

Pakistan-China Ties @ 75: A Geostrategic and Goeconomic Review

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Abstract

Standing tall at 75, Pakistan-China relations have evolved from a formal diplomatic relationship in 1951 into one of the world's most enduring strategic partnerships in 2026. This paper provides a narrative review of the evolution of the bilateral relations from 1951 to 2026 focusing on two key aspects: geostrategic and goeconomic. A qualitative narrative review methodology was used drawing on peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy reports, and other reliable academic sources. The study applies multiple theoretical perspectives, including realism, geo-economics, securitization theory, developmental state theory, and linkage theory to explain the developing nature of Pakistan-China ties. The paper observes that while defense and security cooperation laid the foundation of the partnership, the launch of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) transformed the relationship into a multidimensional strategic and economic partnership. The paper also identifies important challenges, including security concerns, economic disparities, debt sustainability, environmental considerations, and increasing geopolitical competition in Asia. Furthermore, the paper highlights significant research gaps. The paper concludes that the future of Sino-Pakistan ties is likely to depend on

effective governance mechanism, inclusive development, stronger institutional capacity, and continued strategic cooperation to achieve sustainable regional connectivity, economic growth, and long-term mutual benefits.

Keywords: Pakistan–China Relations, Strategic partnership, Geo-economics, South Asian geopolitics, CPEC

Introduction

Pakistan-China relations are one of the longest and most pivotal bilateral relations in modern international relations [10]. The diplomatic relationship, established on 21st May 1951, has progressed from formal to strategic position and now appears holistic, including areas of defence cooperation, economic integration, technological cooperation, diplomatic cooperation and regional connectivity. The partnership has proven to be very resilient over the last seven decades, even in the face of varying domestic political leadership, regional security situations, and shifts in the international system [4].

The two neighbors started their bond in 1951 when Pakistan appeared to be the first non-communist Muslim country to officially recognize the People's Republic of China (PRC) [34]. Strategic convergence between the two countries was pitched a gear higher from the initial engagement, which became largely diplomatic due to the Sino–Indian War of 1962 and the succeeding Sino–Pakistan Boundary Agreement of 1963 [12]. Over the next few decades, bilateral cooperation grew, in the field of defence, in diplomacy, and in the field of regional and international affairs. Resultantly, over time, Pakistan and China began to build what is generically termed an ‘all-weather strategic cooperative partnership’ based on high levels of political trust and long-term strategic alignment [37].

The start of CPEC in 2013 was a turning point in the history of bilateral relations that added geoeconomic value to the geostrategic partnership. CPEC was the major project of China's BRI, which brought an extra significant geo-economic dimension to the partnership, with emphasis on infrastructure development, energy cooperation, industrialization and connectivity between the regions. CPEC widened the horizon of bilateral cooperation from traditional security issues by investing in Special Economic Zones (SEZs), Gwadar Port and power projects [20]. This has led to a more nuanced view of Pakistan–China relationship, which is now characterized as a strategic partnership and economic interdependence [28].

Although thoroughly researched, significant gaps are still found in the current literature on the domain of Pakistan-China ties. The previous literature on the topic is either of a geostrategic/security-driven nature [7];[8];[11];[16];[24];[35] or of an economic orientation strictly relating to CPEC [3];[6];[9];[13];[18];[19];[20];[21];[25];[26];[27];[28];[31];[32]. Few studies have sought to tie these two separate areas of the literature together through a single analysis. In this context, the present paper offers a review of Pakistan-China relations between 1951 and 2026 with a focus on both geostrategic and geoeconomic aspects. The purpose of this paper is to synthesize the existing body of scholarship dealing with the evolution of bilateral relations since the inception of the partnership, to discuss the transformative effects of CPEC, to explore the major theories that have been employed to explain the partnership, to examine important challenges facing bilateral relations, and to highlight emerging research areas for future study. The paper synthesizes a variety of strands from the literature in order to gain a more holistic understanding of one of the most important strategic partnerships in modern-day Asia.

The rest of the paper is structured in the following way. The methodology used is described in the next section. Section three covers the historical perspective of Pakistan-China relations from 1951 to date. Section four examines the main theoretical frameworks. Section five discusses CPEC as a transformational project, streamlining its geostrategic and geoeconomic importance. In section six, major challenges facing the partnership are discussed. The emerging research gaps and future research directions are identified in section seven and the conclusion is provided in the last section.

