

# **Pakistan-China Relations in a Changing Geopolitical Environment**

Masood Khalid

## **Summary**

*The paper analyses the historical evolution of Pakistan-China relationship and the context of its growing importance in the wake of fast changing regional and global developments. This partnership, often cited as a model in inter-state relationships, has flourished despite numerous headwinds over the last 70 years. An enigma to most, this unique partnership is underpinned by the rationale of mutual trust, common interests and a convergent outlook.*

## **Introduction**

A discussion of Pakistan-China relations evokes different reactions in different settings. The Western perspective essentially views the relationship based on expediency and geopolitical considerations. In Pakistan and China, on the other hand, a more euphoric estimation is found in catchy phrases like the friendship being “higher than the mountains” and “sweeter than honey”.<sup>1</sup> Basically, such phrases intend to convey the ‘substance’ of the relationship, not mere rhetoric. Skeptics generally overlook the fact that no relationship can possibly thrive between two unequals, and that too for long, if it is only driven by rhetoric. Still, for most China watchers, it remains an enigma, and, therefore, some references from history are relevant to contextualise it.

Although Pakistan and China established their diplomatic relations in 1951, their formative years witnessed little interaction. Both soon became embroiled in conflicts in Kashmir and Korea and were burdened with the task of nation building. Their primary focus was on meeting the challenges of the time. Perceiving its Eastern neighbour as a perennial security threat, Pakistan joined the United State (US)-led Western alliance system against communism. This move was received with suspicion in Beijing but both countries were careful not to take any step considered inimical to each other’s interests. The Chinese leadership appreciated that Pakistan was the first Muslim country to recognise ‘New China’. Pakistan also did not militarily participate in the Korean war despite US urgings; it also expressed dissatisfaction over China’s absence at the 1951 San Francisco Conference held to conclude a peace treaty with Japan.

In fact, Chairman Mao Tse Tung instructed his foreign ministry as early as in 1951 to develop relations with Pakistan. Again, in 1956, while designating his second Ambassador, Mao instructed him to pay special attention to Pakistan, which was “China’s southwestern gate”.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Text of President Xi Jinping's speech at Pakistan parliament on 21 April 2015, [http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Pak-China\\_Year\\_of\\_Friendly\\_Exchange\\_Doc-1.docx.pdf](http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Pak-China_Year_of_Friendly_Exchange_Doc-1.docx.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Geng Ying, “You and Us”: *Stories of China and Pakistan* (China Intercontinental Press, 2014), p. 30.

This reflected Chinese sagacity and understanding of both the countries being a source of strength for each other despite having different worldviews.

The first formal encounter at the highest levels between the two prime ministers in Bandung in 1955 helped to clear the air. Pakistan assured China that its Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) membership was not against it while China expressed willingness to strengthen its ties with Pakistan. Both agreed to commence high level exchanges. Prime Minister Huseyn Shaheed Suharwardy was the first leader from Pakistan to visit Beijing in October 1956, followed barely two months later by Premier Zhou En Lai to Pakistan. Zhou was given a rousing welcome on a 10-day trip. After Pakistan, Zhou visited India and declined the invitation from Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to visit Srinagar, although India and China enjoyed close relations at that time. This was a clear signal of China showing deference to Pakistan's position on Kashmir and its desire of forging a substantive relationship with Pakistan, independent of its ties with India. These overtures in the very early days of the relationship helped lay the foundation of "mutual trust", which forms the core of their partnership today.

## Laying the Foundation in the 1960s

By early 1960s, despite being an American ally, Pakistan had become dejected with the US' attitude of favouring India and its lacklustre support on Kashmir. The Cold War was at its height; Sino-US rivalry; Sino-Soviet split had altered the balance of power in the region. Sino-Indian tensions were also on the rise after the Dalai Lama fled Tibet seeking asylum in India in 1959. China faced isolation. While its border negotiations with India failed culminating in 1962 border conflict, Pakistan and China succeeded in concluding a border treaty in 1963. China even conceded 750 square miles of territory to Pakistan. Bitter over its experience with India, China was now better sensitised and understood Pakistan's security concerns with its eastern neighbour.

