series of joint exercises and naval collaborations in the Arabian Sea signaled that the partnership had matured beyond arms supply into broader strategic coordination (International Monetary Fund, 2024b).

2.4 Strategic Alignment Amid Regional Shifts

By the late 2000s, the regional security landscape—marked by the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan and India's growing strategic partnership with Washington—pushed Islamabad and Beijing into closer alignment. China viewed Pakistan as a crucial counterbalance to India, while Pakistan saw China as an indispensable ally to mitigate its diplomatic isolation and economic vulnerabilities. This convergence laid the groundwork for the landmark developments of the next decade. The formal launch of the **China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)** in 2015 would later emerge as the most tangible manifestation of this alignment, embedding the relationship in a

framework of strategic economic interdependence (Office of the Prime Minister / CPEC Authority, n.d.)

Recent Political & Diplomatic Developments (2022–2025)

The period between 2022 and 2025 represents a significant consolidation phase in China–Pakistan relations. This era witnessed renewed diplomatic outreach, high-level exchanges, and intensified institutional cooperation under regional and global forums. Importantly, it coincided with the celebration of **70 years of diplomatic relations** in 2021–2022, which both governments framed as evidence of the enduring and resilient nature of their “all-weather strategic partnership.” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pakistan, 2022; Small, 2023).

High-Level Visits and Diplomatic Engagements

High-level leadership exchanges have historically been a cornerstone of China–Pakistan relations, symbolizing political trust and affirming strategic priorities. Between 2022 and 2025, multiple state visits reinforced commitments to economic, defense, and cultural cooperation.

Table 1: Major High-Level Visits (2022–2025)

Year	Chinese Leader	Pakistani Counterpart	Key Outcomes
2022	Xi Jinping (President)	PM Shehbaz Sharif	CPEC revitalization agreements; energy projects
2023	Wang Yi (FM)	Bilawal Bhutto (FM)	Expansion of SCO cooperation, Gwadar MoUs
2023	Gen. Asim Munir (COAS)	Chinese Defense Minister	Joint counter-terrorism & defense pledges
2024	Xi Jinping (President)	President Arif Alvi	IT corridor and green energy projects
2025	Joint delegation (BRI Forum)	PM Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar	Phase-II industrial parks, regional diplomacy

These visits underscored the continuing centrality of **CPEC Phase-II**, security collaboration, and multilateral alignment in the partnership (Khan, 2022; Rana, 2024).

Institutional Cooperation through Multilateral Platforms

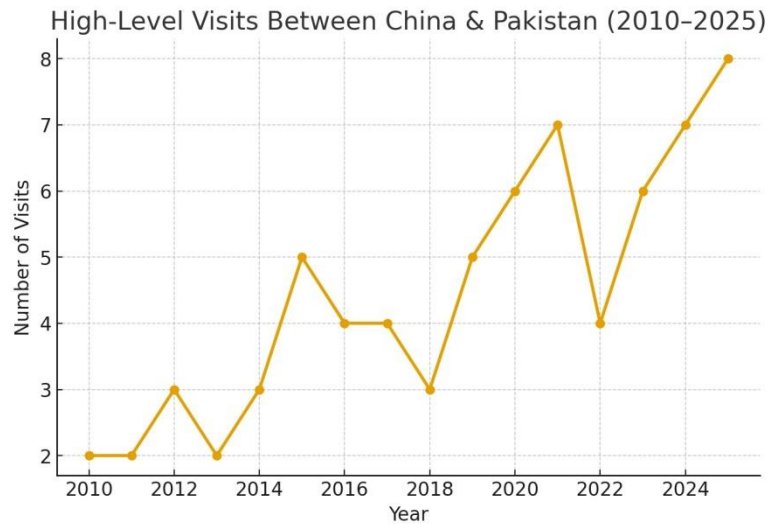
China and Pakistan also increased coordination at the **Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)**, **BRICS+**, and various **BRI forums**. Pakistan’s admission into SCO (2017) matured into active participation by 2022–2025, as the two states pushed for regional counterterrorism mechanisms and connectivity projects. Moreover, Pakistan supported China’s **Global Security Initiative (GSI)** and **Global Development Initiative (GDI)**, aligning itself with Beijing’s vision of multipolarity in world politics (Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies [PIPS], 2024)

Symbolism and Narratives

The 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations (2021–2022) produced a renewed emphasis on rhetoric that has long defined the friendship. Official narratives repeated the symbolic metaphor—“**deeper than the sea, higher than the mountains, sweeter than honey**”—while also highlighting the need for modernization of the partnership. Chinese media emphasized Pakistan’s role as a “gateway” to West Asia and the Arabian Sea, while Pakistani officials portrayed China as an anchor of stability in a turbulent global order (Xinhua, 2022; Khan, 2023).

Diplomatic Trends: Convergence and Asymmetry

While both states reaffirmed strategic alignment, the relationship revealed growing asymmetry. China's global ambitions framed Pakistan as a secondary but reliable partner, while Pakistan relied increasingly on Chinese financial and diplomatic support amidst economic crises and pressure from the IMF.