Methodology

The methodology used in this paper is narrative review in a qualitative approach, which is used to analyze historical background, strategic importance, economic change and current issues of Pakistan-China relations from 1951 to 2026. Narrative reviews are well suited to summarizing wide-ranging literatures, to revealing patterns of ideas and to providing conceptual understanding of complex political and strategic issues [38]. Narrative reviews are not as specific as systematic reviews in their research questions or their narrow inclusion criteria, and they allow for broad interpretation of a variety of scholarly views and theoretical work [30].

The review is based on research articles, books, policy studies, and authoritative analyses on Sino-Pakistan relations, strategic cooperation, regional security, and CPEC. The thematic

analytical framework as a method is used in the review. The literature was reviewed and categorized based on five broad themes: (1) historical development of Pakistan-China relations, (2) strategic and security cooperation, (3) economic integration and CPEC, (4) future prospects and emerging research agenda. The themes are found in most of the literature and together picturise the evolution of bilateral relations in the last seven and half decades.

To add analytical rigor, the review uses several theoretical frameworks, such as realism, geo-economics and developmental state theory, and securitization theory. Multiple theoretical lenses provide a more holistic picture of the strategic, economic and political aspects of Pakistan-China relations. Instead of adopting a single approach as the only one that fully explains the development of bilateral ties, the paper takes into account the interplay of security issues, economic considerations, and overall geopolitical developments.

Historical evolution of Pakistan-China relations (1951-2026)

The history of Sino-Pakistan ties can be dated back to the early days of the Cold war when Pakistan was the first non-communist Muslim majority country to officially recognize the PRC on 21st May 1951. While this was the time when Pakistan was in close contact with Western powers, mainly as a member of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), it was also attempting to build relations with China. This early recognition was evidence of Pakistan's pragmatic foreign policy and its drive to diversify its international relationship and not be entirely dependent on any one power block [12]. The Bandung Conference of 1955 was an important event in bilateral relations. Bandung helped in a progressive change in the Pakistani perspective on China as an ideological threat to a strategic partner [34]. During the conference, mutual challenges were also mentioned on colonialism, sovereignty and regional peace and stability, which would be instrumental in bilateral relations in the coming decades.

The turning point of the ties was the Sino-Indian War of 1962. The war brought about a fundamental shift in regional strategic perceptions and reinforced strategic convergence of Pakistan and China [22]. The war heightened fears in Pakistan about India's regional ambitions and its military buildup. For China, Pakistan became a key regional ally, one that helped to balance the power in South Asia. The overlapping strategic interests led to more cooperation in security and defence issues [14]. Bilateral relations were further strengthened during the Indo-Pakistan War of 1965. While the West was on the course to limit military aid to Pakistan,

China offered support the country and became a dependable strategic ally. This experience left a profound impression on the strategic thinking of Pakistan and shaped the notion that China was a more reliable ally compared to some Western nations. It was during this period that the strategic need for greater integration and cooperation was further highlighted and began to be institutionalized through the events of 1965. At the end of the 1960s, the Pakistan–China relationship had progressed from a mere diplomatic interaction to a strategic partnership and entailed political trust, security cooperation, and a common interest in the region [34]. Economic ties were still fairly small, but the seeds of the ‘all-weather friendship’ had been well planted [10].

1. The Iron Brotherhood Era: Strategic Consolidation, 1971-2000

Between 1971 and 2000, Sino-Pakistan ties matured into a comprehensive strategic partnership. The bilateral cooperation increased with the development of major geopolitical events such as the Bangladesh crisis, Sino–American rapprochement, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the nuclearisation of South Asia. A major challenge to the partnership was the crisis of 1971 in Pakistan. Although China was unable to intervene directly in the conflict, Beijing provided important diplomatic support to Pakistan in international forums. This crisis further strengthened the image of China as a trusted ally in Pakistan’s eyes, and played a role in shaping the ‘iron brotherhood’ narrative in bilateral relations [36].

