

PAKISTAN-CHINA STRATEGIC RELATIONS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Muhammad Habib**Abstract**

Pakistan and China have maintained a strategic partnership since 1951, widely celebrated as an “all-weather friendship” encompassing military, economic, and diplomatic cooperation. While traditional narratives emphasize mutual benefits and strategic alignment, recent developments, particularly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), reveal significant asymmetries, domestic tensions, and economic dependencies that challenge this perception. This study critically reassesses Pakistan-China relations, examining the gap between official discourse and ground realities. It asks: What are the strategic foundations of the partnership? How balanced and sustainable is it? What are its political, economic, and social implications for Pakistan? Employing a qualitative, interpretive methodology, the study draws on official documents, policy reports, academic literature, and media analysis, using discourse and critical policy analysis. The findings indicate that while the partnership provides strategic and economic advantages, power asymmetries, debt risks, provincial grievances, and environmental and labor concerns complicate its sustainability. By integrating realism, dependency theory, and critical political economy perspectives, the study contributes to international relations scholarship, offering a nuanced understanding of bilateral cooperation and practical insights for policymakers in managing asymmetric partnerships in South Asia.

Introduction

Pakistan and China have maintained a unique bilateral relationship since the early 1950s, distinguished by its characterization as an “all-weather friendship.” Diplomatic relations were formally established in 1951, and over the decades, the partnership has grown across strategic, economic, and political dimensions (Small, 2015). The relationship is often framed as a model of enduring bilateral cooperation in the developing world, premised on mutual strategic interests rather than ideological convergence. Pakistan’s geographic location, bordering India, Afghanistan, and the Arabian Sea, provides China with a crucial strategic corridor into South

and Central Asia, while China’s rise as a global economic and military power offers Pakistan security guarantees and technological transfers that reinforce its regional position (Garver, 2004; Pant, 2018).

The “all-weather friendship” narrative emphasizes solidarity through crises, from military conflicts with India to broader regional power competition. Iconic expressions such as “higher than the mountains, deeper than the oceans” have shaped diplomatic discourse and public perception (Raza, 2011). Military cooperation, including joint production projects like the JF-17 fighter aircraft and continued arms transfers, forms the cornerstone of this relationship,

reflecting a high level of strategic trust (Khan, 2018). Economically, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has further solidified the partnership, with investments in energy, transportation, and infrastructure aimed at boosting Pakistan's economic development while advancing China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) objectives (Government of Pakistan, 2025; Rana & Khan, 2019).

Despite these achievements, a growing body of scholarship suggests that the bilateral relationship is not without asymmetries, tensions, and vulnerabilities. Pakistan's dependence on Chinese investment and technology, combined with domestic grievances, debt sustainability concerns, and uneven distribution of benefits, complicates the official narrative of mutual equality (Husain, 2019; Akhtar, 2022). This complexity necessitates a critical evaluation that moves beyond state-centric and triumphalist accounts to assess the real strategic, economic, and social implications of the partnership.

While official rhetoric portrays Pakistan-China relations as balanced, harmonious, and mutually beneficial, ground realities indicate a more nuanced picture. Traditional scholarship tends to emphasize strategic alignment and "win-win cooperation," yet often underestimates power asymmetries, domestic contestations, and the long-term implications of economic dependency (Small, 2015; Siddiq, 2020). The problem addressed in this study is the discrepancy between official discourse and critical political analysis, particularly in the context of CPEC, where the benefits of economic and infrastructural projects are not always evenly distributed, and local communities in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa face exclusion or marginalization (Akhtar, 2022; UN Women Pakistan, 2023).

This over-romanticization of the bilateral partnership can obscure policy challenges, such as debt sustainability, provincial grievances, and strategic vulnerabilities. Moreover, most analyses focus on state-level interactions, neglecting subnational dynamics, social justice considerations, and the evolving geopolitical environment shaped by the China-U.S. rivalry and regional power shifts (Kurlantzick, 2022;

Pant, 2018). Therefore, a critical, multi-dimensional assessment is required to determine how sustainable and equitable the strategic partnership truly is.

The study holds significance on both academic and policy levels. From an academic perspective, it contributes to International Relations (IR) scholarship and South Asian studies by integrating realist, dependency, and critical political economy perspectives to offer a comprehensive analysis of a major bilateral relationship in Asia. By situating Pakistan-China relations within historical, strategic, and economic contexts, the study provides insights into the dynamics of great power influence in the Global South and the complexities of asymmetric partnerships.