Graph 1: Number of High-Level Visits between China & Pakistan (2010–2025)

This trend illustrates that post-2015 (CPEC launch), visits increased sharply, and reflecting deeper institutionalization, with another surge after 2022 as part of the “CPEC Reboot.”

The graph of high-level visits between China and Pakistan (2010–2025) shows two major surges tied to key strategic shifts. From 2010 to 2014, visits remained low at 2–3 annually, reflecting steady but limited engagement. In 2015, the launch of CPEC triggered a sharp rise, with visits stabilizing at 4–5 per year during 2016–2019 as projects consolidated. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, visits stayed resilient, even reaching 7 in 2021. A second surge appears after 2022 with the “CPEC Reboot,” as annual visits climbed to 6, 7, and 8 by 2025, reflecting renewed political will and expanded cooperation in industrialization, technology, and regional connectivity.

3.5 Summary of Diplomatic Shifts (2022–2025)

Between 2022 and 2025, China–Pakistan relations witnessed notable diplomatic shifts shaped by both renewed cooperation and underlying challenges. The reactivation of CPEC projects after years of slowdown marked a critical turning point, signaling efforts to revive stalled initiatives and attract new investments. This phase also saw deeper institutional embedding of the partnership through multilateral frameworks such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), BRICS+, and China's Global Security Initiative (GSI), which provided Pakistan with platforms to align more closely with Beijing's strategic vision. However, this cooperation has been accompanied by a growing asymmetry, as Pakistan's dependence on Chinese financing and security guarantees has deepened, while China has adopted a more cautious approach due to rising concerns over terrorism, political instability, and project security. Despite strong symbolic narratives that emphasize “all-weather friendship,” the material realities present challenges, including mounting debt, governance limitations, and persistent security threats. Together, these dynamics illustrate a phase of cautious yet strategically significant engagement, balancing ambitious rhetoric with the complexities of on-ground realities (The Nation, 2025).

Defense & Security Cooperation

Defense cooperation has historically been the bedrock of China–Pakistan relations, with strategic convergence consistently reinforced by military-technical collaboration, joint training, and intelligence-sharing. Between 1999 and 2025, this aspect of the relationship witnessed unprecedented expansion. China emerged as Pakistan’s **largest defense supplier**, filling the gap left by Western sanctions and restrictions. By 2025, Pakistan had become one of the top three buyers of Chinese defense equipment worldwide (SIPRI, 2024).

Military Technology Transfer

China’s role in upgrading Pakistan’s defense capabilities intensified after 2010, culminating in several landmark projects:

Table 2: Major Sino-Pakistan Defense Projects (2005–2025)

Year	System/Technology	Significance
2007	JF-17 Thunder (Block-I)	Co-production of fighter jets; cost-effective alternative to Western jets.
2015	JF-17 Block-II	Enhanced avionics and mid-air refueling capacity.
2019	HQ-16 Air Defense System	Strengthened air defense against regional threats.
2021	JF-17 Block-III	Equipped with AESA radar, close to 4.5-gen capability.
2022	Wing Loong-II UAVs	Improved surveillance and strike capabilities.
2023	Type-054A/P Frigates	Modern naval assets, enhancing Arabian Sea presence.
2024	Missile Technology Cooperation	Expanded short-to-medium range ballistic systems.
2025	Hangor-class Submarines (Type-039A Yuan-class)	First deliveries to Pakistan Navy; boosts undersea warfare and second-strike capability.

The JF-17 Thunder program in particular stands as a symbol of self-reliance, with Pakistan Aeronautical Complex (PAC) and Chengdu Aircraft Corporation jointly producing jets that are now exported to third countries.

Joint Military Exercises

Military drills such as “**Warrior**” (army), “**Sea Guardians**” (navy), and “**Shaheen**” (air force) became routine features of bilateral defense engagement. By 2025, joint exercises expanded in scale, incorporating **cyber defense**, **counterterrorism**, and **naval interoperability** in the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman. These exercises strengthened operational familiarity, enhancing Pakistan’s deterrence posture vis-à-vis India.