One of the most significant aspects of the relationship at this time was defence and nuclear cooperation. China became a significant military hardware and technology provider to Pakistan. Not only in the field of defense, but cooperation was extended in the field of civilian nuclear energy and strategic capabilities of Pakistan [10]. The Chinese support played a significant role in Pakistan’s attempts to achieve strategic balance in South Asia especially against its archrival India [8]. With the end of Cold War and the sanctions imposed on Pakistan under the Pressler Amendment, Pakistan’s dependence on China further grew. Beijing had become a steadily growing source of diplomatic, military and economic aid during the 1990s. China’s measured response to Pakistan’s nuclear tests in 1998 was in sharp contrast to the sanctions levied by many Western nations, strengthening the image of China as a reliable strategic ally [36].

2. Economic pivot and emerging interdependence 2001-2013

The security-centric nature of the Pakistani-China partnership slowly transformed over the period of 2001-2013, as the alliance shifted from an exclusively security oriented relationship to a range of economic cooperation and strategic interdependence [29]. Besides defence cooperation, bilateral relations focused on expanding trade, infrastructure development, energy cooperation and regional connectivity. This change was a reflection of China's status as a global economic power and a growing demand in Pakistan for foreign investment, infrastructure upgrades and economic diversification. The changed geopolitical landscape for both countries after 9/11. Pakistan became a frontline state in the War on Terror launched by the US and China was determined to ensure regional stability and protect its western territories from the negative impact of extremism and instability [29]. Pakistan had now resumed its ties with the US, but it reiterated its commitment to maintaining the strategic partnership with China as its top priority in its foreign policy. This balancing policy allowed Pakistan to retain close ties with China while cultivating relations with both powers. This balancing policy helped Pakistan keep both productive relations with both major powers and maintain close ties with China [5].

Institutional mechanisms were used to advance economic cooperation. In the economic aspect of cooperation, the early harvest programme and China-Pakistan Free Trade Agreement (FTA) were signed in 2005 and 2006 respectively and served as important milestones [29]. The FTA was China's first wide-ranging trade deal that has been signed with a South Asian nation. The goal of the agreement was to lower tariffs, increase market access and promote bilateral trade. During this decade the volume of trade increased significantly, thus the economic integration between the two countries also grew [20]. The CPEC was conceived during this period.

3. The CPEC Era and Geoeconomic Expansion (2013–2026)

The launch of the CPEC in 2013 served as a quantum leap in Sino-Pakistan ties. CPEC was the flagship project of the BRI, which ushered cooperation between two countries to a new level by bringing in massive investment in infrastructure, energy generation, industry, transportation systems, digital connectivity, and regional integration [20]. This has led to the shift from a security based partnership to one that is multidimensional in terms of strategic and economic interdependence [18]. CPEC carried both geoeconomic and geostrategic orientations aimed at improving connectivity in the region, at stimulating regional economic growth and at achieving good access to the Arabian Sea for China [28]. The initial phase of CPEC was mainly

centered on infrastructure and energy deficit issues in Pakistan. There was a significant focus on investment in power generation, transport-related infrastructure, and road infrastructure. Projects like Sahiwal Coal Power Plant, Port Qasim Power Project, Karot Hydropower Project and extension of Karakoram Highway greatly boosted the energy and transportation capability of Pakistan. These projects helped to alleviate the electricity crisis and enhance logistic connectivity conditions for economic growth [20].

Energy security was one of the most notable successes of the early days of CPEC. Before the corridor was launched, Pakistan experienced electricity shortages, which affected its industrial productivity and its economy. CPEC has also contributed thousands of megawatts to the national grid through investments in different thermal and hydro, solar and wind energy projects. These investments were instrumental in alleviating the energy crisis in Pakistan and boosting economic resilience [28]. In addition to infrastructure and energy, CPEC is also of great geopolitical significance. The corridor is an alternative route for China to link western China and the Arabian Sea through Gwadar Port. This course may also help to lessen China's reliance on the Strait of Malacca, a vital choke point in China's marine trade routes that handle a significant share of its energy supplies. Thus, there is a consensus that CPEC is a 'geo-economic' project which at the same time serves the economic and strategic interests of China [4].