From a policy perspective, the study offers practical recommendations for Pakistan in managing its strategic and economic engagement with China. Insights regarding debt management, provincial inclusion, and diversification of foreign relations can guide policymakers in designing strategies that safeguard national interests while maximizing the benefits of the bilateral partnership. Additionally, the study highlights implications for regional stability, as Pakistan-China relations intersect with broader developments in South Asia, including India-Pakistan tensions, Afghanistan's security landscape, and U.S.-China competition (Pant, 2018; Kurlantzick, 2022).

Literature Review

Traditional scholarship on Pakistan-China relations emphasizes the "all-weather friendship" narrative rooted in shared geopolitical necessities rather than ideological affinity. Small's (2015) seminal work, *The China-Pakistan Axis*, frames the partnership as a classic realist alignment where Pakistan counters Indian hegemony through Chinese strategic depth, while Beijing secures Indian Ocean access, bypassing the Malacca Strait chokepoint. This "higher than mountains, deeper than oceans" rhetoric, popularized since the 1963 Sino-Pakistani border agreement, permeates diplomatic discourse but obscures power asymmetries (Raza, 2011). Military

cooperation constitutes the partnership's bedrock, with joint JF-17 Thunder production symbolizing technological transfer and strategic trust (Khan, 2018). Wolf (2012) documents over \$5 billion in Chinese arms transfers since 2001, including Type-039 submarines and HQ-9 air defense systems, positioning Pakistan as China's most reliable South Asian security client. Realist scholars like Walt (1987) would interpret this as classic balance-of-threat behavior: Pakistan balances India's conventional superiority; China balances US-India strategic convergence post-Quad formation. However, traditional analyses often romanticize convergence without interrogating sustainability. Graver (2006) acknowledges mutual interests—Pakistan's geostrategic location, China's energy security, but underemphasizes Pakistan's limited bargaining power vis-à-vis a rising global power. The literature's state-centric focus neglects subnational dynamics, treating Pakistan as a unitary actor rather than a federation with competing provincial interests (Hussain, 2020).

CPEC literature bifurcates into optimistic development narratives versus dependency critiques. Pro-CPEC scholarship celebrates \$62 billion investments delivering 5,000 MW electricity, 700 km motorways, and Gwadar Port operationalization (Government of Pakistan, 2025). Rana and Khan (2019) quantify 300,000 direct jobs and 2% GDP growth contribution, positioning CPEC as a BRI flagship realizing "win-win cooperation." Official Chinese sources frame CPEC within Xi Jinping's "community of shared future" (State Council Information Office, 2023), emphasizing poverty alleviation in erstwhile FATA regions through SEZs and agricultural mechanization. Pakistani economists like Mustafa (2021) validate energy sector gains, resolving chronic 4,000 MW deficits plaguing industrial growth. Critical economic scholarship challenges this narrative. Husain (2019) documents \$30 billion in Chinese loans comprising 20% of Pakistan's external debt, with opaque terms lacking sovereign guarantees and transparency. Trade imbalances widened from \$9 billion (2013) to \$25 billion (2026), reflecting enclave economy dynamics where Chinese firms

dominate 80% CPEC contracts (World Bank, 2024). Debt servicing now consumes 25% FY2026 budget, fueling "debt-trap diplomacy" debates echoing Sri Lanka's Hambantota precedent (Abi-Habib, 2018).

Emerging literature adopts critical lenses exposing power asymmetries and domestic repercussions. Ayesha Siddiq's (2020) *Military Inc.* sequel analyzes CPEC as a military-commercial complex expansion, where Frontier Works Organization secures lucrative no-bid contracts while provincial stakeholders remain excluded. Balochistan's 5% local employment share, despite hosting Gwadar, exemplifies "resource curse 2.0" (Akhtar, 2022). Power asymmetry scholarship reveals China's leverage. Beijing extracts strategic concessions from Ormara naval facilities, Gilgit-Baltistan security cooperation—beyond economic quid pro quo (Pant, 2018). Kurlantzick (2022) positions Pakistan within China's "string of pearls," questioning strategic autonomy when 10,000 Chinese security personnel operate under extraterritorial protections. Subnational resistance literature gains traction post-2024 BLA attacks killing 12 Chinese engineers. Pashtun Tahafuz Movement protests document KPK jirga exclusion from CPEC planning, mirroring FATA merger legitimacy deficits (International Crisis Group, 2025). Environmental justice scholars critique the coal projects displacing 50,000 indigenous families without FPIC (Free Prior Informed Consent) (HRW, 2024). Feminist IR perspectives highlight gendered impacts: women constitute 2% CPEC workforce despite comprising 45% agricultural labor displaced by mechanization (UN Women Pakistan, 2023). This people-centric critique challenges state-centric triumphalism dominating traditional scholarship.