The border treaty of 1963 was a defining moment in Pakistan-China relations, further enhancing mutual trust. Then, in 1964, Pakistan became the first non-communist country to begin its flights to China. For years, the Chinese used Pakistan International Airlines to travel overseas. Pakistan also extended technical assistance to China in its negotiations with the World Bank. In March 1965, in a major move, Pakistan denounced the "Two China policy" of the US. China now began to regard Pakistan as a trustworthy partner in South Asia. Pakistan had also taken a clear shift in its foreign policy by showing willingness to come closer to China. By mid-1960s, their relations were poised for a major leap.

The 1965 Indo-Pakistan war proved to be a real catalyst in cementing these ties, as China fully supported Pakistan. China's image improved exponentially after the war and made a positive impact on Pakistani psyche. On the other hand, the US lost all goodwill in Pakistan by its punitive action of halting military supplies. That was a severe blow as the Pakistan army's inventory was of US origin. The deficit was overcome by China through emergency military supplies.

Another important building block in the relations was the 1966 decision to construct the Friendship or Karakoram Highway linking China's Xinjiang region with Gilgit-Baltistan in

Pakistan. Today, **this highway serves as the main route for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)**. A decade of trust-building through successive steps from 1955 to 1965 had brought the two countries at the cusp of a partnership that later acquired global and regional implications.

Pakistan's distancing from the West after the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war, instilled a chill in US-Pakistan relations. In late 1960s, Pakistan also reached out to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), which offered the country its first steel mill and some military equipment. It is worth noting that Pakistan was still a member of SEATO and Central Treaty Organization when it asserted an independent foreign policy stance by building relations with both China and the USSR. Improvement in US-Pakistan relations had to wait till 1970-71.

### **Pakistan, the Bridge on which Kissinger Walked to China**

Meanwhile, the ties with China continued to expand. Growing Chinese interest in Pakistan's well-being was its decision to help Pakistan economically. Despite its Cultural Revolution related tumult and economic difficulties, **China offered Pakistan over US\$300 million (\$404.8 million)** for its development plan and related projects. Quantified today, this amount runs into billions. China also continued its military assistance to Pakistan. **It also helped build Pakistan's heavy industry capacity at Taxila in the late 1960s.**

The year 1971 was eventful on many counts. Pakistan faced an existential crisis with the Indo-Soviet nexus playing against it in its conflict with India in East Pakistan. China extended diplomatic and political support to Pakistan in 1971 and continued its military assistance. But it could not militarily intervene to prevent the breakup of Pakistan, expected by some, since it was weak and facing political turmoil after the death of Marshal Lin Biao, purported successor of Mao Tse Tung. Also, due to the military confrontation with the Soviet Union, China had deployed troops on its border there. China, therefore, counselled Pakistan to seek a political settlement of the East Pakistan crisis and as early as in April 1971, warned Pakistan of imminent Indian military intervention in its eastern province if the matter was not handled politically. However, the crisis of leadership in Pakistan was too grave to heed this sane advice.

**In July 1971, Pakistan played a seminal role in facilitating US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's secret visit to China,** leading to the rapprochement between two antagonists. When President **Richard Nixon visited China in February 1972,** he described his week-long visit as "the week that changed the world". Zhou urged Kissinger not to forget the "bridge" which had brought them closer. Apparently, the Americans heeded Zhou's advice by showing their famous "tilt" towards Pakistan in the 1971 Indo-Pakistan crisis.

**Also, in 1971, China had become a member of the United Nations (UN) and Pakistan firmly supported its membership.** In September 1971, when the US proposed for the dual representation of China, Pakistan opposed it. Pakistan's Permanent Representative Agha Shahi (later Foreign Minister) stated, "Partial representation means no representation at all for China or any other state". In the debate in the UN Security Council (UNSC) on the 1971 crisis, when the Soviet delegation sided with India, Chinese Permanent Representative Huang Hua (later Foreign Minister and Vice Premier) had harsh exchanges with his Soviet

counterpart. China exercised its first veto in the UNSC in 1972 in Pakistan's favour when the question of Bangladesh's admission was considered. China made the membership conditional on the safe return of Pakistani prisoners of war from India.