CPEC is a chance for Pakistan to modernize infrastructure, stimulate foreign direct investment, industrialize and improve connectivity in the region. SEZs launched under CPEC aim to boost industry and promote jobs, and better connect Pakistan into regional and global value chains. CPEC exhibits some developmental state features, such as the state-led development of investments, infrastructure, and industrial transformation, which are instruments of economic modernization [32]. CPEC has sparked extensive discussion amongst academics and policy makers due to its transformative effects. The project is seen as a catalyst for economic development, regional integration and strategic cooperation by supporters [9]. However, critics worry about the sustainability of debt, the management of governance, transparency, impacts on the environment, and unequal benefit distribution. However, too many positive estimates have been made about CPEC that fail to account for the structural issues that are plaguing Pakistan's economy such as the weak institutions, limited capacity for governance, and the capacity for implementation [6].

Security issues have also come to the fore as a big hurdle in the way of successful CPEC [9]. There is growing apprehension about protecting Chinese investments due to militant attacks against Chinese personnel, infrastructure projects and security forces. There is growing concern about the protection of Chinese investments because of militant attacks against Chinese personnel, infrastructure projects and security forces. The corridor is being increasingly seen as a purely economic project and has now become a national security issue for Pakistan and China as the project moves to the status of a ‘securitized’ initiative [2]. Resultantly, dedicated security units have been formed to safeguard projects and staff to ensure security in regard to the corridors.

The strategic landscape around CPEC has been evolving in a more complex manner with increasing great power competition. The corridor has new geopolitical dimensions as India and the United States are strengthening their strategic relationship, the region is concerned about the growing influence of China and instability in Afghanistan. Pakistan now has a dilemma to solve, on one hand of pursuing greater cooperation with China and on the other hand of continuing the practice of viable relations with the western states and international financial institutions [5]. However, with these difficulties, CPEC is the largest economic project in the history of Pakistan and the greatest symbol of modern Pakistan-China relations [3]. The corridor has changed the bilateral relations in a way that they have become ‘embedded’ economic interests in a relationship that was traditionally centered on security issues. The successful implementation of this transformation will rely on addressing the security issues, as well as the economic aspirations and geopolitical trends that are pertinent in the context of Pakistan and China’s future beyond 2026.

Theoretical Perspectives on Sino-Pakistan Ties

There is no single overarching theory which can fully account for the development of Pakistan-China relations. The history of the partnership has been marked by a series of developments over the past 70 years and has been shaped by security issues, economic factors, regional security, and wider geopolitical changes. Today, bilateral relations are increasingly discussed in the context of several theoretical approaches reflecting the complexity of these relationships.

1. Realist Interpretation

Realism is the most pertinent theory to explain the genesis and existence of Pakistan-China relations. Realist theory is based on the premise that states live in an anarchic international

system and that security and power accumulation is the only course for states to pursue their national interest [15]. Alliances and strategic partnerships can be formed when states see shared threats and want to counterbalance against their adversaries. The realist view sounds more appropriate to the case of Pakistan-China ties. During the Cold War era, China's rise was a significant counterweight to India's conventional military dominance for Pakistan. Pakistan was beneficial for China, because it would obstruct India's regional footprint and have a friendly ally on the western border of India [33]. Strategic convergence between the two states was further strengthened by the Sino-Indian War of 1962, Sino-Pakistan Boundary Agreement of 1963 and following defence cooperation. Shared strategic interests have been the key factor in maintaining the partnership, more than ideology [33].

2. Geo-economic Perspective

In recent years, the geo-economic dimension has come into the limelight to analyze Pakistan-China relations, especially after the announcement of the CPEC. Geo-economics is the term for the use of economic tools and infrastructure investments to create a wider range of strategic and geopolitical goals based on the strategic importance of trade, investment, infrastructure and economic integration as instruments of influence [19]. In Pakistan, the foreign policy is increasingly becoming geo-economic, which focuses on economic development, connectivity and regional integration, as this is the approach adopted by the country [28]. CPEC is not only an infrastructure project, but a much broader initiative within this framework. It serves as a blueprint for the countries to pursue long-term economic and geopolitical goals. CPEC enables China to reach the Arabian Sea through Gwadar Port and improves the connectivity of the western countries with South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East for China. The corridor also gives China strategic flexibility as it is not reliant on sea lanes through the Strait of Malacca [4]. CPEC presents Pakistan with a chance to solve its infrastructure challenges, draw in investments, enhance energy security, and better connect with regional trade.