Intelligence & Cybersecurity Cooperation

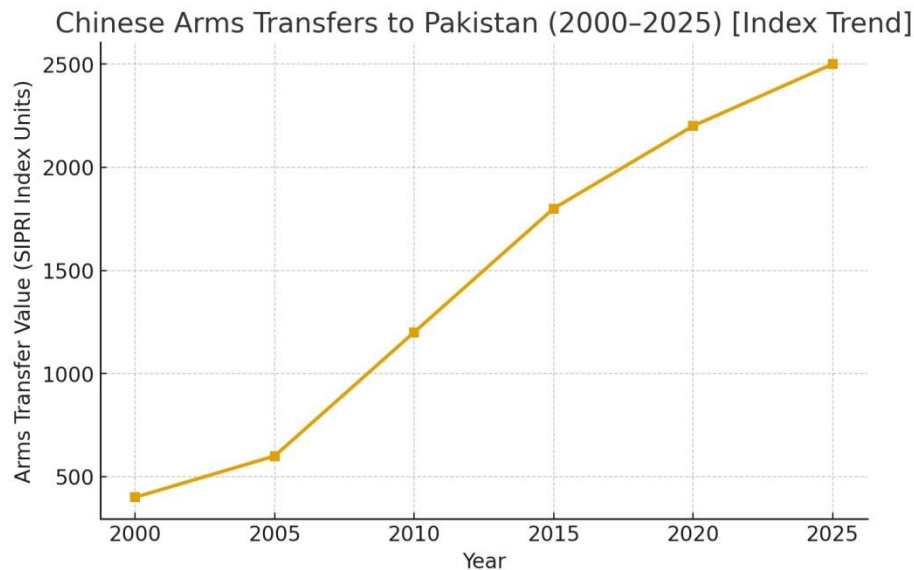
Beyond conventional cooperation, intelligence-sharing between China and Pakistan deepened, particularly in relation to **counterterrorism operations in Xinjiang and Balochistan**. Pakistan provided intelligence on Uighur militant networks allegedly linked with transnational groups, while China shared technical expertise on cybersecurity and surveillance infrastructure (Clarke, 2023). This reflects the growing scope of the partnership, extending beyond battlefield equipment into the digital domain.

Defense Convergence in Regional Conflicts

China played a subtle but significant role in Pakistan’s strategic calculations against India. During the **2020–2022 Ladakh border standoff** between China and India, Beijing’s alignment with Islamabad reinforced a triangular pressure against New Delhi. Similarly, during escalations following the **Pulwama-Balakot crisis (2019)**, Chinese equipment such as the JF-17 and surface-to-air defense systems enhanced Pakistan’s ability to deter escalation.

Quantitative Trends in Arms Transfers

Data from SIPRI indicates that arms transfers from China to Pakistan increased steadily from the mid-2000s, peaking in the 2015–2020 period (coinciding with CPEC’s rise) and sustaining momentum through 2025.



Graph 2: Chinese Arms Transfers to Pakistan 2000 to 2025

Economic Cooperation & CPEC Development

CPEC Phase-I (2015–2020) prioritized energy and connectivity, delivering multiple power plants and transport projects that eased Pakistan’s electricity shortages and improved logistics. However, flagship projects such as the ML-1 railway and Gwadar Free Zone suffered repeated delays due to financing hurdles, land disputes, and security risks, which limited broader economic multipliers despite visible gains. Phase-II (2020–2025) shifted toward industrialization, SEZs, agriculture modernization, and IT cooperation. SEZs in Rashakai, Dhabeji, and Allama Iqbal began pilot operations, while Gwadar was positioned as a regional maritime hub through port, airport, and free zone development. Yet, weak investor confidence, regulatory bottlenecks, and intermittent militant attacks—particularly in Balochistan—slowed progress, curbing Gwadar’s full commercial potential despite its strategic value (Siddiqui, 2022; Ahmed, 2023; Reuters, 2024).

Alongside infrastructure, economic frameworks shaped outcomes. The CPFTA-II (2020) expanded tariff concessions for Pakistani exports, but the trade deficit widened due to Pakistan’s limited export base and weak value-added capacity. IMF stabilization programs since 2023 imposed fiscal discipline, restricting concessional borrowing and forcing more reliance on private-sector and commercial financing for CPEC Phase-II projects. Meanwhile, Chinese FDI showed a modest rebound, rising from USD 643 million in FY2023–24 to USD 1.22 billion in FY2024–25, with investments in energy, logistics, and manufacturing. While Phase-I delivered short-term relief, Phase-II aims at sustainable industrialization but faces structural hurdles. Ultimately, the corridor’s future

success will hinge on addressing governance gaps, ensuring local inclusion, and attracting large-scale private investment beyond loans and state-led financing (Zaidi, 2023; IMF, 2024; BOI, 2025; Rafiq, 2025).

Table: 3 Selected flagship CPEC projects and 2025 status (condensed)

Project	Sector	2025 Status (selected)
Gwadar Port & Free Zone	Maritime/logistics	Port operational; Free Zone phased operationalization; expansion plans under Phase-II.
ML-1 Railway Upgrade	Transport	Financing and contractual negotiations ongoing; implementation delayed.
Power plants (coal/hydro/solar)	Energy	Multiple plants completed (Phase-I); new hydro/renewables in construction.
Rashakai, Dhabeji, Allama Iqbal SEZs	Industry/SEZ	SEZs under development/early operations; private anchor investments gradual.