By the mid-1960s, Pakistan and China had struck a convergent chord overcoming all their initial reservations, and by the mid-1970s, a visibly substantive content in their relationship. The frequency of high-level visits witnessed an upswing in the 1980s, 1990s and the subsequent years. Both countries established institutionalised mechanisms to steer bilateral cooperation. In 1986, Pakistan and China signed an agreement on civilian nuclear cooperation. The Nuclear power plants set up in Pakistan under this agreement enjoyed International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards. This came as a great relief when France refused to provide a nuclear reprocessing plant, and after the US imposed sanctions on Pakistan when the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989. Another landmark project started by the two countries was the co-production of JF-17 fighter aircrafts, now being marketed overseas. Both countries also commenced cooperation in the space technology.

The language used in the official communications and documents of the two countries over the years best illustrates the historical evolution of this journey of friendship. In the early 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, the relationship was merely described as "friendly relations"; in the 1980s, it was "traditional friendship"; in the 1990s, it evolved into "comprehensive friendship"; the 2003 Joint Declaration on Direction of Bilateral Cooperation called it an "all weather friendship"; the 2005 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Good Neighbourly Relations termed it as "bilateral strategic partnership of good-neighbourly friendship" and in July 2013, when the CPEC was launched, it was evaluated as the "China-Pakistan all-weather strategic cooperative partnership". By 2018, it had been elevated to "China-Pakistan all-weather strategic cooperative partnership and building closer Pakistan-China community of shared future in the new era." This progression shows the consistent upward trajectory of the relationship followed in the last 70 years.

## **All-weather Partnership**

Chinese diplomacy is nuanced and takes special care in choosing words in what is to be conveyed. While China describes its relations with various friendly countries as "strategic", "comprehensive" or "cooperative", the Chinese leadership uses the term "all-weather" for Pakistan to emphasise the special nature of bilateral relationship. Chinese leaders use another term of "Iron brother" for Pakistan, underscoring their confidence in the enduring nature of mutual ties.

Successive leaders of Pakistan and China have invested in the relationship, which is now deeply entrenched at the grassroots level. A vision and idealism guide this relationship. Intellectuals, civil society and the media have also played an important role in consolidating the friendship.

Both countries demonstrate not only a mutuality of interests but also an earnest desire to further broaden this partnership. Pakistan considers its relationship with China to be the cornerstone of its foreign policy, while China calls it as its highest priority. The level of

mutual trust is conspicuous in their support for each other on core issues of national interests. Pakistan has extended support to China on Xinjiang, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet and South China Sea issues, and at the Human Rights Council.

On its part, China is the only major power that unequivocally supports Pakistan's efforts to safeguard its independence and sovereignty. It is willing to invest in developing a strategic partnership with Pakistan, as against ups and downs, it has witnessed in its relationship with the US. Beijing takes a principled stand on the issue of Pakistan's membership of the Nuclear Supplier's Group (NSG), its listing in the Financial Action Task Force and sanctions. China recognises Kashmir to be a dispute between India and Pakistan and calls for a peaceful solution in line with the UNSC resolutions, UN Charter and bilateral agreements between India and Pakistan. It opposed unilateral action by India of revoking the special status of Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019. The Indian decision not only violated UNSC resolutions on Kashmir but also the bilateral Simla Agreement between India and Pakistan.

Pakistan and China's mutual support is not driven solely by geopolitical considerations but by their shared perspective to uphold the UN principles of non-interference, peaceful coexistence, multilateralism, fairness and justice in inter-state relations. Both are opposed to hegemony, unilateralism and a zero-sum approach in international affairs and support the cause of developing countries for a fair and equitable international order.

