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75 Years of China-Pakistan Relations: Iron Brotherhood to All-Weather Strategic Partnership

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Abstract: This paper explores the 75-year evolution of bilateral relations between the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the People's Republic of China (PRC). Often described as an 'Iron Brotherhood' and an 'All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership,' the relationship has transitioned from diplomatic recognition in 1951 to deep-seated geopolitical, economic, and strategic/military cooperation. The paper aims to analyse the historical milestones, strategic convergences, and economic transformations of China-Pakistan bilateral relations, the impact of CPEC, and strategic cooperation/collaboration in addressing contemporary challenges faced in a rapidly shifting global order.

Keywords: China-Pakistan Cooperation, Iron Brotherhood, Strategic Partnership, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), BRI, and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Introduction

The bilateral relationship between the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the People's Republic of China (PRC) stands as a unique paradigm in modern international relations. Characterised by the phrase 'Iron Brotherhood' (巴铁 (Bā Tiě) in Chinese), the bond transcends traditional geopolitical alignments and has survived many shifts in global and domestic political regimes in both Islamabad and Beijing. Over the last seven decades, both governments have consistently strengthened these relations across various domains, including diplomacy, economy, commerce, trade, defence and security, and educational and cultural cooperation. China-Pakistan friendship is proverbially known as 'higher than the Himalayas, deeper than oceans, and sweeter than honey.' It has evolved from traditional bilateral relations into a 'strategic partnership'. This paper provides a comprehensive historical and analytical overview of the 75-year journey, tracing its evolution from early diplomatic alignment to an intense, multi-layered strategic partnership. China and Pakistan enjoy exceptional relations of iron brotherhood that have been transformed into an all-weather strategic cooperative partnership built on 75 years of close diplomatic, strategic, military, economic and regional cooperation. This special relationship has been nurtured consistently and continuously by all successive generations of political leadership in both countries since Pakistan recognised the People's Republic of China in 1951, immediately after the successful revolution led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) against imperial and colonial forces. Chairman Mao Zedong and Premier Zhu-en-Lai accorded special significance to China's relations with Pakistan. In the light of their long-term strategic vision of having strong friendly relations with neighbouring countries, China has always accorded special importance to its relations with Pakistan. Correspondingly, all leaders of Pakistan have reciprocated with equal reverence to cherish Pakistan's iron brotherhood with China. China – Pakistan relations are limited to diplomatic, economic, and security domains only. These relations are equally strong in other fields of people-to-people (P2P) relations in scientific, technological and educational cooperation, cultural exchanges, archaeological preservation, revival of ancient Silk Road connectivity, and business-to-business relations in areas of commerce and trade, construction of rail/road highways, special economic zones and building of dams and hydro-electric projects. Pakistan has the honour of hosting CPEC, which is the flagship project of the Chinese 'BRI.

Historical and Cultural Bonds

Pakistan and China are linked to each other with strong historical and cultural bonds. The ancient Silk Road, a trade route linking China with the West, originated in Chang'an (modern Xi'an).¹ Passing through various other areas, it had very important arteries that crossed over the land that comprises today's Pakistan. The Silk Road carried goods and ideas between the two great civilisations of Rome and China.² Part of the Silk Road still exists as a paved highway connecting Pakistan and the Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang, China.³ Currently, it is called the Karakoram Highway or the Silk Road - Pakistan-China Friendship Highway in Pakistan and China National Highway 314 (G314).

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Karakoram Highway connects Kashgar in the western Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in China with Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan.⁴

Travelling through the Silk Road, many Buddhist monks and Chinese Scholars came to *Udiyana* (present-day Swat) in northern/north-western Pakistan and Taxila (*Takshila*), near Islamabad, to seek religious knowledge about Buddhism. At that time, Gandhara (the Taxila-Khyber Pakhtunkhwa-Gilgit region and parts of southern Afghanistan) were centres of excellence for Buddhist philosophy and learning. Historical records of pilgrims of great Buddhist monks clearly describe that, in addition to the famous monk Faxian, several other great Chinese Buddhist monks and pilgrims braved the perilous Silk Road to visit *Udiyana*. During antiquity, Udiyana was universally revered as a sacred cradle of Buddhist learning, philosophy, and eventual Vajrayana traditions. Besides monks, many royal emissaries also visited these areas. The most famous ones include: Faxian (early 5th Century - 402 CE), Song Yun & Huisheng (early 6th Century - 520 CE), and Xuanzang (early 7th Century - 630 CE)⁵. Hyecho (704–787 CE), a Korean Buddhist monk who was trained extensively in Tang Dynasty China, also traversed Udiyana and Gandhara in the early 8th century. He wrote his famous '*Memoirs of the Pilgrimage to the Five Kingdoms of India*'.

