

Journal of Religion & Society (JRS)

Available Online:

<https://islamicreligious.com/index.php/Journal/index>

Print ISSN: [3006-1296](#) Online ISSN: [3006-130X](#)

Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)

EXPLORING THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND FUTURE PROSPECTS OF PAK CHINA RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between Pakistan and China is one of the most strategically significant and historically rich bilateral partnerships in contemporary geopolitics. This study examines the evolution of Pak-China relations, tracing their origins to the early years following Pakistan's independence in 1947 and the establishment of formal diplomatic ties in 1951. It highlights key milestones, including the 1963 border agreement, China's assistance in Pakistan's nuclear program, and the mutual collaboration during the Cold War era. The research further underscores the role of economic cooperation, such as the development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which has become a cornerstone of their partnership under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The article delves into the multi-faceted nature of this alliance, which spans defense, trade, technology, and cultural exchanges. It explores how shared strategic interests, such as counterbalancing regional rivalries and promoting economic connectivity, have shaped their enduring bond. Furthermore, the study analyzes the challenges and criticisms faced by this partnership, including concerns about Pakistan's growing economic dependence on China, regional tensions with India, and the evolving dynamics of international relations. Looking ahead, the article assesses the prospects for Pak-China relations in light of emerging global trends. It discusses opportunities to deepen cooperation in renewable energy, digital technology, and regional stability initiatives, while addressing potential obstacles like debt management and external geopolitical pressures. The study emphasizes the need for both nations to ensure mutual benefits and sustainable growth, preserving the long-term integrity of their alliance. This comprehensive analysis provides valuable insights into the historical, economic, and geopolitical dimensions of Pak-China relations. It

concludes that the partnership remains a pivotal factor in the regional and global landscape, with promising prospects for continued collaboration in the face of evolving challenges and opportunities.

Keywords: Pakistan-China Relations, CPEC, Belt and Road Initiative, Regional Geopolitics, Economic Cooperation, Strategic Partnership, Historical Context, Future Prospects.

Introduction

The close geographical association of China and Pakistan highlights the inescapable influence of geography on international relations, emphasizing the historical context of the two countries' strong relationship. Despite the self-interest inherent in state behavior, the Pakistani leadership has consistently pursued friendly relations and collaborative efforts with its neighbors, while China's foreign policy is shaped by its national interests. Looking ahead, future prospects for the China-Pakistan relationship include political, economic, business, and educational partnerships, as well as the potential impact of regional and geopolitical developments. It is crucial to recognize the historical bonds that have shaped the relationship between China and Pakistan and the shared aspirations for development and stability. The multifaceted nature of this partnership opens up avenues for collaboration in various fields, such as technology, infrastructure, trade, and people-to-people exchanges. As the world continues to evolve, it is essential for China and Pakistan to adapt and strengthen their ties, seizing opportunities presented by a rapidly changing global landscape. Through strategic dialogue, joint initiatives, and a commitment to mutual respect, the relationship between China and Pakistan can continue to thrive, serving as a foundation for peace, prosperity, and progress in the region and beyond. (Abb, 2023)

Historical Background

China-Pakistan relations clearly illustrate how an alliance between two states shapes their readiness to confront forces that inhibit alliance

and coordination. The relations have been marked by greater cross influences from diverse political systems and social structures. Both states were born of British India, and the foreign policies of both began with a resolution of the Kashmir dispute. Thus, the seeds of conflict were contemporaneous with the constitution of the two states. Also, just as relations between India and China were catastrophic from the beginning, relations between both Pakistan and India and Pakistan and China were amiable. China-Pakistan relations were initiated in 1954, solidified by various agreements in subsequent years, and finally led to an alliance during the 1965 and 1971 wars. Seen retrospectively, ports are a recent invention by the Chinese and for the Chinese. The notable development has been the Chinese decision to establish a Pakistani corridor. The building of the Karakoram Highway constitutes a major investment that pegs down and implements the Chinese decision. The decision to hand over the corridor is a significant development in the context of strategic thinking and very generous in the context of China's behavior with other allies. (Khan & Ilmas, 2023)

1. Early Interactions

There is a long substantive historical context of interactions mutually carried out by civilizations and states now situated where China and Pakistan are. Ever since ancient times when civilizations began to seek prosperity and sustainability, humans along the Silk routes exchanged goods, services, ideas, and religious thoughts. The travelers back then became ambassadors of peace and understanding. Buddhism played a critical part in shaping civilization in the region now identified as Pakistan. Many Buddhist scholars and holy men journeyed across mountain passes and forded rivers to reach the land now known as China and taught en route. Buddhism became very influential in China. (Sardar & Saeed, 2020)