## **Extending the Scope of the CPEC**

In recent years, Pakistan and China have paid special attention to their economic cooperation. Pakistan was amongst the first countries to join the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As a pilot project of the BRI, the CPEC boasts of tangible outcomes in about six years of its life. First, it has helped Pakistan overcome its persistent energy shortfall. Pakistan was incurring a loss of about US\$4 billion (S\$5.38 billion) on account of this shortfall prior to the CPEC. Some major energy projects have been completed in record time and more are in the pipeline, in keeping with Pakistan's strategy to diversify its energy mix. Chinese companies have used super critical technology in coal-based power plants to prevent environmental pollution.

Also, some key infrastructure and transportation projects, including the upgrading of Karakoram Highway have been undertaken. The work on the Gwadar Port and allied infrastructure is ongoing. Work is also picking up on three priority Special Economic Zones. **China has so far invested about US\$26 billion (S\$34.95 billion) in these projects, generating about 75,000 local jobs.** For several years now, China has been Pakistan's largest investor and the biggest trading partner. Chinese investment in the CPEC is expected to grow with the addition of new projects.

The CPEC had faced a slow down due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the change of government in Pakistan. But now those impediments have been removed. The CPEC's scope has been expanded in its next phase to include cooperation in agriculture, industry, oil and gas, science and technology, information technology, education, tourism and socio-economic projects.

The CPEC is an economic partnership project with no hidden agenda. It is meant to help Pakistan in overcoming its serious development deficit and to facilitate its emergence as a regional trade and energy hub. This conforms to Pakistan's pivot to geo-economics paradigm in its foreign policy. China is opening its Western regions and their proximity to Pakistan offers new avenues for economic collaboration. Pakistan wishes to leverage its unique advantage of being a bridgehead between China, South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East, through enhanced trade and investment that will benefit all the regions. The Central Asian Republics, which are landlocked, are keen to take advantage of the CPEC to reach the Pakistani ports of Gwadar and Karachi. The CPEC route will also help China to overcome its Malacca Straits dilemma and cut costs and time in transportation of its exports to Africa and the Middle East, besides establishing a connectivity network with Central Asia and Afghanistan.

The CPEC is the first major investment initiative of its kind ever undertaken by a foreign country in Pakistan. It not only reaffirms China's friendship but also its confidence in the economic potential of Pakistan. The CPEC is a vehicle for Pakistan's progress and promoting people to people connectivity and cultural interaction. The CPEC has been targetted on the premise of debt sustainability, environmental concerns and transparency. But mostly the facts are distorted to present a one-sided picture. Pakistan has clarified that Chinese loans are only 10 per cent of its overall debt liability, are concessional in nature and have a long-term maturity period. This should lay to rest all speculations. Moreover, the BRI could help eradicate radicalism and extremism, an overarching goal that the international community shares.

## **Pakistan and the US-China Rivalry**

It is unfortunate that the BRI has lately become a victim of US-China rivalry. In a report to the US Congress in May 2020, the White House stated that the BRI would give China "undue political influence and military access".<sup>3</sup> The containment of China, being a declared objective of US foreign policy, has cast its shadow on the BRI and, by consequence, on the CPEC. For example, anti-China theme was dominant in the discussions at the last G-7, NATO and US-European Union (EU) Summits, and US President Joe Biden, at the G-7 Summit, framed the competition with China as "a contest between democracies and autocrats". American indictment of the Communist Party of China as the root cause of all ills has understandably evoked strong reaction from Beijing.

Most independent analysts agree that any move to counter growing Chinese footprint, including in South Asia, is likely to backfire as it will not garner the support of countries interested in benefitting from economic cooperation with China. For most countries, China is a bigger trading partner than the US, so they would be reluctant to choose sides. However, in this brinksmanship, a lot of bad blood and tension will occur, even hostilities breaking out between contending parties. For example, both US and China could sleepwalk into a conflict over Taiwan. It is generally agreed that the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the Australia, United Kingdom and US security alliance (AUKUS) will cause

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<sup>3</sup> White House, "United States strategic approach to the People's Republic of China", May 2020, p. 4, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/U.S.-Strategic-Approach-to-The-Peoples-Republic-of-China-Report-5.24v1.pdf>.



protracted destabilisation of the Indo-Pacific region and a balance of power tussle between China and the US, and amongst regional powers. A new type of cold war will haunt the world.