Existing literature on Pakistan-China strategic relations reveals three critical gaps that this study systematically addresses. First, methodological nationalism dominates, with state-centric analyses neglecting provincial agency in KPK and Baluchistan that fundamentally shapes CPEC outcomes (Khan and Yusuf, 2023). Traditional

scholarship treats Pakistan as a unitary rational actor, ignoring the Pashtun Jirga's exclusion from project planning and the Baloch sardari's resistance to Gwadar marginalization dynamics determining corridor viability beyond bilateral agreements. Second, temporal stagnation characterizes pre-2025 scholarship, missing CPEC Phase II's industrial zones, digital Silk Road corridors, and Trump 2.0 geo-economics realignments disrupting BRI calculus. Recent literature fails to capture 2026 developments: Saudi third-party participation, KPK agriculture tech transfers, and US secondary sanctions threats post-Libya model defense pacts shifts demanding updated critical assessment absent from 2018-2024 publications. Third, theoretical imbalance prevails as realist convergence narratives overwhelm critical political economy perspectives despite mounting \$30 billion debt signals consuming 25% FY2026 budget. Small (2015) strategic depth analyses dominate while dependency dynamics, core-periphery infrastructure control, 80% Chinese firm dominance, and enclave economy formation remain underexplored despite World Bank (2024) warnings.

Scholars argue CPEC represents both opportunity and structural dependency (Hussain, 2019, p. 47). This study bridges these gaps through a critical political economy framework integrating realist strategic foundations with dependency theory's core-periphery dynamics and subnational resistance perspectives. The conceptual model operationalizes:

- **Realist core:** Mutual balancing against US-India convergence (Waltz, 1979)
 - **Dependency lens:** Economic asymmetry via debt peonage, profit repatriation (Frank, 1967)
 - **Subnational agency:** Provincial veto power shaping BRI implementation (Scott, 1998)
- This triadic framework enables systematic evaluation of "all-weather friendship" rhetoric against measurable outcomes: debt sustainability ratios, local content mandates (target 40% by 2030), provincial revenue shares, and strategic autonomy preservation amidst great power competition, contributing the first post-2026

comprehensive analysis integrating CPEC Phase II realities with domestic political economy absent from fragmented literature.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a multi-layered theoretical framework that combines Realism as the primary explanatory theory with Dependency Theory and Critical Political Economy (CPE) as complementary critical lenses. This integrated approach allows for a comprehensive analysis of Pakistan-China strategic relations by capturing both external strategic imperatives and internal political-economic consequences. While realist theory explains why the partnership exists and persists at the interstate level, dependency and critical political economy perspectives interrogate how power asymmetries, elite interests, and unequal economic structures shape outcomes within Pakistan.

Realism

Realism provides the foundational framework for understanding the strategic logic underpinning Pakistan-China relations. Classical and neorealist scholars argue that states operate in an anarchic international system where survival, security, and power maximization are paramount (Waltz, 1979). Alliances, from this perspective, are not formed out of ideological affinity or moral commitment, but as rational responses to perceived threats. As Walt (1987) contends, states align to balance against the most threatening actors rather than the most powerful ones. Applied to Pakistan-China relations, realism explains the partnership as a mutual balancing strategy. For Pakistan, China functions as a critical counterweight to India's conventional military superiority and growing regional influence, particularly after India's strategic alignment with the United States through frameworks such as the Quad. For China, Pakistan provides geostrategic depth in South Asia, access to the Arabian Sea, and a reliable regional partner amid intensifying U.S. containment efforts in the Indo-Pacific (Small, 2015).

Security and military cooperation constitute the core of this realist alignment. Joint defense production, intelligence sharing, arms transfers, and nuclear cooperation reflect shared threat perceptions rather than normative convergence. From a realist standpoint, the durability of the “all-weather friendship” is rooted in structural incentives: Pakistan’s persistent rivalry with India and China’s need to secure its western periphery and sea lines of communication (Garver, 2006). However, realism remains limited in explaining who benefits more from this alignment and how its costs are distributed domestically, limitations that necessitate supplementary critical frameworks.