The Silk routes through which vigorous exchanges took place helped build a physical and cultural bridge between China and the region situated where Pakistan is. However, an unexplored fact is that apart from these traditional cultural relationships that China had with the lands situated in South Asia, Buddhism itself originated in India, which lies on the western border of China. After Buddhism was included in the territorial, China on several occasions sent monks to study Buddhism in India and stored many Buddhist scriptures. These unique aspects of China's knowledge of Indian religions as well as the Indian subcontinent play an important role in the academic study and propagation of Buddhism in East Asia and also, to some extent, embody moral and ethical belief systems that could be utilized to promote the guiding principles of a society. (Firdous, 2020)

2. All-Weather Friendship

The first and foremost expression used by both nations whenever describing and commenting on the nature and depth of their friendship is a relation, and this has been most commonly verified with the all-weather friendship. Besides making this term popular, the leaders of both countries have also offered the rationale for their usage. A careful analysis of the Pak-China twenty-year relations would also authenticate the impressiveness of the claim made by them, but within a limited context. As a matter of fact, assertion, either of word or of repetition, has no worth as a token symbol, and both the words and the things they are meant to symbolize need more to reinforce the feeling they are meant to express. The glorified status of the Pak-China relations, as well as their all-weather status, was institutionalized with the signing of the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance in 1963. The Pak-China relations up to 1963 were not similar to those of the USSR and PRC relations. Without any doubt, the complex interplay of values in the conduct of international politics

has rendered the sharing of such relationships extremely difficult, if not impossible. Our understanding and assessment of this claim depend on the nature of the context in which it is used. It is not a supervalue that is stable and dominant, dictating patterns of factor relations, the form of social system, and the configuration of the international system, nor is it an expression that at all levels pertains to a single peak value. Rather, it is a derived value, influenced or shaped by a variety of relations and activities. (Ali, 2020)

Economic Cooperation

The economic cooperation is a bone of contention in Pak-China relations. From the 1950s to the 1990s, Pak-China bilateral economic cooperation could be defined as cooperation in a purely economic area by two countries of different status; China on a completely different level. But from 2000 to the present, cooperation has been in a relatively developed status by China with relatively less developed Pakistan. In short, from the 1950s to the 1990s, Pak-China economic cooperation meant assistance plus bilateralism and trade for Pakistan. But from 2000 onwards, cooperation in an economic area has been more about protectionism and investment with multilateral involvement by China in Pakistan. The dynamic change in Pak-China economic cooperation from the 1950s to the present represents how the wave of globalization has seriously impacted Pak-China economic cooperation. It is characterized by the fact that first, after the establishment of diplomatic relations, bilateralism became the main form of trade in national trade. (Dabrowski, 2024)

During 1950-1970, the main economic part of the Pak-China economic cooperation was the military and economic assistance between the two countries. In terms of military cooperation, during 1951-1970, Pakistan received five hundred eighty-four pieces of the Chinese F-6 fighter-bomber and fifteen hundred ninety-six. In terms

of economic assistance, Pakistan received a total of 196 large machinery items, including agricultural machinery, road construction equipment, light industrial equipment, medical equipment, pharmaceutical machinery, bicycles, and geodetic instruments, with a total equipment value of 42,000,000 dollars. Pakistan also received a lot of traditional Chinese medicine. In 1950, China's financial allocation for Pakistan was 10 US dollars. On March 23, 1963, the period of Chinese assistance to Pakistan was extended, and the logistics service of the Chinese naval and air forces supplied two squadrons of aircraft that Pakistan had and air service at the barracks. The two countries concluded a barter agreement in which Pakistan provided 4,425,000 tons of Afghan wool, and China gave Pakistan 139 pieces of lovely cloth, with a total value of £1,510,995. In September 1962, as the country was ready to launch a military operation against Pakistan, the Chinese side provided 400 tons of gasoline, with a value of 5 million 200 thousand yuan. At the same time, large quantities of Soviet aid to India, including vehicles, tires, inflatable fuel tanks, radios, tents, and some high-end Indian and Pakistani equipment, also came from China. (Xuyang, 2022)(Hussain et al., 2020)

1. CPEC

China and Pakistan originated the CPEC in 2015, and it is the flagship project of China's 'Belt and Road Initiative.' CPEC has been planned as a network of highways, railways, pipelines, and other infrastructure projects that will connect China's restive west to the Arabian Sea through Pakistan. This corridor will not only provide China with a much shorter and secure trade route compared to the current sea route but will also open up employment opportunities for the local population. The CPEC will have a positive impact on the regional economy and support the development of Balochistan, Khyber-