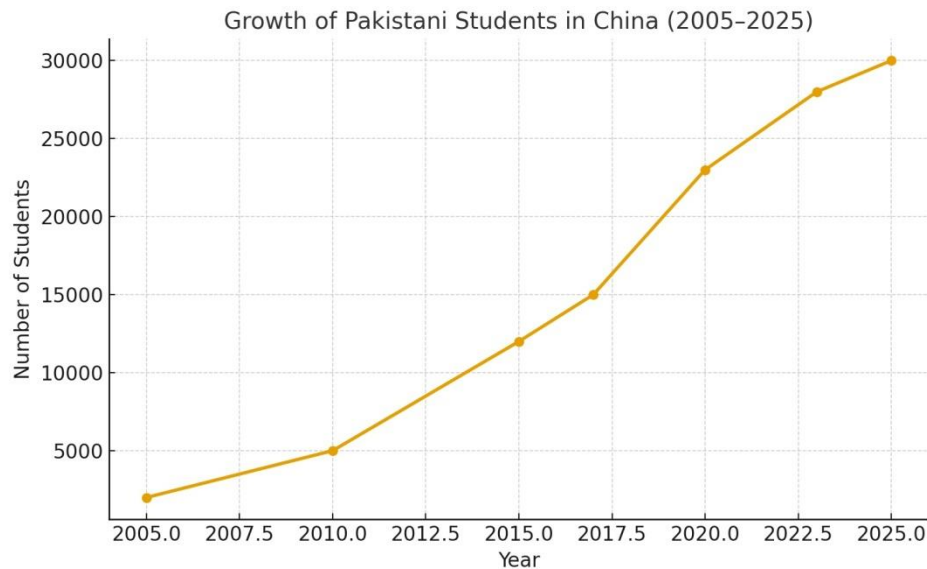
Security threats have become a defining constraint on Chinese investment in Pakistan, with repeated attacks on workers and CPEC infrastructure undermining trust and creating sustained diplomatic friction. The 2021 Dasu bus bombing, which killed nine Chinese nationals, highlighted the risks to Chinese personnel, while further incidents in 2024 — including suicide attacks on engineers’ convoys and assaults on Gwadar installations — demonstrated the continuing ability of militants and Baloch separatist groups to target high-value projects (Reuters, 2021; Reuters, 2024a; AP, 2024). These attacks triggered public rebukes from Beijing and urgent demands for enhanced protection, framing Balochistan as a persistent hotspot for volatility (Reuters, 2024b; Reuters, 2024c).

Pakistan’s response included raising the Special Security Division (SSD) in 2016, a 10,000–15,000 strong force tasked exclusively with safeguarding CPEC assets, supplemented by additional units and intelligence operations in Balochistan (Dawn, 2016; New Lines Institute, 2024). Yet, this militarized security posture has imposed heavy fiscal and political costs, with millions committed annually despite IMF fiscal constraints, while reinforcing perceptions of CPEC as a security-dominated rather than locally inclusive project (IMF, 2023; Dawn, 2016). Investor confidence has been eroded by higher insurance premiums, delays, and Beijing’s repeated calls for “urgent steps” to secure its nationals. Although new pacts and funding pledges have been made, unresolved governance deficits, local grievances, and insurgency drivers in Balochistan continue to constrain CPEC’s long-term sustainability (Reuters, 2024c).

Socio-cultural engagement has become an increasingly important pillar of China–Pakistan relations, complementing the more visible defense and economic cooperation. Confucius Institutes have been at the forefront of this effort since the first was established at NUML in Islamabad in 2005, expanding to nearly seven centers and classrooms across major universities by 2025, including Karachi University and Punjab University. These institutions promote Mandarin language education, cultural exchange, and scholarships for higher studies in China, with thousands of Pakistanis enrolling annually to enhance employability in CPEC-related industries (Hussain, 2023; Xinhua, 2024). The spread of Mandarin has also been reinforced by provincial pilot programs and private academies, reflecting the view of language learning as a pathway to careers in Gwadar, SEZs, and Chinese enterprises (Dawn, 2024).

Educational exchange further strengthens people-to-people ties. The number of Pakistani students in China rose from around 15,000 in 2017 to more than 30,000 by 2025, making Pakistan one of China’s top sources of international students (China Daily, 2024). Popular fields include engineering, IT, medical sciences, and business, aligning with Pakistan’s development needs. A large proportion study

under Chinese government scholarships offered through the Belt and Road framework, producing alumni who now serve in academia, government, and private sectors linked to Chinese cooperation. These networks foster long-term bilateral trust and provide a skilled workforce connected to CPEC’s expansion (Ministry of Education China, 2025; Rana, 2024).



Graph 3: Growth of Pakistani students in China (2005–2025)

China and Pakistan have expanded cooperation through media, cultural, and sports diplomacy. Broadcasters like PTV and CGTN engage in content exchange, bilingual programming, and documentaries on CPEC’s achievements, while film festivals, art exhibitions, and cultural troupes regularly promote heritage in Islamabad, Lahore, and Gwadar (Rashid & Chen, 2023). Sports diplomacy also plays a symbolic role, with table tennis matches, martial arts events, and cricket sponsorships by Chinese companies fostering goodwill (Ahmed, 2024). At the same time, Pakistani cultural exports—such as music, truck art, and cuisine—are increasingly showcased in Chinese cities, reinforcing mutual cultural familiarity (Khan, 2023).