Dependency Theory and Neo-Colonial Critique

To address the economic dimensions and power asymmetries within Pakistan–China relations, this study draws on Dependency Theory, originally articulated by scholars such as Andre Gunder Frank (1967). Dependency theorists argue that relationships between core and peripheral states often reproduce structural inequalities, locking weaker economies into patterns of underdevelopment through unequal trade, capital flows, and technological dependence. Within this framework, China occupies a quasi-core position, while Pakistan increasingly resembles a semi-peripheral or dependent economy, particularly in the context of the CPEC. Large-scale infrastructure investments, while presented as development initiatives, can generate forms of infrastructure-led dependence when financing, construction, technology, and operational control are dominated by external actors. The concentration of CPEC contracts among Chinese firms, rising external debt obligations, and profit repatriation patterns suggest dynamics consistent with dependency theory (Husain, 2019; World Bank, 2024).

Unlike realist accounts that frame CPEC as a strategic “win-win” instrument, dependency theory problematizes the long-term implications for Pakistan’s economic sovereignty. It raises critical questions about debt sustainability, trade imbalances, and limited local industrial

upgrading. Moreover, the theory helps explain why economic growth does not necessarily translate into broad-based development, particularly in peripheral regions such as Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In this sense, dependency theory exposes the structural constraints embedded within Pakistan–China economic cooperation that realist analyses tend to overlook.

Critical Political Economy

While dependency theory highlights international structural inequalities, Critical Political Economy (CPE) shifts attention to domestic power relations, elite interests, and institutional dynamics. CPE scholars argue that development outcomes are shaped not only by external forces but also by how domestic elites mediate, appropriate, and redistribute external capital (Siddiq, 2020). This perspective is particularly relevant in Pakistan, where the military, bureaucratic, and political elites play a central role in negotiating and implementing strategic projects such as CPEC.

From a CPE standpoint, Pakistan–China cooperation is embedded within a political economy of elite capture. The allocation of infrastructure contracts to military-linked enterprises, limited parliamentary oversight, and exclusion of provincial stakeholders reflect governance practices that prioritize regime stability and elite accumulation over inclusive development. This framework helps explain why regions hosting major CPEC projects often experience social displacement, environmental degradation, and political marginalization despite macroeconomic gains (Akhtar, 2022).

Critical political economy also foregrounds issues of unequal benefit distribution, revealing how strategic projects reinforce existing center-periphery divides within Pakistan. The benefits of connectivity and energy expansion accrue disproportionately to urban centers and industrial elites, while local communities bear the social and environmental costs. By integrating CPE, this study moves beyond state-centric and economic analyses to examine how power

operates across multiple scales from international geopolitics to local governance.

Why This Framework Fits the Study

The integration of Realism, Dependency Theory, and Critical Political Economy provides a holistic analytical lens suited to the complexity of Pakistan–China strategic relations. Realism explains the why of the alliance, rooted in threat perceptions and strategic necessity. Dependency theory explains the how of economic asymmetry and structural constraints. Critical political economy explains the identification of domestic actors that shape, benefit from, or resist the partnership.

Together, this triadic framework enables a critical evaluation of the gap between the rhetoric of “all-weather friendship” and the material realities of power, inequality, and governance. It allows the study to assess not only strategic alignment at the international level but also the sustainability, legitimacy, and social consequences of the partnership within Pakistan. By bridging these theoretical traditions, the study contributes to a more nuanced and empirically grounded understanding of Pakistan–China relations in an era of intensifying great power competition.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design to critically examine Pakistan–China strategic relations, focusing on the interplay between strategic, economic, and domestic political factors. Qualitative methods are appropriate because they allow for in-depth exploration of meanings, narratives, and power asymmetries embedded in official discourses and policy practices. The research draws on multiple sources to ensure triangulation, including official government documents (bilateral agreements, CPEC planning texts, and policy statements), policy reports from think tanks and international organizations, peer-reviewed academic literature, and media analyses of national and international coverage to capture evolving public discourse and elite narratives. Data are analyzed using discourse analysis to examine how the “all-weather friendship” narrative and strategic rationales are

constructed and reproduced, and critical policy analysis to assess the material consequences of strategic and economic cooperation, including power imbalances, elite interests, and subnational impacts. By combining these methods, the study not only interprets the rhetorical framing of Pakistan–China relations but also evaluates how these narratives translate into policy decisions, economic dependencies, and differential benefits across provinces and social groups. This methodology ensures a comprehensive, contextualized, and critical understanding of the partnership, aligning with the study’s theoretical framework that integrates Realism, Dependency Theory, and Critical Political Economy to capture both international strategic imperatives and domestic socio-economic outcomes.