The Silk Road was not a source of trade and commerce alone. Indeed, it played an important role in the exchange of religious and cultural ideas and philosophies, which shaped the depth and intensity of strong ties among people of South Asia, China, Central Asia, and extending far away to Southeast Asia through China. Therefore, it can be said with great authenticity that China-Pakistan relations are new. Indeed, these build on the solid foundations laid by scholars, monks and royal emissaries over a long period of many centuries. Recently, a very famous Chinese Scholar, Professor Dr. Li Xiguang, who is a former Dean of the School of Global Communication and Journalism, Tsinghua University, and a very well-known Professor Emeritus, has described these relations in great detail in his doctoral thesis on '*Travel and Pilgrimages of Chinese Scholars and Monks to Udiyana*.'

Diplomatic Relations

China became a republic in 1912 when the Republic of China (ROC) was established, ending thousands of years of imperial rule. However, the struggle for real independence and complete sovereignty continued till 1949. In 1949, the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) led by Mao Zedong, after the CCP defeated the Chinese Nationalist forces (the Kuomintang, led by Chiang Kai-shek) in a long, protracted Chinese Civil War.⁶

Pakistan was among the first non-communist states and the first Muslim-majority country to recognise the People's Republic of China in January 1950⁷. The two countries established formal diplomatic relations on May 21, 1951.⁸ In 1955, Vice President of the PRC, Madam Song Ching Ling, marked the first high-level visit from the Chinese side to Pakistan⁹. In 1956, the visit of Prime Minister H.S. Suhrawardy to China was the first high-level visit from Pakistan. In 1963, Foreign Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto paid a high-level diplomatic visit to China¹⁰. This visit is considered a watershed and a turning point in the diplomatic history of China and Pakistan. Thereafter, there was no looking back, and China – Pakistan relations have seen many milestones of strength to strength over decades to this day.¹¹ Though these relations have been traditionally labelled as 'higher than the mountains, deeper than the oceans, and sweeter than honey', Pakistan's ex-Prime Minister, Syed Yusuf Raza Gilani, also repeated these words in his vote of thanks at the joint session of Parliament after the address of the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao,¹² in 2010.

Early Initiatives of Mutual Cooperation

In 1963, Pakistan and China concluded a boundary agreement through the Sino-Pakistan Agreement after peaceful negotiations¹³. Pakistan and China have never had any difference of opinion or border dispute. Whereas Pakistan has serious disputes on its eastern border with India (Kashmir, Siachen, and Sir Creek) and Afghanistan, and on the west, occasionally raises doubts about the international status of its border with Pakistan (the Durand Line), the border between China and Pakistan has always remained very peaceful without any controversy. In fact, early resolution and mutually agreed border settlement have paved the way for future cooperation, leading to the establishment of road links between China and Pakistan through the construction of KKH.

In 1964, Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) started its flights to Beijing, becoming the first non-communist country airline to fly to Beijing, entering into a new era of linkages between the two countries. Pakistan was the window for China to interact with the rest of the world. In 1965, an Agreement on Cultural Cooperation was signed, promoting understanding and harmony.¹⁴

Construction of the Karakoram Highway (KKH) – China-Pakistan Friendship Highway / Silk Road

The construction of the Karakoram Highway (KKH), which links Islamabad (Pakistan's capital) with Kashgar (an important city in western China) in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), stands as a landmark achievement by the engineers and workers of the Chinese People's Liberation Army and the Pakistan Army. This project, also known as the China-Pakistan Friendship Highway or Silk Road, is proverbially called the eighth wonder of the world.¹⁵ In Pakistan, it is called National Highway 35 (N-35) and is known as the Friendship Highway in China. It extends 1,300 kilometres (810 miles) from Hasan Abdal, Pakistan, to the Khunjerab Pass and onward to Kashgar, China. In 1963, Pakistan and China concluded the boundary agreement between the two countries through peaceful negotiations.¹⁶ It was a landmark achievement in the improvement of bilateral relations. India had raised many undue