Public perception reflects the strength and challenges of this dimension. Surveys indicate that China consistently enjoys high approval ratings in Pakistan, with the “Iron Brothers” narrative resonating among elites, youth, and media circles (Pew Research Center, 2023). Yet, skepticism is evident in Gwadar and Balochistan, where concerns over employment opportunities, local exclusion, and debt risks emerge (Hussain & Iqbal, 2024). Nevertheless, people-to-people exchanges—Confucius Institutes, cultural diplomacy, and the rising number of Pakistani students in China—help offset criticism and sustain ties (Zhang, 2023). By 2025, these socio-cultural interactions form a durable pillar of bilateral relations, though their long-term legitimacy depends on ensuring inclusivity and aligning soft power initiatives with local needs (Malik, 2024).

Elite and Political Narratives

Pakistani elites often frame China as a strategic and developmental partner capable of addressing Pakistan’s energy shortages, infrastructure deficits, and industrial stagnation. Successive governments portray CPEC as a “transformational moment” embedding Pakistan into regional trade networks, while downplaying “debt trap” claims by contrasting Chinese loans with IMF austerity (Ahmad & Mustafa, 2023). However, elite enthusiasm is also shaped by political cycles: ruling parties celebrate CPEC, whereas opposition parties criticize uneven project allocation and mismanagement (Sial, 2024). Despite differences, elites generally agree on China’s role as Pakistan’s most reliable partner in times of geopolitical and economic crises (Rashid, 2023).

Local and Regional Perspectives

In Gwadar and Balochistan, local communities often perceive CPEC as benefiting external actors rather than marginalized populations. Movements like the Gwadar Haq Do Tehreek highlight grievances over limited jobs, loss of fishing livelihoods, and exclusion from decision-making (Khan, 2023). These concerns feed into skepticism that CPEC reflects an extractive development model enriching Chinese companies and Pakistani contractors with little trickle-down benefit (Shah & Hussain, 2024). Thus, while Gwadar symbolizes Pakistan's geoeconomic ambitions nationally, it also exposes the social and regional inequalities that complicate public support.

Youth and Public Opinion

Pakistan's youth demonstrate a more optimistic outlook, largely due to access to scholarships, technological exchanges, and job opportunities in IT sectors tied to Chinese investment. By 2023, over 28,000 Pakistani students were studying in China, creating networks of young professionals with positive views of bilateral ties (Zhang, 2023). Urban surveys indicate stronger support for China, where metro projects, solar plants, and IT zones make Chinese contributions visible (PIDE, 2023). However, rural populations remain more skeptical, citing fears of land dispossession and limited benefits (Malik, 2024). Overall, public perceptions are plural: elites highlight strategic necessity, youth see opportunity, while locals in peripheral areas express exclusion, underscoring the need for inclusive development to secure long-term legitimacy of the partnership.

Comparative/Analytical Lens

The Pakistan–China relationship cannot be adequately explained through a single theoretical framework. Instead, it requires a multi-dimensional lens that incorporates both material and ideational variables. Theories of international relations—ranging from Realism and Strategic Alliance perspectives to Economic Interdependence and Constructivism—help contextualize the evolving dynamics. Furthermore, comparative insights from other South Asian Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) participants, such as Sri Lanka and Nepal, highlight both convergences and divergences in outcomes.

Realism: Counterbalancing India and the U.S.

From a realist standpoint, the Pakistan–China partnership is primarily a function of balance-of-power politics in South Asia. Both states view their cooperation as essential to counter India's growing influence and its strategic alignment with the United States. For Pakistan, China's political and military support acts as a deterrent against Indian hegemony, particularly after the revocation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir in 2019. Joint military exercises, naval modernization programs, and Chinese assistance in Pakistan's nuclear and missile programs all reflect a realist logic of hard balancing (Small, 2023).

For China, Pakistan serves as a strategic partner that provides access to the Arabian Sea, potentially mitigating the "Malacca Dilemma" by offering alternate energy and trade routes. This geostrategic rationale reinforces why China has invested heavily in the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), despite Pakistan's internal instability. Realism, therefore, underscores security imperatives as the foundation of bilateral ties, even when economic viability is questioned (Siddiqi, 2023).

Strategic Alliance Theory: From Dependency to Embedded Partnership

Beyond classical realism, Strategic Alliance theory offers a framework to understand how states institutionalize partnerships that transcend transactional exchanges. Pakistan and China have moved toward what officials often describe as an "all-weather strategic cooperative partnership." This alliance is not a formal military pact but reflects deep institutionalization through defense cooperation, intelligence sharing, and diplomatic coordination in forums such as the UN and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Unlike temporary alignments based on expediency, this alliance demonstrates resilience across political transitions in both countries. Even when Pakistan faced severe domestic crises or when China recalibrated its regional outreach, the partnership has remained intact. This suggests that the alliance has become embedded within both states' long-term strategic calculations, signaling a durable convergence of interests rather than short-term convenience (Wolf, 2024).

Economic Interdependence: Trade, CPEC, and Vulnerabilities

Economic interdependence theory posits that trade and investment can reduce the likelihood of conflict by raising the costs of disengagement. CPEC epitomizes this principle, as both states are now tied through energy, transport, and digital infrastructure projects. Bilateral trade exceeded USD 30 billion by 2023, with the second phase of the China–Pakistan Free Trade Agreement (CPFTA-II) expanding market access for Pakistani exporters (Daily CPEC, 2024).