Several noted scholars hold the view that while China is striving to rehabilitate its glory lost during the “century of humiliation”, it has no apparent interest in either dominating the world or recreating the world in its image.<sup>4</sup> It only wants its due share and representation in global political and economic architecture, which is a post-World War 2 legacy. Pakistan shares this perspective of a global order that ensures equal representation of small and big countries and the one based on win-win outcomes.

The enormity of challenges faced by humanity warrants making wise choices. Strategic choices for both China and US are limited. Managed competition will cause less harm to China, the US and the global community than confrontation that borders on serious risks of miscalculation. The world needs cooperation and collaboration between China and the US, whose economies are closely intertwined, and their cooperation is indispensable for solving transnational issues. However, the trends suggest otherwise. US- China rivalry is eroding the fruits of globalisation. New norm setting by resorting to unilateralism, protectionism, coercion and use of force has rendered the UN into a rudderless body. The bogey of the “China threat” is an oft-repeated mantra with very few buyers. Those predicting “China collapse” have also been proven wrong.

The American administration maintains that the relationship with China, a revisionist power, will from now on be “adversarial, competitive and cooperative”.<sup>5</sup> The launch of the Quad, Build Back Better World, AUKUS, Coalition of Democracies, foundational agreements with India are ample illustrations of US’ strategy to confront China globally, in economic and security domains. Its China policy appears more confrontational and less cooperative, making its European and East Asian allies nervous. A strategic alliance between China and Russia is the answer to US policy of curbing their influence, which has started manifesting itself in new alignments and realignments at the regional and sub-regional levels. The world order is not only in a state of flux but heading fast towards disarray.

Pakistan does not wish to be caught in this crossfire and seeks constructive and friendly ties with both big powers. The CPEC is a rare window of opportunity for Pakistan’s economic development and is non-negotiable as is the friendship with China. Any pressure on Pakistan to abandon the CPEC is not only unfair but also at variance with American policy in support of regional connectivity and economic cooperation. Through C5+1 and Quadrilateral mechanism comprising the US, Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, America ostensibly seeks to advance the same objectives which the CPEC envisions. An economically strong Pakistan is a guarantee for regional peace and stability and a bulwark against terrorism and extremism. Any opposition to the CPEC thus evokes negative vibes in Pakistan.

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<sup>4</sup> This conclusion is that of the author. See, for instance, the works of scholars Joshua Shiffrin, “Should United States fear China’s rise”, *The Washington Quarterly*, 2019; Fareed Zakaria, “The new China scare”, *Foreign Affairs*, Jan-Feb 2020; Lauren Foster, “Why China will not dominate the 21<sup>st</sup> century”, CFA Institute, posted in *Economics*, 18 March 2014; and Joseph Nye, who reportedly stated that while China may have the hard power to dominate the world, it lacks soft power to do so.

<sup>5</sup> Maleeha Lodhi, “An inescapable contest”, *Dawn*, 9 August 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1639586>.

## Power Play in South Asia

Alarmingly, South Asia is fast emerging as a sub-region of the larger Indo-Pacific theatre where US-China rivalry is now in full play. South Asia is home to about 25 per cent of the world's population. Its geography and resource endowment are unique and critical to global trade and economic integration. Its people are creative and diligent; yet the South Asian nations are amongst the poorest. It is the least integrated region economically. Tensions are rife due to unresolved disputes and an inexplicable irrationality to address them. Pakistan-India tensions, mainly emanating from the Kashmir issue, have vitiated the regional security environment. Pakistan faces an intransigent India which refuses to engage in meaningful dialogue. Unfortunately, huge challenges of poverty, climate security and food security have escaped to capture the imagination of South Asian policymakers, due to mutual suspicions. Smaller countries of South Asia yearn that the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation plays a substantive role in their development. But the organisation has been rendered dysfunctional due to egoistic point scoring and regional rivalries.