objections to such a settlement. Pakistan and China had accorded high priority to establishing communication links between the two friendly and brotherly countries. To promote people-to-people contacts at a large scale and to enhance cooperation in various other fields, especially to increase bilateral trade and commerce, it was imperative to establish road and rail links between China and Pakistan. Pakistani and Chinese engineers began construction of the KKH, linking Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan region with China's Xinjiang region, in 1966. It was inaugurated in 1978, and later on, it was further extended till 1982. It is believed to be the highest paved highway¹⁷ in the world that passes through or near the mountain ranges of the Himalaya, Hindu Kush, Karakoram, and Pamir.¹⁸ It can be said with certainty that credit for conceiving such a novel project with enormous impact on the relations of both countries essentially goes to Premier Zhou Enlai, who was indeed a great visionary leader. It is also said that Chairman Mao Zedong, the revolutionary leader of the historic struggle of the Communist Party of China (CPC) that led a successful revolution and creation of the People's Republic of China, had also expressed his desire to establish a road communication link with Pakistan, to open a southern gateway of China to South Asia and the rest of the world. Many Chinese scholars have subscribed to and supported this presumption. Now, in hindsight, we can say with certainty that KKH has paved the way for a new avenue of connectivity, CPEC.

Global Cooperation – A Bridge between the West and China

Pakistan historically helped bridge diplomatic gaps between China and the West, including facilitating early U.S.-China contacts in the early 1970s. Pakistan facilitated the first visit by the U.S. Secretary of State and Advisor for National Security and the US President Nixon to China, paving the way for the first-ever US-China official contact, leading toward the normalisation of Sino-American relations¹⁹. Former US Secretary of State Dr Henry Kissinger recognised Pakistan's 'key' role in arranging his secret visit from Islamabad to Beijing in 1971, for making a breakthrough in China-US relations. Pakistan's pivotal role was acknowledged during a high-level webinar event organised by China's State Council in Beijing. In March 2021, the China Development Forum organised a special commemorative session to mark the 50th Anniversary of Dr Kissinger's secret visit to Beijing from Islamabad. 'Dr Henry Kissinger praised Pakistan for its role during that period and how President Yahya Khan acted as a go-between for China and the US, communicating secretly with Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai and President Richard Nixon, which led to Dr Kissinger's path-breaking journey in a Pakistan International Airline (PIA) plane from Islamabad to Beijing on July 9, 1971. Dr Kissinger recounted how the first message from China was in the form of a handwritten note, which was personally dictated to him in the White House by the then Pakistan Ambassador in Washington, Agha Hilaly.'²⁰ Based on Kissinger's visit in 1971, U.S. President Richard Nixon visited the People's Republic of China from February 21 to 28, 1972, becoming the first sitting American president to visit the country.²¹ The visit initiated the nuanced 'One China' policy framework regarding the status of Taiwan.

Bilateral Diplomatic Cooperation, Synergy and Convergence

Bilateral diplomatic cooperation between China and Pakistan is anchored in an 'All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership.' Though such cooperation is visible in all international fora, its best manifestation is demonstrated at the United Nations (UN) and its various bodies and offices, particularly at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in the field of international peace and security and global conflict resolution. The core of Sino-Pak diplomatic synergy lies in an unyielding mutual defence of territorial sovereignty on the international stage. China and Pakistan consistently harmonise their voting behaviours and narratives across global forums, notably the United Nations. At the regional level, Pakistan is an active member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and supports China's diplomatic and economic initiatives, especially on regional connectivity, promotion of commerce and trade, security and development. Pakistan has always supported the One China policy without any reservation or hesitation. Pakistan has reaffirmed repeatedly that Taiwan is an integral part of the People's Republic of China and must be united with the mainland through a peaceful process. Pakistan opposes all forms and manifestations of Western policies of 'China Containment.' Pakistan condemns militarisation of the Indian and Pacific oceans, especially the (so-called) Indo-Pacific region, the South China and East China Seas, the Strait of Malacca, and the Taiwan Strait. Pakistan also rejects the false claims made by various Southeast Asian countries on some islands and the consequent implications for territorial waters. Pakistan discards and refutes unsubstantiated allegations by Western governments and media about human rights in China, which are launched through malicious campaigns to malign China. Pakistan has strongly rebutted Western allegations and accusations of China's efforts to create a 'debt trap' for Pakistan by providing loans. Instead, Pakistan appreciates and values Chinese investments in various sectors of its economy and believes that such initiatives will help Pakistan get out of economic crises and difficulties.