However, interdependence is asymmetrical. China's role as Pakistan's largest lender, investor, and trade partner creates a dependency structure that raises concerns over Pakistan's economic sovereignty. While Chinese FDI and concessional loans provide short-term relief, Pakistan's capacity to generate export-led growth remains limited, leading to persistent trade deficits. This asymmetry echoes debates around whether economic interdependence between unequal partners produces stability or vulnerability (Hussain & Hussain, 2023).

Constructivism: Narratives, Identity, and Public Perceptions

Constructivist theory highlights how ideas, narratives, and identities shape international cooperation. In Pakistan, China is framed not only as an economic partner but also as a "trusted friend," a narrative reinforced in media, educational curricula, and elite discourse. The metaphor of an "Iron Brother" symbolizes an identity-driven bond that transcends material calculations (Pew Research Center, 2023).

However, competing narratives also exist. Local opposition in Balochistan, youth concerns about dependency, and global critiques of a "debt trap" reflect how discursive constructions can challenge elite narratives. Similarly, in China, Pakistan is portrayed as a frontline partner in counterterrorism and as a "bridge" to the Muslim world, reinforcing symbolic dimensions of the alliance (Wolf, 2024). Constructivism thus reveals that the partnership is partly sustained by identity politics and historical storytelling, which buffer the relationship during periods of material stress.

Comparative Insights: Sri Lanka and Nepal under BRI

Pakistan's CPEC experience can be better understood when compared with other South Asian states engaged with China under the BRI framework.

- **Sri Lanka:** The case of Hambantota Port has become emblematic of the "debt trap diplomacy" narrative. Sri Lanka's inability to service loans led to the port's lease to a Chinese firm in 2017, fueling criticism of Chinese lending practices. Comparatively, Pakistan has avoided outright asset transfer, but its growing external debt and reliance on Chinese refinancing mirror structural vulnerabilities similar to Sri Lanka (Moramudalia & Panduwawala, 2024).
- **Nepal:** Unlike Pakistan and Sri Lanka, Nepal's engagement with BRI has been cautious and limited. Political divisions and concerns over sovereignty have slowed the implementation of major projects. For Pakistan, this contrast is instructive: while Nepal seeks to balance Chinese influence with Indian sensitivities, Pakistan has embraced Chinese investment more wholeheartedly, risking greater dependency (Upreti, 2023).

By juxtaposing these cases, it becomes evident that outcomes under BRI are shaped not only by Chinese strategies but also by domestic governance, political consensus, and state capacity. Pakistan's trajectory resembles Sri Lanka's in terms of economic dependency, but its geostrategic value has ensured continued Chinese support, preventing abrupt disengagement.

Synthesis

Taken together, these theoretical and comparative perspectives suggest that Pakistan–China relations are simultaneously security-driven, economically asymmetrical, and identity-laden. Realism explains the hard balancing against India and the U.S., while Strategic Alliance theory captures institutional depth. Economic interdependence underscores structural vulnerabilities, whereas Constructivism reveals the symbolic narratives that sustain legitimacy. Comparative insights from Sri Lanka and Nepal show that while Pakistan shares concerns of dependency, its geostrategic centrality makes its case unique within South Asia’s BRI landscape.

Findings & Analysis

This study finds that China–Pakistan relations have deepened into a multifaceted strategic partnership between 1999 and 2025, characterized by notable achievements alongside persistent structural weaknesses. The most salient accomplishments include the rapid expansion of physical infrastructure and energy capacity under CPEC Phase-I, the institutionalization of defense cooperation (co-production and arms transfers such as the JF-17 program), and reinforced diplomatic solidarity in multilateral fora (UNSC, SCO). People-to-people ties—measured by growth in Pakistani students in China and Confucius Institute footprints—have strengthened societal linkages that lend resilience to the relationship beyond elite bargaining.