3. Theory of securitization

Another significant lens through which contemporary Pakistan-China ties can be viewed is by applying the theory of securitization. The Copenhagen school securitization theory explores the ways in which political actors turn specific issues into security issues, thus legitimizing 'extraordinary' policy measures and institutional responses [2]. As Pakistan and China increasingly present the implementation of CPEC as a national security concern. The political and military elites in both countries have securitized the corridor, presenting the success of the

corridor as a fundamental requirement for national development, strategic stability and bilateral cooperation [2]. Consequently, threats to CPEC are often portrayed as threats to national security, and not just as economic problems. This securitization exercise has brought about significant institutional implications. Pakistan also created special security divisions to ensure safety of Chinese personnel and infrastructure projects and security cooperation between the two countries has increased significantly. The establishment of special security measures is indicative of the fact that economic infrastructure has been turned into a strategic asset that is protected by special measures. Securitization has enhanced the security of the projects, however, there are also some concerns that too much securitization can diminish transparency, restrict public engagement, and result in the militarization of economic governance [2].

4. Theory of Linkage and Chinese influence

The theory looks at the impact of external relationships on domestic political institutions, and policy outcomes. The new avenues of political and institutional linkages between Pakistan and China have emerged as a result of China's growing involvement through infrastructure financing, economic cooperation, and development assistance [37]. The linkages are not merely economic, but could also affect governance, development agendas and state–society relations. Linkage theory has proved to be especially useful since it focuses on the wider institutional implications of economic cooperation. It spurs scholars to consider the role that external partnerships play in governance, policy-making and political evolution beyond just economic outcomes.

Geostrategic and Geoeconomic Achievements, Opportunities, and Challenges of CPEC

The ties between the two neighbours are driven by both the geostrategic and geoeconomic considerations. CPEC is the most important milestone in the history of ties. It has created a new paradigm of bilateral relations from a security-focused partnership to a multi-dimensional partnership of economic cooperation, infrastructure, industry, and strategic interdependency. The CPEC has added geo-economic dimension to the bilateral engagement and changed the nature and importance of defence cooperation, which was the hallmark of past phases of Pakistan-China relations [17]. These projects have helped both nations to develop their strategic cooperation, economic development and regional integration. Thus, CPEC has been

a focal point of bilateral relations and one of the most porous aspects of the current Pakistan–China cooperation, which has been widely studied.

1. Economic Security and Developmental Transformation

The core goal of CPEC is to ensure the economic security through modernization of infrastructure and investment driven development. Before the advent of CPEC, Pakistan was battling significant issues in the areas of transportation and logistics, energy supply and industrial productivity. These constraints on structure affected economic growth and made the country less competitive in the regional and international markets. The aim of CPEC was to address the shortage of critical infrastructure, enhance transportation and connectivity, and ease trade [20]. Highway, motorway, railway modernisation, and port development have been majorly improved through large-scale investment, which has significantly eased the logistical bottlenecks and enhanced physical infrastructure. The enhancements have increased the country's ability to promote domestic economic activities and improved connectivity of the region. The CPEC has several features of developmental state models in particular, the utilization of massive public investment to boost industrialization and economic modernization [32]. The setting up of SEZs is with the objective of attracting investment, promoting industrial production and job creation. The zones are expected to enable technology transfer, enhance productivity and better connect Pakistan to regional value chains.

2. Energy Security and Economic Resilience

Energy security has been given prime importance in economic development and the initial tranche of the CPEC focused on power generation projects. The key projects were coal-fired power plants, hydropower, solar, and transmission projects. These investments also added to the country's energy shortfall by enhancing electricity generation capacity. The increase in energy supply has contributed to the development of industrial productivity and economic resilience [20]. Likewise, the investments in the energy sector are one of the most successful elements of CPEC as it directly tackles a structural constraint in economic development [28].

The other pivotal goal of CPEC is to improve regional connectivity. The corridor aims to make Pakistan a transit hub for China, South Asia, Central Asia and Middle East. CPEC is expected to help in the transport of goods, services and people from one region to another through investments in transport infrastructure and logistics. Connectivity is at the core of the BRI and a tool for supporting economic integration and regional development [26]. In the larger picture,

Pakistan's geographical location and access to the Arabian Sea makes it a geo-strategically important country. The establishment of the road network, railways networks and development of Gwadar Port, therefore, has been seen as a vital step towards improving regional trade and economic cooperation.