The recent border standoff between India and China has added another perilous dimension to an already fragile security environment. Cumulatively, these trends pose a serious threat to regional peace and are unsustainable in the long run. India mistakenly believes that China and Pakistan are working in tandem to encircle it. The truth lies elsewhere. Pakistan and China, in fact, seek normal neighbourly relations with India and expect it to take bold initiatives to resolve its disputes with both. India could have joined the BRI and worked for the collective good of the region. Instead jockeying for power and influence as well as an aimless arms race was the option exercised, which has created a serious strategic imbalance in South Asia.

Adding to this grim scenario, the Taliban's ascendance in Afghanistan has also created more anxiety and uncertainty. This new power dynamic is causing consternation beyond Afghanistan's borders. A new 'Great Game' is feared in Afghanistan. Pakistan and China agree that Afghan situation needs to be handled prudently. The region cannot afford more instability. It is important to accelerate international efforts to stabilise rather than shun Afghanistan. China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and the Central Asian countries can help build a regional consensus for peace and reconciliation. For example, they can assist in reducing tensions between Tajikistan and Afghanistan. The US and the EU can help Afghanistan avert an economic meltdown. The UN can channel humanitarian assistance.

Barring a positive approach, Afghanistan can once again become a sanctuary for global terrorist organisations, descending the country and the region into chaos. Any discourse about regional connectivity and projects like the **Central Asia-South Asia power project, known as CASA-1000** and Trans-Afghanistan Pipeline would then become meaningless. Pakistan and China, therefore, have a consensus on international engagement with Taliban; a broad-based political dispensation; urgent humanitarian assistance; Afghan capacity building; respect for basic human rights and most importantly an undertaking by Taliban that the Afghan territory will not be used against anyone for terrorism. Pakistan and China would like the international community to come forward and help in reconstruction of Afghanistan. In this context, both agree on Afghanistan's participation in the CPEC on the restoration of stability.



## Conclusion

Pakistan cannot afford to lower its guard in the wake of this state of volatility and ominous developments in its neighbourhood. Relations between India and Pakistan suffering from deep mistrust and suspicion have virtually obscured prospects for any durable peace in South Asia, at least in immediate future. Imperatives of regional peace and security demand a viable dispute resolution mechanism agreed bilaterally or through multilateral means to resolve their differences. The war of attrition ongoing now has the potential to cross the conventional threshold. The escalation may not be premeditated but risks exist of an inadvertent escalation, caused by misreading of the intention of the adversary. In such situations endangering peace, the UN has a mandate to intervene to avoid a disaster. As against acrimony and distrust in Sino-Indian and Pakistan-India relations, the Pakistan-China relationship is a bright spot in their foreign policy. A commonality of views and a congruence of interests characterise Pakistan-China relations. This does not imply playing the bloc politics; rather offering a successful model in inter-state relations which can be replicated particularly in the context of South Asia. Both countries view themselves playing a constructive role for regional peace and stability and not to use their friendship as a tool in power games.

As close strategic partners, both Pakistan and China face the prospects of growing instability and turbulence in their neighbourhood. Both countries are against hegemony and seek resolution of outstanding disputes through peaceful means. In this context, Pakistan-China relations have acquired even greater importance. Pakistan considers China to be a voice of reason and restraint in international affairs. It is the common choice of both countries to develop a cooperative partnership that conforms to the fundamental interests of the two countries. This friendship has weathered all storms due to its unique nature and will continue to contribute constructively to regional peace and stability.

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Mr Masood Khalid is a former Ambassador of Pakistan to Korea, Malaysia and China. He has dealt with multilateral aspects of Pakistan's foreign policy and served as Deputy Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the United Nations, New York. He can be contacted [masoodkhalid433@gmail.com](mailto:masoodkhalid433@gmail.com). The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in the paper.