During the 1965 and 1971 Indo-Pakistan wars, China provided full diplomatic support to Pakistan when Western powers had imposed arms embargoes. This brotherly gesture solidified Pakistan's trust, transforming China into a reliable diplomatic and security partner.

China's Clear Stance on the Kashmir and Trans-Boundary Water Disputes

For decades, China has provided explicit, consistent and unflinching diplomatic support to Pakistan regarding the Jammu and Kashmir dispute.²² Following unilateral regional transformations in South Asia caused by India's illegal occupation of the State of Jammu and Kashmir, China has always used its leverage at the United Nations Security

Council (UNSC) to challenge unilateral actions and seek peaceful solutions to the dispute anchored in the UN Charter and relevant UNSC resolutions. Repeated official statements by China reaffirm that the Kashmir dispute is a 'leftover from history' that must be resolved through dialogue and diplomacy, effectively blocking efforts to neutralize the issue internationally.²³ 'China's strong reaction to India's abrogation of Articles 370 and 35A was not merely a diplomatic gesture; it represented a recalibration of its Jammu and Kashmir policy. Beijing not only criticised India's move but also voiced concern regarding the elevation of Ladakh into a Union Territory, which directly affected China's claims in Aksai Chin.'²⁴

Diplomatic cooperation has extended into the domain of ecological and resource security. Amid growing tensions surrounding water distribution in South Asia, China and Pakistan have expanded their diplomatic alignment to include transboundary water resource cooperation. China supports Pakistan's calls for adherence to international law regarding upper-riparian responsibilities, ensuring that water is not weaponised as an instrument of geopolitical leverage. Following tensions with Pakistan, India had suspended and placed the Indus Water Treaty (IWT) 'in abeyance.' The Treaty was concluded in 1960 through the auspices of the World Bank.²⁵ On August 31, 2026, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) at The Hague issued a major final award. The court ruled that the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty remains fully operational and binding, and India has no unilateral right to suspend or place the treaty 'in abeyance'.²⁶

Pakistan's unshakable support for One China Policy

Pakistan serves as an unshakeable defender of the One China Policy. Islamabad consistently supports Beijing's stance on Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and the South China Sea, a cornerstone of its foreign policy. Pakistan explicitly rejects Taiwanese independence, validating China's position on national reunification. This unwavering stance is frequently reaffirmed during bilateral meetings, joint state statements, and global forums like the United Nations.²⁷

Defence and Security Relations: The Anchor of Strategic Partnership

While economic ties have dominated recent discourse, defence cooperation remains the foundational anchor of Sino-Pakistan relations. China's assistance in Pakistan's defence production sector forms the backbone of its strategic self-reliance. The military and security relationship has evolved from early cooperation and Pakistan's need to acquire military hardware from China into deep co-development and strategic interdependence. Over the decades, this partnership evolved from basic equipment overhauling to deep technological transfers and joint industrial manufacturing.²⁸ The partnership between Pakistan and China to build defence-related industry emerged during a critical geopolitical juncture in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the United States imposed military embargoes on Pakistan. In 1971, Pakistan and China signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to build a tank rebuild complex. The Chinese state-owned enterprise NORINCO provided the capital, machinery, blueprints, and engineering expertise to establish the Heavy Rebuild Factory (HRF) at Taxila.²⁹

Initial assistance in the defence production sector by China was offered to Pakistan in the early 1970s. Conceived under Pakistan's 3rd Five-Year Plan, Heavy Mechanical Complex (HMC), Taxila was established with extensive Chinese economic and technical assistance. The Chinese specifically designed and gifted unique heavy infrastructure—including a massive 3,000-ton hydraulic press—becoming operational in December 1971. Originally built as a cornerstone for capital goods and industrial metallurgy, HMC provided the baseline heavy foundry infrastructure that enabled Pakistan's subsequent defence manufacturing ecosystem.³⁰ China helped set up the Heavy Foundry and Forge (HFF) to produce massive castings and forgings. This critical component was later merged directly into HMC in 1990, securing the metallurgical foundation needed for heavy engineering and artillery parts.