Pakhtunkhwa, Gilgit-Baltistan, and Pakistani-administered Azad Jammu and Kashmir. The CPEC will bridge Asia, Europe, and Africa and promote regional connectivity and economic cooperation. (Sheng et al., 2022)

Given the barren economic and movement trajectories in the oil-rich Middle East, the prospects for CPEC will entice the Arab kingdoms, and they could be potential investors in gratitude for arms support and cheap defense services. CPEC will cause an imbalance in power relations between Pakistan and India, enabling Pakistan to restrain India but not sufficiently for it to contemplate adventure on account of its nuclear deterrence. The infrastructure, connectivity, and industrial parks that would be set up along the CPEC route will create a more conducive environment for the development of Gwadar. The Chabahar port could meet the requirements of the Middle East terminus, but its potential is stunted, and it will dwarf the CPEC. (Hussain et al.2021)

2. Trade Relations

The China-Pakistan Free Trade Agreement came into effect in 2007 and was the first such agreement entered into by China with any country. The agreement has helped greatly enhance the volume of bilateral trade. Newer areas of cooperation, potential untapped resources, and prospects of cooperation build confidence in the existing relations between the two countries. However, the increasing trade deficit for Pakistan with China and limited protection granted to Pakistani products and services continue to be a point of contention. The composition of two-way trade consists mainly of exports from China to Pakistan. The trade balance has always been in favor of China since 2006-07. Pakistan has huge potential to increase its exports to China provided that it enhances the productive capacity of the country. The exports to China are scrapped because the businesses

in Pakistan do not produce the exportable goods due to the lack of technology, human capital, and capital. (Sahibzada2021)

According to the China-Pakistan Free Trade Agreement 2007, preferential access to Pakistani products has been granted provided they either meet the Rule of Origin criterion or where it has been granted market access through the grant of the Price Quota. China has given Pakistan the price quota for three hundred and seven "zero-rated" (duty-free) tariff lines for a given quantity prescribed. The feedback has been communicated to the government of Pakistan to review the CPFTA 2007 to nullify the criticism regarding Chinese reflections on Pakistani exports. Despite the fact that China and Pakistan are complementary economies, the inherent and potential barriers to Pakistani exports to China are intricate, including that Pakistan's export of non-agriculture product dependence is at 89% only with China. The country needs trade facilitation measures with China to bring about enhancements in the trade environment. (Nasir, 2020)

Strategic Partnership

For decades, Pakistan and China have been tied at the highest diplomatic level in the form of "all-weather friendship," which is further boosted for the greater cause of CPEC. The relationship between Pakistan and China is also a cooperative geopolitical strategic alliance known as a "Strategic Partnership." This relationship was officially recognized by the leaders of both countries and announced in 2011, and has since been the cornerstone of Pakistan's foreign policy. Unlike its relationships with other countries, the Pakistan-China relationship is free from serious disputes and is considered part of Islamabad's foreign policy. Over the years, such a relationship has broken through several obstacles and can also withstand the test. The future goal of Pakistan's foreign policy is to further consolidate and

grow the strategic partnership with China while building balanced and friendly relationships with other major world powers. During the military government led by General Zia-ul-Haq, the Pakistan-China relationship began to grow rapidly and took a strategic turn. To contain India, Pakistan and China have never officially recognized Israeli forces. In addition, Pakistan has recognized Taiwan to provide a special security and political relationship with China. The growing close relations of the People's Republic of China with Pakistan led it to reach the Kashmir territory. Later, the People's Republic of China became the sole defender of Pakistan's position on the Kashmir issue, thereby counterbalancing the increasing cooperation between the Republic of India and the Soviet Union. (Purwati et al., 2021)

Military Ties

The first few years of the 1990s also saw the Shanghai Chinese City of Commerce and Trade Cooperation Pact inaugurated, which was followed by the opening, in 1992, of the Chinese Interests Section at the Pakistani Embassy in Tokyo, something that clearly underlined the close relationships now existing between China and the nations of the Asia Pacific region, an area China now saw as having become a major world economic marketplace. Also introduced by China from the beginning of 1992, along with the formalization of official trade relationships with Taiwan, Hong Kong, and others, were the opening of the first-ever private law office in Hong Kong by a US firm, and the inaugural private legal practice permit ever granted to a US lawyer in China. Another first law practice among the major international law firms of the world was the linkup made with a Pakistani law firm, who were charged with the prime responsibility for securing strategic joint venture investments for state-owned enterprises or government corporations that were created by the multi-billion dollar projects in the Pakistani Punjab Province, within the privately developed

residential defense housing colonies under construction throughout the territory. (Dexue, 2021)