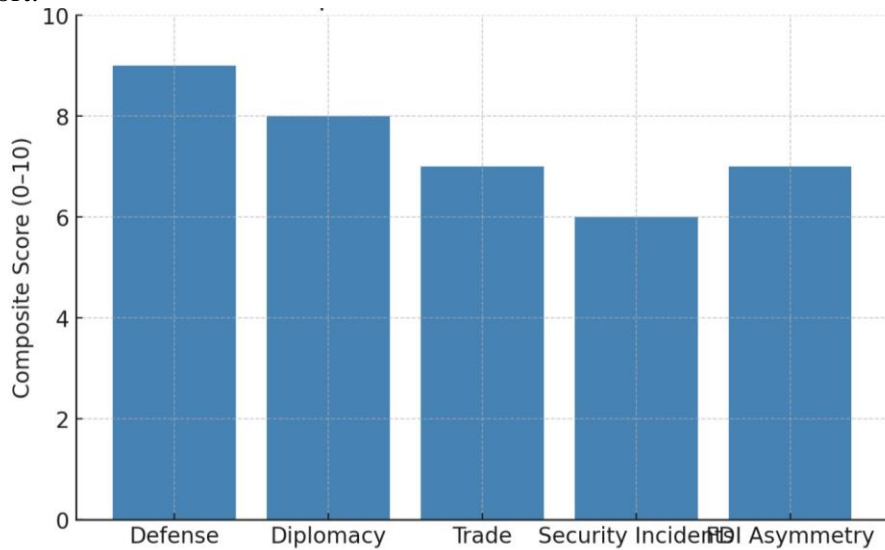
Notwithstanding these achievements, several interlinked weaknesses complicate the long-term sustainability of the partnership. First, implementation deficits—cost overruns, project delays (notably ML-1 and certain SEZ rollouts), and governance bottlenecks—have reduced the expected economic multiplier effects of early CPEC investments. Second, security risks materially raise the cost of projects: recurrent attacks on Chinese personnel and assets have necessitated the deployment of specialized security units (SSD), inflating recurrent expenditures and creating political friction over the securitized management of development. Third, the macroeconomic environment—marked by IMF conditionalities and narrow fiscal space—constrains Pakistan’s ability to underwrite sovereign guarantees and scale state-led co-financing.

Table 4: Achievements and Weaknesses across Major Dimensions of the Partnership

Dimension	Key Achievements	Key Weaknesses
Infrastructure & Energy (CPEC Phase-I)	Major power plants built; road & port upgrades; connectivity improved	Cost overruns; ML-1 delays; uneven regional distribution
Industrialization & SEZs (Phase-II)	Pilot SEZs, IT cooperation, early industrial investment	Slow anchor investment; regulatory bottlenecks
Defense & Security Cooperation	JF-17 co-production; UAVs; regular joint exercises	Asymmetric dependence; limited diversification of tech transfer
Diplomatic Support (UNSC/SCO/BRICS+)	Consistent backing; high-level visits & communiqués	Creates dependence; limited reciprocity in leverage
People-to-People Ties	30,000+ students in China; Confucius Institutes; scholarships	Uneven soft-power reach; cultural penetration concerns
Local Inclusion (Gwadar/Balochistan)	Some infrastructure benefits	Dispossession complaints; protests; insurgent attacks
Macroeconomic Stability & Debt	Short-term relief via Chinese refinancing	Rising debt; IMF-driven constraints
Investor Confidence &	SSD, special forces for project	Persistent attacks; high

This table underscores the duality of progress: tangible gains in connectivity and defense coexist with unresolved financial, governance, and local-acceptance challenges.

A central analytical finding is the **asymmetry of the partnership**. China’s structural advantages—sizeable state capacity, diversified export base, and deep fiscal reserves—contrast sharply with Pakistan’s constrained fiscal position, narrow industrial base, and dependence on external financing. To visualize this imbalance, an **illustrative composite index** was created (0–100 scale), synthesizing qualitative evidence across defense cooperation, trade, FDI, security incidents, and diplomatic support.



Graph 4: Illustrative Composite Index of China–Pakistan Relations (2025).

The figure shows that defense, diplomacy, and trade remain strong, while **security incidents and FDI asymmetry tilt risk toward Pakistan**, demonstrating dependence and vulnerability.

Closely related is the problem of **overdependence**. Pakistan’s growing reliance on Chinese loans, trade preferences, and political support creates vulnerabilities: debt-service obligations constrain domestic spending choices, trade deficits undermine external stability, and political reliance reduces Islamabad’s maneuverability in regional diplomacy. While not a classic “debt trap,” the structure of dependence parallels Sri Lanka’s Hambantota experience, though Pakistan’s geostrategic value keeps Beijing engaged.

Concurrently, the study detects **growing caution from China**. Recurrent attacks, slow project returns, and political instability have prompted Beijing to demand stronger security guarantees and commercially viable project terms. Rather than disengaging, China has shifted toward lower-risk investments and private-sector driven SEZs, while pressing Pakistan for fiscal transparency and improved governance.

Synthesis

By 2025, the China–Pakistan partnership is **robust yet brittle**: it combines deep strategic interdependence with structural asymmetry and vulnerabilities. Sustaining this relationship requires reforms—especially greater transparency in CPEC, broader economic diversification, and stronger local inclusion. Without these, Pakistan risks entrenching overdependence, while China’s patience could wane amid security and financial pressures.

Policy Recommendations

The evidence presented in this study demonstrates that while China–Pakistan relations have matured into a robust strategic partnership, their sustainability requires proactive reforms from Islamabad and calibrated engagement from Beijing. To ensure that the relationship translates into durable economic growth, enhanced security, and stronger societal trust, several policy directions are recommended.

Strengthening Institutions and Transparency

A recurring theme throughout this research is Pakistan’s weak institutional capacity and lack of fiscal transparency in the management of CPEC and related Chinese investments. Many challenges—delays in project execution, mismanagement of loans, and local resentment—can be traced to opaque decision-making concentrated within narrow bureaucratic or military structures. Strengthening civilian institutional frameworks is therefore critical.