Chinese assistance was the foundational cornerstone in the creation of Heavy Industries Taxila (HIT), and the enterprise continues to serve as the engine of Pakistan's self-reliance in land-based defence production. By evolving from a basic repair facility into a massive military-industrial complex, HIT has dramatically reduced Pakistan's dependence on Western defence imports, saving billions in foreign exchange.³¹ HIT has three main component factories: Tank Manufacturing Factory; Heavy Rebuild Factory (T-Series); and DESCOM.

The 'Tank Manufacturing Factory' is a modern outfit with the latest Tank manufacturing facilities, which include heavy-duty flexible machining operations and a complete infrastructure for hull and turret manufacture. The factory has successfully manufactured tanks Al-Khalid, T85, T69 and Army Recovery Vehicles (ARVs). It was established in January 1992, with direct Chinese assistance, with a view to creating indigenous tank manufacturing capabilities in Pakistan. It consists of generic facilities for fabrication and assembly. Presently, the factory is manufacturing the Al-Khalid-I and Armoured Security Vehicle PROTECTOR.³² After producing the Al-Khalid Main Battle Tank in collaboration with NORINCO, HIT produced the Al-Zarrar Tank, which completely modernised Pakistan's massive armour fleet. HIT's latest addition is the Haider Tank, which is completely assembled locally. While utilising Chinese technological partnerships, HIT locally manufactures key subsystems like the gun system barrel, breech mechanism, and electronic fire control systems. In addition to rebuilding and developing its own tanks, HIT has also contributed to manufacturing Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs) and self-propelled howitzers.

China and Pakistan maintain a deep, decades-long strategic partnership in aerospace and air defence, anchored by joint manufacturing, technology transfers, and the supply of advanced military hardware. Pakistan Aeronautical Complex, established in 1973 with Chinese assistance, has played a crucial role in building Pakistan's indigenous capability to repair, maintain, and build fighter aircraft.³³ The crown jewel of defence cooperation between China and Pakistan is the

JF-17 Thunder fighter jet, co-developed by the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex and China's Chengdu Aircraft Industry Corporation. Along with the JF-17 Thunder, joint production projects include: Karakoram-8 Trainer and Fighter aircraft, Super-7 Fighter (a substitute for the existing F-6 fighter aircraft) and J-10 Fighter.³⁴ During the India-Pakistan military conflict of May 2025, the Pakistan Air Force, with extremely skilful employment of J-10CE multirole fighters equipped with PL-15E high-tech missiles, shot down at least six Indian fighters, including a French Rafale.³⁵ Referring to a video released by the Pakistan Air Force's Directorate General Public Relations in the first week of September 2026, international media has reported that the latest Chinese HQ-17AE missile air defence launch vehicle has been inducted in the Pakistan Air Force. Developed by the CASIC Second Academy in Beijing, China's leading manufacturer of air-defence weapons, each HQ-17AE is a mobile system which is able to detect and bring down all types of air threats, including stealth fighter jets, helicopters, combat drones and cruise missiles that enter its perimeter of operation.³⁶

China has significantly contributed to developing the Pakistan Navy's capabilities through large-scale platform acquisitions, technology transfers, and joint shipbuilding initiatives, which include four submarines built in China and four to be constructed via technology transfer at the Karachi Shipyard & Engineering Works. The first Chinese-built Hangor-class submarine was officially commissioned in Sanya, China, with deliveries and local assembly scheduled through 2028.³⁷ China has also constructed a fleet of advanced guided-missile frigates (Type 054A/P) tailored for the Pakistan Navy.³⁸ China's biggest contribution towards maritime infrastructure development in Pakistan is the construction of Gwadar Port. It is located in the southern province of Balochistan, on the Arabian Sea. It is the largest project of CPEC, which itself is considered a flagship project of the BRI. The Gwadar Port, when fully operational, will be one of the largest trans-shipment facilities for landlocked Central Asian States and western China.