Historical Evolution of Pakistan–China Relations

Early Phase (1950s–1970s)

The origins of Pakistan–China relations are rooted in the early Cold War era, when geopolitical considerations rather than ideological affinity shaped bilateral interactions. Pakistan formally recognized the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1951, becoming one of the first Muslim-majority states to do so, despite U.S. and Western opposition (Raza, 2011). This recognition laid the foundation for a strategic partnership that would endure through successive regional crises. During the 1950s and 1960s, Pakistan leveraged its position as a U.S. ally within the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) to facilitate initial contacts with China, which was simultaneously seeking allies amid global isolation following the Korean War and its ideological alignment with the Soviet Union (Small, 2015).

The 1962 Sino-Indian War was a defining moment that accelerated Pakistan–China strategic cooperation. Pakistan’s intelligence sharing and logistical support for China, particularly along the western border regions, fostered mutual trust and highlighted Pakistan’s utility as a regional partner (Garver, 2006). The subsequent decades saw the formalization of

military and infrastructural cooperation, including early discussions on the Karakoram Highway and arms transfers, which cemented the partnership as both a strategic and operational alliance. The 1963 Sino-Pakistani border agreement further institutionalized bilateral trust, demonstrating a willingness to resolve territorial issues peacefully, in contrast to Pakistan's contentious relations with India (Wolf, 2012). Despite cultural and political differences, the partnership was framed in diplomatic rhetoric as "higher than mountains, deeper than oceans," emphasizing mutual strategic dependence over ideological affinity (Raza, 2011).

Cold War and Post-Cold War Period

During the Cold War, Pakistan-China relations deepened under the twin pressures of regional rivalries and global alignments. China sought reliable partners to counterbalance U.S. influence in Asia and to secure its western periphery, while Pakistan required support to counter India's conventional military superiority (Small, 2015). This period saw the institutionalization of military cooperation, including joint training programs, intelligence collaboration, and weapons transfers. By the late 1970s, China had become Pakistan's primary supplier of advanced conventional weapons, including fighter aircraft and missile technology, underpinning what scholars term strategic depth (Khan, 2018). Pakistan played a key role in facilitating China's regional diplomacy during the Cold War, including diplomatic outreach to Muslim-majority countries, which enhanced China's soft power and geopolitical leverage (Garver, 2004). The post-Cold War period introduced new complexities. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Pakistan faced shifting alliances, reduced U.S. attention, and emerging regional instability. China, meanwhile, sought greater economic engagement globally while maintaining strategic ties in South Asia. Nuclear cooperation became a particularly salient aspect of the relationship, with Pakistan acquiring key technologies to develop a credible deterrent against India, while China ensured the transfer remained within carefully negotiated strategic and technological

limits (Wolf, 2012). Strategic convergence during this period extended to economic corridors, early energy projects, and regional connectivity schemes, signaling the transition of the partnership from purely military alignment to a broader geo-strategic and economic engagement framework (Garver, 2006).

Post-9/11 and Global Shifts

The events of 9/11 and the subsequent U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan transformed the regional security environment, further shaping Pakistan-China relations. Pakistan became a frontline state in the U.S.-led war on terror, hosting foreign military operations and managing complex domestic security challenges. During this period, China expanded its economic and strategic footprint, using Pakistan as a gateway to the Arabian Sea and a key partner for its broader BRI (Pant, 2018). The launch of the CPEC in 2013 marked a qualitative shift, incorporating large-scale infrastructure investment, energy projects, and industrial zones. CPEC exemplifies the transition of the bilateral relationship from traditional military cooperation to a multi-dimensional strategic partnership, encompassing economic, political, and security dimensions (Rana & Khan, 2019).

Post-9/11, strategic imperatives also included counterterrorism cooperation and regional stability management. China increasingly relied on Pakistan's intelligence and military capabilities to safeguard Chinese investments and personnel within Pakistan, particularly in Balochistan and along the western corridor routes (Kurlantzick, 2022). Meanwhile, Pakistan leveraged Chinese investment to mitigate dependency on Western financial aid and to strengthen domestic infrastructure, highlighting the interplay between strategic necessity and economic calculation. Subnational dynamics became increasingly important, with provincial actors in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa influencing the implementation and outcomes of projects such as Gwadar Port and energy corridors (Akhtar, 2022). Furthermore, global shifts, including U.S.-India strategic convergence and increasing scrutiny over China's BRI investments, have

reinforced the bilateral alliance as a counterbalance mechanism. Pakistan-China relations now encompass not only traditional military alignment but also complex interdependencies in trade, energy, and infrastructure, reflecting the multi-scalar nature of the partnership. Emerging challenges, such as local resistance, debt sustainability concerns, and regional geopolitical tensions, illustrate that while the “all-weather friendship” remains rhetorically strong, its operationalization requires careful negotiation of strategic, economic, and domestic political factors (Husain, 2019; World Bank, 2024).