3. China's Strategic Importance

Beyond the economic aspect, CPEC also holds strategic value for China. According to many scholars, the corridor is a significant part of China's overall geopolitical and geo-economic policy. Geography plays a crucial role in the development of Chinese interest in Pakistan [4]. China obtains better access to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean through Gwadar Port and the related transportation network. This opening enhances diversification of trade routes and supports China's connectivity initiative. Another one that is often mentioned is the threat of China's reliance on the Strait of Malacca. This sea passage is one of the world's biggest trade bottlenecks and is a major route of Chinese trade and energy imports. The Chinese strategy of building alternative transport corridors in Pakistan is an attempt to mitigate strategic fragilities of relying on a single route [6]. Improved connectivity and economic integration are seen as tools in achieving stability and development in western China. Thus, CPEC is a multifaceted project that encompasses both economic growth and developmental goals, as well as plans for regional connectivity and geopolitical considerations.

4. Strategic Significance for Pakistan

CPEC is often referred to as a 'game changer' that can redefine Pakistan's economic and strategic landscape [4]. The corridor can serve as an avenue to alleviate the long pending infrastructure deficiencies, bring in foreign investments, enhance energy supply and boost connectivity in the region. On strategic level, CPEC is also institutionalizing Pakistan's relationship with China. While bilateral relations in the past mainly focused on security cooperation, CPEC has integrated economic aspects into the cooperation, enhancing the mutual dependency and mutual incentives for further cooperation [17]. This institutionalization makes bilateral relations more resilient and provides several avenues of interaction besides security issues. CPEC also enhances the strategic importance of Pakistan in regional and international politics. The BRI is the flagship project of the new initiative, making Pakistan the core of China's plan for regional connectivity [24]. This role will help Islamabad take advantage of its geographical location and put more investment in the city.

5. Critical Evaluation: Successes and Limitations

Various studies have provided conflicting views on the overall impact of CPEC. Achievements in infrastructure development, energy security, transportation connectivity and strategic cooperation are highlighted. They believe that the corridor has enhanced Pakistan's prospects of development and at the same time has given a boost to the bilateral relations with China [20];[28]. Some critics note, however, there are some drawbacks. First, questions about sustainability of the debt burden are ongoing. While there are many scholars who do not accept narratives on debt traps, there are questions of finance, repayment and fiscal sustainability [6]. Second, governance issues and lack of transparency have been a concern about accountability and public participation. Third, the disparities in benefits have fueled complaints and political tensions among the provinces [1]. Another constant hurdle is security. The attacks have proven that large-scale development projects are susceptible to attacks in unstable security settings. The securitization of CPEC is a sign of the fact that the economic development is now being linked to wider security concerns [2].

Critical Challenges to the Pakistan–China Partnership

Although Pakistan-China relations have reached unprecedented heights and the vision and mission of CPEC are groundbreaking, the relationship is challenged by various structural, political, economic and security issues. The relationship is solid at the governmental level, but the implementation of the long-term objectives will be successful if the following drawbacks and issues in project implementation are overcome. Recent studies [6]; [32] suggest that the sustainability of Pakistan-China's cooperation will not be decided only by convergence of the strategies but also the efficient management of the challenges of governance, economic vulnerability and regional geopolitical complexities within the two countries.

1. Security Issues

The first challenge that faces Pakistan and China cooperation is security. After the initiation of CPEC, more and more Chinese nationals, infrastructure projects and economic investments have been targeted by the militant organizations working in Pakistan. Multiple attacks against Chinese engineers, workers and diplomatic staff have brought concern to the security situation around the significant development initiatives. According to [2], these security challenges have been a part of the securitization of CPEC which made it a national security concern rather than an economic development project. As a countermeasure, Pakistan has set up dedicated military

and paramilitary teams to safeguard the investments of Chinese people and Chinese projects of CPEC. The Special Security Division (SSD) and the various security measures are indicative of the growing linkage between economic development and security. These measures have the advantage of creating better security for strategic projects, but the threats are still posing uncertainty and escalating cost of operations [17]. The instability can deter investment, delay the project implementation and decrease people's trust in future development projects. In the context of sustainable security, it is therefore necessary to ensure not only military security but also socioeconomic inclusion, political stability and good governance.