Historically, China has provided critical assistance to Pakistan's civilian nuclear energy sector (e.g., the Chashma and KANUPP reactor complexes) and strategic missile technology development, which Pakistan views as vital for maintaining strategic stability in South Asia. In fact, China has provided foundational and highly strategic assistance to Pakistan across its aerospace research and satellite launching programs.³⁹ China has financed and built several commercial nuclear reactors to help resolve Pakistan's energy crises. This includes the four-unit Chashma Nuclear Power Plant Complex (C-1 through C-4) and the massive 1,100 MW Karachi Nuclear Power Plants (K-2 and K-3), which utilise advanced Chinese Hualong-1 reactor technology.⁴⁰ China has constructed and launched the PAKSAT-1R in 2011, followed by the multi-mission PAKSAT-MM1 in May 2024, significantly expanding broadband, e-governance, and digital connectivity across Pakistan.⁴¹ Pakistan became the first foreign country to fully integrate into China's BeiDou satellite navigation network, granting civilian and military independence from Western GPS systems.⁴² Under the 2025–2029 Space Cooperation Plan, Pakistani astronaut candidates are undergoing extensive training through the China Manned Space Agency (CMSA). Pakistan plans to send its first astronaut to live and conduct research aboard China's Tiangong Space Station.

Strategic Interoperability between China and Pakistan

China and Pakistan maintain a deep, institutionalised strategic partnership featuring regular joint exercises across all military branches, army, navy, and air force to improve interoperability, improve operational synchronisation, and counter shared regional threats.⁴³ Both armies conduct the recurring Warrior exercise series (such as Warrior-VIII and Warrior-IX) focused on simulated counterterrorism operations, urban warfare, and sharing best practices in modern combat.⁴⁴ Similarly, code-named 'Shaheen (Eagle)', the joint training exercise between the Chinese and Pakistani air forces, is a regular feature of joint exercises between both countries.⁴⁵ The navies of China and Pakistan regularly perform bilateral exercises in the North Arabian Sea. The Sea Guardian exercise series is a regular bilateral naval drill conducted jointly by the Pakistan Navy and the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA-N) of China to enhance military cooperation and tactical coordination.⁴⁶

The Geo-Economic Shift: CPEC and the Belt and Road Initiative Nexus

In the 21st century, economic relations between China and Pakistan underwent a paradigm shift from a geostrategic partnership to a mutually beneficial geo-economic partnership. These relations reflect a deep mutual trust that has evolved gradually over many decades, resulting in a multi-billion-dollar geo-economic collaboration. China is Pakistan's largest trading partner, while Pakistan remains a key economic partner for Beijing in South Asia.

Launched in 2015, CPEC serves as the flagship project of President Xi Jinping's BRI. The BRI was initiated by China after President Xi Jinping's famous speeches in 2013 in Kazakhstan and Indonesia. President Xi Jinping first proposed the *Silk Road Economic Belt* during a speech at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan in September 2013, focusing on overland rail and road infrastructure across Central Asia. Xi Jinping stated that the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' would gradually form regional large-scale cooperation by connecting points to areas, and lines to plains, which would make the economic ties between Eurasian countries closer, cooperation deeper, and the development space broader.⁴⁷ On October 3 of the same year, while visiting Indonesia, he proposed in his speech at the Indonesian Parliament that China would like to jointly build the '21st Century Maritime Silk Road' with Indonesia and other ASEAN countries. The Road – the maritime trade routes – was proposed focusing on maritime ports and sea routes across Southeast Asia and beyond. The "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" together constitute the Belt and Road Initiative.⁴⁸

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a massive bilateral project to improve infrastructure within Pakistan and to enhance and expand trade with China. It envisions further integrating the countries of South Asia. 'The project was launched on April 20, 2015, when Chinese President Xi Jinping and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif signed 51 agreements and memorandums of understanding valued at \$46 billion.

The goal of the CPEC is both to transform Pakistan's economy—by modernising its road, rail, air, and energy transportation systems—and to connect the deep-sea Pakistani ports of Gwadar and Karachi to the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in China and beyond by overland routes.⁴⁹ 'This aims to reduce the time and cost of transporting goods and energy such as natural gas to China by circumventing the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea. The initiative is also set to open several special economic zones (SEZs), modelled on similar zones in China that offer incentives for investment and are intended to spur rapid economic growth.'⁵⁰ CPEC is considered the "flagship project" of the BRI because it serves as the ultimate proof-of-concept and the most strategically critical corridor among all BRI routes.⁵¹ In the words of President Xi Jinping: 'CPEC is located where the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road meet.'⁵² The project represents a massive bilateral investment portfolio—exceeding \$60 billion—designed to transform regional infrastructure and economics.⁵³ Geographically, CPEC is the unique link that bridges China's overland economic 'Belt' (originating from Xinjiang) directly to the maritime "Road" at the Gwadar Deep-Sea Port on the Arabian Sea. CPEC and Gwadar Port together have a unique geostrategic importance which transcends the horizons of geo-economics alone. Gwadar Port is the ultimate insurance policy against maritime blockades.