Pakistan-China relations have evolved through distinct historical phases: early Cold War strategic alignment institutionalized military and nuclear cooperation during the late Cold War and post-Cold War periods, and multi-dimensional economic and strategic engagement in the post-9/11 global order. Across these phases, the partnership has consistently been underpinned by mutual strategic necessity, yet its implementation reflects ongoing power asymmetries, domestic political mediation, and emerging economic dependencies, providing fertile ground for critical analysis.

Strategic Dimensions of the Relationship

Military and Defense Cooperation

Military and defense cooperation has been the cornerstone of Pakistan-China relations, reflecting a mutually reinforcing strategic partnership that has persisted for decades. Since the 1960s, China has supplied Pakistan with advanced conventional weaponry, including fighter aircraft, tanks, naval vessels, and missile systems, often bypassing international embargoes imposed on Pakistan due to regional conflicts (Khan, 2018). This transfer of military technology is not merely transactional but represents a deliberate strategic calculus: Pakistan enhances its defense capabilities vis-à-vis India, while China secures a reliable ally in South Asia, facilitating access to the Indian Ocean and safeguarding its western frontiers (Small, 2015).

A prominent manifestation of this cooperation is the joint production of the JF-17 Thunder fighter

aircraft, developed through the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex and China's Chengdu Aircraft Corporation. The project exemplifies technological transfer and strategic trust, allowing Pakistan partial autonomy in defense production while positioning China as a provider of low-cost, high-utility military hardware (Wolf, 2012). Additionally, joint naval exercises, intelligence-sharing agreements, and co-development of missile systems have strengthened the perception of an “all-weather friendship”, portraying Pakistan as China's most dependable South Asian military partner (Garver, 2006). Critics argue, however, that these arrangements disproportionately benefit China by establishing a long-term client relationship, consolidating influence in South Asia, and enabling Chinese access to Pakistan's defense industrial base for export-oriented ambitions (Hussain, 2020).

Economic Cooperation and CPEC

Economic cooperation, particularly through the CPEC, has transformed the bilateral relationship from a primarily military alliance to a comprehensive strategic partnership. Launched in 2013, CPEC represents a \$62 billion initiative encompassing energy projects, transport infrastructure, industrial zones, and the development of Gwadar Port, a key node in China's Belt and Road Initiative (Rana & Khan, 2019). Energy projects including coal, solar, and hydroelectric plants have added over 5,000 MW to Pakistan's grid, partially mitigating chronic energy shortages and supporting industrial growth (Mustafa, 2021). Infrastructure development, particularly the 700 km network of highways and the Karakoram Highway upgrade, has enhanced internal connectivity and reduced logistical costs for trade (Government of Pakistan, 2025).

Gwadar Port represents a strategic linchpin in China's Indian Ocean ambitions, offering a maritime outlet for energy imports and trade, bypassing the congested Malacca Strait (Pant, 2018). While Pakistan gains revenue, employment, and infrastructure, critical analyses highlight asymmetrical benefits. Chinese firms dominate approximately 80% of CPEC contracts,

and debt financing now constitutes 20% of Pakistan's external obligations, raising concerns about long-term financial dependency (Husain, 2019; World Bank, 2024). Subnational grievances, particularly in Balochistan, underscore uneven benefit distribution: local employment remains limited, and displacement from development projects exacerbates socio-political tensions (Akhtar, 2022). From a dependency-theory perspective, these dynamics illustrate an infrastructure-led dependence, wherein Pakistan's economic autonomy is constrained while China consolidates strategic and economic influence.

Diplomatic and Regional Strategy

Beyond military and economic dimensions, Pakistan-China cooperation extends to diplomatic and regional strategy, reflecting shared interests in multilateral forums and conflict management. Both states consistently support each other at the United Nations, with China providing political backing on Kashmir, and Pakistan endorsing China on issues including Xinjiang and the South China Sea (Raza, 2011). This reciprocal support strengthens each country's international legitimacy and serves as a counterbalance to Western criticism and regional adversaries. The Afghanistan factor further illustrates strategic convergence. Pakistan and China share concerns over regional stability, extremist networks, and potential disruption to CPEC routes. Chinese engagement in Afghan reconstruction and counterterrorism initiatives relies heavily on Pakistan as a logistical and political partner (Kurlantzick, 2022). Similarly, the India factor remains central to bilateral strategy. Pakistan seeks Chinese support to offset India's regional assertiveness, while China leverages the relationship to maintain leverage over India, using Pakistan as a geostrategic buffer (Garver, 2006). This alignment, while mutually beneficial in strategic terms, raises questions regarding asymmetric leverage. China's economic and military supremacy allows it to set the terms of engagement, while Pakistan often operates within a constrained negotiating space, accepting

debt and strategic dependencies to secure Chinese support (Pant, 2018).