During the 1990s, some of the larger projects in this respect were initiated in Russia, India, and Pakistan, and were directly related to the respective countries' military, law, and site-specific communications infrastructure policies. For Pakistan, the upgrading of the country's military infrastructure was by far the greatest priority. It was vital that during the 1990s, any increasing military cooperation between China and its neighbor Pakistan, and indeed with both India and Russia, needed to be placed on a sound economic footing. This was particularly so, as the twenty-first century continued to progress without, as of 1997, any arms control between or within the nations of Asia, the Pacific, and domestically among the respective military/defense law forces capable of being put into operation. It was vital that countries in the subcontinent region developed an in-depth understanding of missile technology control regimes and their subsequent implications. Such measures were vitally important if the world was ever to be able to put a stop to regional and third-world arms control equations spiraling out of control. (Bilal et al., 2024)

Regional Security Concerns

Overlapping territorial disputes with the internal dynamics of the two nation-states also have implications for regional security in both states. The unresolved territorial disputes in Pakistan's disputed territory of Indian-administered Kashmir and the unresolved border dispute regarding Aksai Chin in China are likely to facilitate and exploit differences among these states in the division of Asia. However, the ambitions of other states have been carefully examined and countered by the two. India initiated the Kargil War in May 1999, preceding the Agra Conference and the Amritsar initiative in June-

July 1999 to garner support for Pakistan over the issue of being a possible renegade nuclear power. (Kuszevska, 2022)

In the case of China, these concerns stem from the Uighur and Tibetan questions, wherein China is fearful of interference. Backing for the demand for Tibet's separation is another aspect of these initiatives, which are related to non-contact threats to Beijing. The territorial issues of Aksai Chin add complexity to the existing territorial disputes, such as the South China Sea dispute and the situation concerning Taiwan. These two territorial disputes not only provide a strategic base but also gain India's trust, while also offering political space for Beijing to adopt a harder stance regarding Taiwan and the South China Sea. The depth of China's commitment to India and Pakistan will be evident when it becomes more certain that its vital interests are at risk. (Nasim, 2022)

Cultural Exchanges

The relationship between China and Pakistan has long been characterized by a significant communication gap, with the Chinese language being widely spoken and understood in China, while few people in Pakistan were familiar with it. This lack of understanding led to misconceptions and distrust between the two countries. Despite extensive government exchanges between China and Pakistan, there was a lack of people-to-people exchanges, which further fueled distrust and neglect in the relationship. Additionally, China's heavy involvement in Pakistan raised concerns about its intentions in the Indian-Pakistani dispute and strained Sino-Indian relations. In an effort to bridge the communication gap and promote cultural exchange, China provided non-refundable aid to implement projects at the Lahore University of Management Sciences, aiming to promote the Chinese language and culture in Pakistan through educational, sports, and socio-economic activities. This initiative led to a growing

interest in learning Chinese among Pakistani students, with many institutions introducing Chinese language courses. The Lahore University of Management Sciences became a leading institution for Chinese language education, and students were also given the opportunity to visit China, fostering a deeper understanding and collaboration between the two countries (Safdar, 2021).

Conclusion

The success of any international relationship depends upon the mutual qualities and actions of the pertaining states. In addition to the above adage, prevailing historical trajectories and contextual crafting of pertinent contemporary issues are also the guiding planes for orienting the policies of the interacting states. The associations between Pakistan and China are evaluated under these four quadrants. The importance of the historical affiliations and their underpinning on the present-day bilateral collaborative mantra is the critical underlying construct of this research. Moreover, the research also considers the future dimensions of the promising relations of China with Pakistan and the attendant strategic, geo-economic and geostrategic configurations therein. Hence, the emerging kinks of the suitable future roadmap are filtered followed by the timelessness and sensitivities of the alliance are underscored. Indeed, the paper is an unpretentious contribution to the academic literature as well as the policy debate of the evolving bilateral relationship between Pakistan and China.

Throughout the length and breadth of the current millennia, a sobering admonition for Pakistan and China is contemporary issues should primarily be seen through 7000 years of historical context. The legendary Oxus Treasure substantiates that the relationship between the lands now known as Pakistan and China goes back several millennia. The interconnectedness and the correspondences

particularly along the region lying above confluence of Indus River and the Central Asia Corridors exist for thousands and thousands of years. It will be substantive enough for contemporary issues and future prospects of Pakistan-China relations. Such historical trajectories form the protocols of the following paper, in analyzing the historical affiliations and their underpinning on the present-day bilateral collaborative mantra.

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