Gwadar is situated on the northern coast of the Arabian Sea in Pakistan's southern province, Balochistan. It is situated just outside the Strait of Hormuz, a maritime highway through which one-third of the world's liquefied natural gas and 20% of global oil pass. Gwadar Port is a reliable safeguard for China against any maritime blockades in the Strait of Malacca or the South China Sea. The blockade of the Strait of Hormuz during the recent US-Israel and Iran War in the Persian Gulf region has proved these apprehensions and fears. Over 80% of China's oil imports pass through the narrow Strait of Malacca, a critical chokepoint that could easily be blockaded by adversaries (such as the US or India) during a conflict. By routing energy imports through Gwadar and transporting them overland via CPEC to Xinjiang, China secures a direct, land-based energy corridor that completely bypasses the South China Sea and the Malacca Strait. CPEC provides China with a vital, 3,000-kilometre alternative overland shortcut. This secures a direct pathway to the Middle East, Africa, and European markets, vastly reducing transit time and security risks. While operated commercially, Gwadar's deep-sea capabilities allow it to perform multiple roles during global or regional maritime crises. Landlocked Central Asian Republics (CARs) can also use Gwadar as their shortest route to international markets.

The first phase of the CPEC focused on major infrastructure and energy projects, while newer phases emphasise industrial growth, special economic zones, technology development, and regional connectivity. As of late 2026, Pakistan has completed 45 development projects under the CPEC framework, representing a total combined investment of US \$25.61 billion.⁵⁴ The progress on CPEC projects has faced some setbacks, including structural and security challenges. However, China and Pakistan have demonstrated enormous resilience, determination, mutual understanding, and functional cooperation to overcome all such challenges.

The China-Pakistan Free Trade Agreement

The China-Pakistan Free Trade Agreement (CPFTA) is a comprehensive trade pact designed to integrate the economies of China and Pakistan, eliminate trade barriers, and encourage bilateral investments. It was the very first free trade agreement (FTA) that China signed with any South Asian country.⁵⁵ Phase-1 of the 'Agreement' entered into force on July 1, 2007, whereas Phase-2 was operationalised on January 1, 2020.⁵⁶ The first phase merged the earlier 2006 "Early Harvest Programme" into a broad bilateral framework. To expand its scope beyond tangible goods, the two nations signed the Pak-China Free Trade Agreement in Services in 2009. This unique addition relaxed historical shareholding restrictions. It allowed Chinese firms to hold 60% to 99.99% stakes in domestic sectors like telecom, finance, healthcare, and IT education—far exceeding standard foreign investment caps.⁵⁷ While Phase I significantly boosted overall trade volume, it led to a heavily widened trade deficit for Pakistan. To correct this, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan spearheaded the negotiation of Phase II. Officially implemented in 2020, CPFTA-II provides a level playing field for Pakistani products competing in the \$2 trillion Chinese import market. It introduced robust safeguard mechanisms to shield sensitive domestic Pakistani industries from being overwhelmed by cheap imports.⁵⁸ The agreement functions closely alongside the broader infrastructure projects of CPEC. While recent geopolitical shifts and economic constraints have introduced a more cautious phase for heavy infrastructure financing, the bilateral trade framework continues to see active attention. High-level diplomatic engagements, such as meetings between Pakistani and Chinese leadership, ensure ongoing pacts covering technology, agriculture, and trade development keep the agreement active.