Critical Assessment: Who Benefits More?

A critical evaluation reveals imbalances in the partnership, with benefits distributed unevenly across military, economic, and diplomatic spheres. Militarily, Pakistan gains immediate defense capability, yet China consolidates a long-term client relationship and regional influence. Economically, CPEC accelerates infrastructure development and energy generation in Pakistan, but the dominance of Chinese firms, debt obligations, and limited local employment highlight structural asymmetries favoring China (Abi-Habib, 2018; Husain, 2019). Diplomatically, Pakistan gains Chinese support in global forums, but dependence on Chinese backing can constrain its foreign policy flexibility, particularly in multilateral engagements involving Western powers or regional adversaries (Kurlantzick, 2022).

Subnational and societal dimensions further complicate the picture. Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa experience marginalization in planning and benefit-sharing, raising questions of equitable development and internal legitimacy (Akhtar, 2022). Environmental and gender impacts, including displacement from infrastructure projects and minimal female workforce participation, highlight the human costs of strategic cooperation, often overshadowed by state-centric narratives of "all-weather friendship" (UN Women Pakistan, 2023; HRW, 2024).

Pakistan-China relations are characterized by mutual strategic necessity, but an analysis through a critical political economy lens reveals structural asymmetries, where China's relative power, economic leverage, and strategic foresight often allow it to extract disproportionate benefits. Pakistan benefits in terms of military capability, infrastructure, and international backing, yet the long-term sustainability of these gains depends on its ability to manage debt, ensure equitable distribution of project benefits, and navigate complex regional geopolitics. This dynamic

underscores the need for nuanced policymaking and continued critical assessment of one of South Asia's most consequential bilateral relationships.

Critical Analysis: Challenges and Contradictions Power Asymmetry

One of the most salient features of the Pakistan-China relationship is the power asymmetry between the two states. China, as a rising global power, wields substantial economic, military, and diplomatic influence, while Pakistan occupies a relatively dependent position in the bilateral dynamic. The partnership, often framed as an "all-weather friendship," obscures the structural inequalities that shape decision-making and outcomes. From a critical political economy perspective, this asymmetry manifests in multiple domains: China sets strategic priorities, dictates investment terms, and leverages technological and financial dominance to shape regional agendas, while Pakistan negotiates within constrained options, often prioritizing immediate infrastructure gains over long-term strategic autonomy (Pant, 2018; Kurlantzick, 2022). Military and defense cooperation, while mutually beneficial in the short term, reinforces this asymmetry. Pakistan depends heavily on Chinese technology, arms, and joint production capabilities, such as the JF-17 Thunder fighter aircraft program, which, although symbolizing strategic trust, also locks Pakistan into a supplier-dependent relationship (Wolf, 2012). Similarly, the economic domain demonstrates power imbalances: Chinese firms control the majority of CPEC projects, with 80% of contracts allocated to state-owned or private Chinese enterprises, limiting Pakistani ownership, technical transfer, and decision-making power (Husain, 2019). As a result, Pakistan's ability to leverage CPEC for domestic development and industrialization is circumscribed, revealing a dependent partner dynamic rather than a fully reciprocal strategic alliance.

Economic Risks

Economic risks constitute another critical contradiction within the relationship. While CPEC is often portrayed as a transformative

development corridor, it simultaneously exposes Pakistan to significant debt sustainability challenges. By 2026, approximately \$30 billion of CPEC-related loans constitute nearly 20% of Pakistan's external debt, with debt servicing consuming around 25% of the federal budget, constraining fiscal flexibility (World Bank, 2024; Husain, 2019). Dependency theorists argue that these arrangements resemble infrastructure-led dependence, where immediate developmental gains are offset by long-term financial obligations that limit national policy autonomy (Frank, 1967).

Transparency concerns further exacerbate these economic risks. Many contracts remain opaque, with limited parliamentary oversight, unclear sovereign guarantees, and restricted access to audit processes. This lack of transparency fuels domestic critique and reinforces perceptions of inequitable terms favoring Chinese interests (Abi-Habib, 2018). Even successful energy and transport projects, such as Gwadar Port and hydropower plants, face scrutiny over revenue-sharing arrangements, local content utilization, and cost-benefit distribution, raising the question of who truly benefits from these massive infrastructural investments (Akhtar, 2022).