2. Institutional Challenges

Another big challenge faced in the implementation of CPEC is governance. Transparent decision making, institutional coordination and effective regulatory frameworks are needed for large-scale infrastructure projects [18]. But repeated studies have pointed out concerns over transparency, accountability and public participation in decision making processes related to CPEC. The governance aspect of CPEC has been frequently described as being centralised and under the radar of public scrutiny [37]. Significant negotiations have often occurred at the federal level on a range of important project selection, financing and implementation priorities, with relatively limited involvement of provincial governments and local stakeholders. For complex infrastructure projects, the crucial factors for success include efficient administrative structures, effective government coordination and good regulatory institutions. Any weakness in these areas can lead to delays in implementation, cost overruns, and ineffectiveness of the project. Resultantly with a view of maximizing the developmental gains of CPEC and building trust in the initiative, governance reforms and institutional transparency have come into the spotlight [20].

3. Domestic Issues

Amongst the most discussed issues regarding CPEC is the distribution of benefits among the provinces of Pakistan. Those who support the corridor have said it has brought economic opportunities to the country, but critics have claimed that this opportunity has been unevenly distributed, leading to the perception of regional inequality and political exclusion. The topic of federalism and centre–province relations has been a matter of discussion for the implementation of CPEC [1]. Issues on providing infrastructure projects, industrial estates and investment opportunities in various provinces have been raised many times. The success of CPEC in the long-term will depend on whether the region is able to raise its GDP, as well as

whether the policymakers are able to resolve regional grievances and ensure equitable benefits of development across all provinces of Pakistan.

4. Debt Sustainability and Economic Dependence

There has been a significant amount of research and debate on the financial aspects of CPEC. Debt sustainability and long-term financial commitments are prominent issues in the academic and policy discourse on economic modernization, which is also presented by infrastructure investments. But academics warn against a ‘debt-trap’ narrative of CPEC [6]. According to [28], many debt-related claims do not differentiate between different financing approaches such as concessional loans, commercial investments and public–private partnerships. However, it is a valid question whether the accumulation of debt is sustainable, and the continued balance-of-payments problems, heavy reliance on foreign finance and slow growth in exports in Pakistan could lead to economic risks in large-scale borrowing [6]. Therefore, the sustainability of CPEC is largely hinged upon its capacity to foster economic activities, boost exports and provide adequate economic returns to justify investments. The past experience is a perfect example of how strategic convergence is happening between Pakistan and China due to shared concerns about India’s regional role. The trend has continued with bilateral cooperation. CPEC poses concerns with regards to sovereignty, regional influence and increasing China’s involvement in South Asia from Indian point of view [24]. The corridor is therefore one of the areas of tension in the regional security landscape.

5. The Pakistan-USA-China Strategic Triangle

Change in the relationship of Pakistan, China and the US is another significant challenge and opportunity for Pakistan’s foreign policy. Pakistan had been having relations with both Washington and Beijing during the Cold War and post-Cold War era. But now, as the competition between the United States and China is becoming more intense on strategic front, it has become more difficult to balance. Pakistan’s modern foreign policy is a process of ‘strategic hedging’ [5]. Pakistan does not seek to ally itself with either of the two countries, but aims to build positive relationship with both countries while maximizing economic and strategic opportunities. Pakistan thus has the challenging task of building deeper relationship with China in the context of CPEC as well as maintaining the relationship with Western countries, international financial institutions and global markets. The challenge of managing this strategic triangle successfully will be one of the main hurdles in the foreign policy of Pakistan in the foreseeable future [10].

Emerging Research Gaps

There has been considerable scholarly engagement with strategic cooperation, defence cooperation, CPEC and regional geopolitics in the literature, which has been growing in its size and scope. However, even with significant scholarly interest, there are still significant gaps in current scholarship. Although the focus of most studies remains on macro-level strategic and economic aspects, governance outcomes, local-level impacts, environmental sustainability, technological transformation and perceptions of society have been given relatively little attention. To fill these gaps is crucial to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamic Sino-Pakistan partnership.