Sociocultural Convergence: People-to-People Relations

The people-to-people (P2P) contacts between people of China and Pakistan transcend historical boundaries. The Silk Road connecting these people was the cradle of a multicultural civilisation based on peaceful and harmonious coexistence, openness and inclusiveness. President Xi Jinping, in his speech in Kazakhstan in 2013, recalled Zhang

Qian, a royal emissary of China's Han Dynasty around 140 B.C., who left Chang'an, the capital of the Han Dynasty and travelled westward on a mission of peace and opened an overland route linking the East and the West. His diplomatic travel is commonly known as Zhang Qian's journey to the Western regions. He also spoke about great adventurers, including Du Huan of China, Marco Polo of Italy and Ibn Battuta of Morocco, who travelled along these ancient routes of the Silk Road over land and at sea, during the eras of the Tang, Song and Yuan Dynasties.⁵⁹ President Xi Jinping underscored that 'the ancient silk routes were not for trade only; they boosted the flow of knowledge as well.' He further explained: 'Through these routes, Buddhism, Islam and Arab astronomy, calendar and medicine found their way to China, while China's four great inventions and silkworm breeding spread to other parts of the world. More importantly, the exchange of goods and know-how spurred new ideas.'⁶⁰

Beyond the hard power of the Iron Brotherhood and mutual economic interests, the success of China - Pakistan relations is deeply embedded in sustained institutional and cultural ties that transcend the current era and have their roots in the centuries-old Silk Road spirit. These relations are manifested through people-to-people (P2P) and business-to-business (B2B) relations. Innumerable cultural exchanges, over the last seventy-five years, have strengthened the solid foundation of P2P and B2B relations. The establishment of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms across Pakistan, massive scholarship allocations for Pakistani students studying in China, and robust think-tank exchanges have fostered deep cultural empathy between the two populations. At present, five such institutes are functioning in Pakistan in collaboration with various universities.⁶¹ According to recent data from the Embassy of Pakistan in Beijing, there are nearly 29,000 Pakistani students currently studying in China. Among these enrolled students, approximately 6,000 to 7,000 are studying on Chinese scholarships.⁶² This high enrolment makes Pakistan the third-largest source of international students in China globally. Similarly, universities in China have established more than twenty Pakistan and CPEC Studies Centers.

China – Pakistan Regional Cooperation and Pakistan's Strategic Role in the SCO

Pakistan plays a vital geopolitical and security role as a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), helping to bridge South and Central Asia.⁶³ Since gaining full membership in the SCO, in 2017, with China's endorsement, Pakistan has played a positive role in advocating Eurasian integration. Pakistan offers the SCO a critical land route connecting Central Asian States with the Arabian Sea, aligning CPEC infrastructure with broader SCO transit corridors. Pakistan also actively participates in the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in Tashkent, sharing intelligence to combat cross-border militant threats.⁶⁴ Both nations focus heavily on combating the 'Three Evils': terrorism, separatism, and extremism. The SCO membership opens larger Eurasian markets to Pakistan, diversifying trade partners beyond traditional boundaries. The multilateral forum of the SCO allows Islamabad to present its regional perspectives and build consensus.⁶⁵ China and Pakistan also use the SCO to coordinate policies, support mutual core interests, and present a unified front against external geopolitical pressures.⁶⁶

Conclusion

Despite the resilience of the 'iron Brotherhood' and 'Strategic Partnership', there are complex structural issues, impediments and challenges that need to be overcome to make China – Pakistan relations stronger and more robust. Foremost among these challenges are 'Security Concerns for CPEC Projects and Chinese Citizens' in Pakistan. Non-state actors and anti-state militant groups in the region have targeted Chinese engineers and projects in Pakistan. Securing Chinese personnel remains a top priority for Pakistani law enforcement and a point of intense bilateral coordination. 'Economic Sustainability' is another main concern. Critics, especially in the West, frequently scrutinise the financial terms of CPEC loans. Many times, they use the narrative of 'debt trap diplomacy to undermine Chinese investments in Pakistan. Managing external debt while maintaining high infrastructure growth requires delicate macroeconomic management by Pakistan. 'Geopolitical Polarization' in the region has caused insurmountable challenges in balancing its relations with global powers. As global rivalries gain momentum, ever-deepening U.S-China systemic competition puts pressure on Pakistan. Similarly, recent military conflict in the Persian Gulf has also brought Pakistan onto the international diplomatic chessboard.

Seventy-five years of diplomatic relations have transformed Pakistan-China relations from a geopolitical compulsion into an immutable, systemic strategic partnership. The 'Iron Brotherhood' has proven remarkably resilient against changing global dynamics. Therefore, China-Pakistan relations need to be orchestrated in a very skilful manner in the future. China and Pakistan must continue to build enviable relations on the solid edifice laid by generations of political and security leadership of both countries. Future generations should follow in the footsteps of their elders and make these relations impregnable and indisputable.

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