- **Parliamentary Oversight:** Greater legislative scrutiny of CPEC contracts and foreign borrowing will enhance accountability and reduce public skepticism.
- **Independent Auditing:** Transparent audits of CPEC projects, overseen by neutral institutions, would help address accusations of corruption and improve investor confidence.
- **Decentralized Management:** Empowering provincial governments, particularly in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, will promote equitable distribution of benefits and reduce alienation among marginalized communities.

By institutionalizing transparency, Pakistan can balance strategic imperatives with democratic legitimacy, ensuring that long-term Chinese engagement is perceived as developmental rather than extractive.

Expanding Cooperation Beyond CPEC

While CPEC remains the cornerstone of bilateral relations, overdependence on a narrow set of infrastructure projects exposes Pakistan to financial risks and political sensitivities. Diversification is essential.

- **Technology and Digital Economy:** Joint ventures in artificial intelligence, e-commerce platforms, and fintech can create knowledge-intensive growth sectors and provide employment for Pakistan’s growing youth population.
 - **Renewable Energy Transition:** Cooperation in solar, wind, and hydroelectric power can both meet Pakistan’s climate commitments and reduce reliance on fossil fuel imports.
 - **Agricultural Modernization:** Joint research on high-yield seeds, water efficiency, and mechanization can directly improve food security, an underexplored area in the partnership.
- These initiatives would distribute benefits more broadly across sectors, moving the relationship beyond debt-financed infrastructure to innovation-driven cooperation.

Enhancing Public Diplomacy and People-to-People Linkages

The future resilience of China–Pakistan relations will depend not only on elites but also on societal perceptions. While surveys suggest generally positive public attitudes toward China, localized grievances in Gwadar and skepticism over employment distribution remain serious concerns.

- **Educational Exchange:** Expanding scholarships and joint degree programs can reinforce mutual understanding and reduce brain drain.
- **Cultural Diplomacy:** Joint media collaborations, film festivals, and sports diplomacy can counter negative narratives and humanize bilateral ties.
- **Community Engagement in CPEC Projects:** Regular consultations with local stakeholders would mitigate protests, reduce resistance, and foster a sense of ownership among affected populations.

By investing in people-to-people diplomacy, both countries can reinforce the symbolic dimension of the “Iron Brotherhood,” ensuring that it resonates beyond official rhetoric.

Joint Regional Strategies

Finally, the bilateral partnership must be situated within a wider regional context. Both Beijing and Islamabad face a shifting security and economic environment shaped by U.S.–India alignment, instability in Afghanistan, and volatility in the Middle East. Joint strategies are therefore essential.

- **Afghanistan Stabilization:** Coordinated diplomacy and development assistance can help prevent spillovers of militancy and ensure CPEC’s western expansion remains viable.
- **Regional Connectivity:** Integration with Iran, the Gulf states, and Central Asia can transform Pakistan from a transit corridor into a regional trade hub.
- **Climate Security Cooperation:** Joint efforts in water management and disaster preparedness will address shared vulnerabilities in an era of climate change.

By aligning their regional strategies, Pakistan and China can project themselves as co-architects of stability in South Asia rather than as reactive actors bound by bilateral imperatives alone.

Conclusion

The Pakistan–China partnership has entered a decisive stage where achievements and vulnerabilities are equally pronounced. The past two decades demonstrate clear progress in infrastructure connectivity, energy security, trade facilitation, and educational-cultural exchanges. The rise of Confucius Institutes, the influx of Pakistani students to Chinese universities, and expanding opportunities in IT and scholarships reflect the growing people-to-people dimension. At the same time, elite-driven narratives, coupled with youth expectations of jobs and connectivity, sustain the perception of China as Pakistan’s indispensable partner. Financing constraints, IMF conditionality’s, and Pakistan’s heavy reliance on Chinese loans and FDI perpetuate asymmetries. Security challenges—particularly repeated attacks on Chinese nationals—have strained bilateral trust and forced Pakistan to expand security expenditures at the cost of development priorities. Moreover, public concerns in Balochistan and debt-trap discourses challenge the state’s ability to build broad-based legitimacy for CPEC. The findings demonstrate that the Pakistan–China relationship is neither purely strategic nor entirely economic; rather, it is shaped by a hybrid of realist calculations, economic interdependence, and constructivist narratives. While China views Pakistan as a counterbalance to U.S.–India alignment, Pakistan sees China as a guarantor of economic survival. This structural imbalance has made China increasingly cautious, especially after project delays, governance shortcomings, and rising local opposition. Moving forward, the durability of the partnership depends on Pakistan’s ability to reform institutions, enhance transparency, and diversify cooperation beyond mega-infrastructure. Joint strategies in IT, climate adaptation, cultural diplomacy, and regional connectivity can rebalance the relationship and foster resilience against global power shifts. The Pakistan–China partnership, therefore, stands at a crossroads: it may either remain asymmetrically transactional or evolve into a more equitable and multidimensional strategic alliance if Pakistan embraces reforms and inclusivity.

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