The Road Ahead

Pakistan-China ties are likely to continue along strategic lines and simultaneously adapt with economic changes in the future. The international situation, with Russia-Ukraine conflict and the crisis in the Middle-East, is still in a state of flux, but the basic pillars of bilateral cooperation continue to be solid. The partnership is likely to remain in the centre of the foreign policies of both countries on account of the shared interests, institutionalized cooperation mechanisms, and growing economic interdependence.

Strategically, regional security issues are likely to continue to be significant. Bilateral cooperation will remain affected by geopolitical developments in this region, especially in the backdrop of the current Iran-US-Israel conflict in the Middle-East, Pakistan's tension with New Delhi and Kabul. Thus, the partnership is likely to involve defence collaboration and security coordination as well [3].

From a geoeconomic perspective, future collaboration is likely to be increasingly centered on industrial development and technological innovation, digital connectivity, agricultural modernization, and green energy. Whereas the first phase of CPEC has focused on infrastructure and energy, the next phase will be more focused on economic productivity, industrial competitiveness and sustainable development . This change is part of a broader paradigm shift from building infrastructure to consolidating the economy and strengthening institutions [17]. Cooperation is also expected to be influenced by the increasing significance of the theme of geo-economics. The economic connectivity and regional integration serve as tools for foreign policy that are of increasing importance [19]. In this context, economic

integration with China, better trade relations, and increased involvement in the regional connectivity network are potential areas for growth. However, sustained improvement will rely on how well the existing challenges are managed in the future [6]. The issues of security, governance, need for debt sustainability, environmental concerns and provincial disparities remain to be addressed. If these problems are not solved, they can jeopardize the success of development projects and their ability to gain public acceptance.

Evolution of the Global Power Balance is another important factor. The situation is bound to be more competitive between U.S. and China, which will present opportunities and challenges for Pakistan [23]. Balancing relations with several big powers and strategic cooperation with China will continue to be a key focus for Pakistan's foreign policy. Pakistan's performance with this balancing strategy will have an impact on its economic opportunities and diplomacy flexibility.

In general, Pakistan-China relations are likely to further strengthen in the near future. But the nature of the cooperation can shift from a security-focused cooperation into a more holistic cooperation that focuses on defence and economic modernization, technological cooperation, sustainable development and regional connectivity.

Conclusion

The relations between Pakistan and China are one of the most enduring and strategically important relations in today's international relations. The relationship between the two countries has evolved from diplomatic engagement to a multidimensional strategic partnership in the fields of defence cooperation, economic integration, infrastructure, technology and regional connectivity.

The present paper has aimed to highlight that bilateral relations developed from multiple stages of development. The early phase set the stage for convergence and trust in the political foresightedness. The following decades saw the development of defence coordination and diplomatic co-ordination, evolving into an 'all-weather strategic cooperative partnership' as it is often referred. The most important change in the bilateral relations was the launch of the CPEC in 2013, which accounted for a new geo-economic dimension and increased economic interdependence. The paper also notes that the study of the complexity of Pakistan-China bond

is contributed by various theoretical lenses i.e. realism, securitization, interdependence, developmental state, and linkage theories.

Based on the available sources, CPEC has brought about significant advancements in infrastructure, energy security, and regional connectivity. But there are still many hurdles to be overcome. The corridor remains subject to various security risks, governance issues, and uncertainties in the global order, such as issues of sustainability of debt, and geopolitical tensions. All of these challenges call for effective governance, institutional reform, and inclusive development strategies [27].

Additionally, the paper highlights significant gaps in the current scholarship, such as research that is limited in the area of governance outcomes, technology transfer, environmental sustainability, public perceptions, and long-term development impacts. This would help to fill in the missing pieces of the puzzle and would be useful to scholars and policy makers.

Pakistan-China relations will occupy the centre stage in South Asian geopolitics and the development of South Asian economies. Going forward, the partnership will be successful, if both countries are able to turn economic opportunities into consistent and equitable development results and if there is continued strategic collaboration [17]. The new phase in the partnership, which is marked by economic consolidation and technological cooperation, will be assessed in terms of its contribution to the stability of the region, modernization of its economy and human development to a greater extent.

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