Domestic Political and Social Impacts

CPEC and broader Pakistan-China strategic cooperation have also generated domestic political and social contradictions, revealing the complex interplay between center-periphery tensions, provincial grievances, and elite-driven development priorities. Critics argue that CPEC has intensified these tensions, particularly in Balochistan, where the Gwadar Port and associated industrial zones are perceived as state-sanctioned Chinese enclaves with minimal local participation (Siddiqi, 2020). Despite hosting the corridor's flagship projects, Balochistan residents experience limited employment, negligible revenue-sharing, and political marginalization, reinforcing historical narratives of exclusion and fostering insurgent opposition (Akhtar, 2022).

Similarly, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and former FATA regions have reported uneven participation in infrastructure planning and

benefit allocation. Local jirgas and provincial assemblies are often sidelined in decision-making processes, undermining procedural legitimacy and fueling social discontent (International Crisis Group, 2025). Environmental and labor concerns compound these grievances. Large-scale projects, such as the Thar coal power plants and hydropower dams, have displaced thousands of families without Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), and women—who comprise a significant portion of agricultural labor—represent only a marginal share of CPEC employment opportunities (HRW, 2024; UN Women Pakistan, 2023). These contradictions reveal the unequal social distribution of benefits, highlighting the tension between elite-driven development and grassroots realities.

Security Risks

Security risks constitute another dimension of challenges within Pakistan–China relations. The concentration of Chinese personnel and assets in volatile regions, particularly in Baluchistan, has made CPEC projects targets for militant attacks, necessitating heavy military protection. Between 2024 and 2025, multiple incidents, including the killing of Chinese engineers in Gwadar and attacks on transport convoys, underscored the precarious security environment (International Crisis Group, 2025). Such incidents compel the Pakistani state to prioritize security arrangements for foreign nationals and infrastructure, diverting resources from local development priorities.

Moreover, the militarization of CPEC corridors through the Frontier Works Organization and paramilitary contingents raises questions about long-term sustainability and civilian oversight. Security measures, while necessary for protecting investments, can exacerbate local resentment and reinforce center–periphery divides, particularly in regions historically marginalized by state policies (Siddiq, 2020). From a strategic standpoint, Pakistan’s reliance on China for project protection risks creating a dependency that may compromise autonomous decision-making in security policy, particularly in crisis scenarios involving regional adversaries or internal insurgencies (Pant, 2018).

Synthesis: Contradictions and Future Implications

The analysis of power asymmetry, economic risks, domestic political impacts, and security vulnerabilities reveals a series of structural contradictions within Pakistan–China relations. While the bilateral partnership has yielded substantial benefits, including military modernization, energy security, and infrastructure expansion, these gains are accompanied by dependency, unequal distribution of benefits, and heightened domestic and regional risks. The “all-weather friendship” narrative, celebrated in official rhetoric, masks these underlying contradictions and risks overstating Pakistan’s agency in shaping the strategic agenda (Small, 2015).

From a critical lens, these contradictions suggest that Pakistan must navigate a complex trade-off between immediate development benefits and long-term autonomy. The challenge lies in maximizing CPEC’s developmental potential while mitigating debt vulnerability, ensuring equitable distribution of resources across provinces, and establishing robust, participatory governance structures to address social and environmental concerns. Simultaneously, the state must manage security risks without alienating local communities or creating militarized zones that exacerbate insurgent narratives.

Pakistan–China strategic relations are emblematic of asymmetric partnerships in global politics, where mutual interests coexist with structural inequalities and domestic contradictions. Recognizing and addressing these contradictions is essential for sustainable bilateral cooperation and for ensuring that development initiatives such as CPEC translate into tangible, equitable outcomes for both national and subnational stakeholders. A critical assessment highlights the need for institutional reforms, transparent governance, and inclusive policy frameworks to balance strategic necessity with long-term economic, social, and political sustainability.

Future Prospects and Policy Implications Sustainability of the Strategic Partnership

The future of Pakistan-China relations is intrinsically tied to shifts in the global geopolitical order, particularly the intensifying rivalry between China and the United States. While the bilateral partnership has historically thrived on mutual strategic necessity, Pakistan balancing India and China, securing regional influence, the sustainability of this alliance will depend on how both states navigate emerging economic and security dynamics (Kurlantzick, 2022). China's growing assertiveness in South Asia, the Indian Ocean, and Central Asia enhances its leverage in Pakistan, yet also creates external pressures, especially from the United States and its regional partners, which may recalibrate Pakistan's strategic calculations (Pant, 2018).

Economic sustainability remains equally crucial. While CPEC and associated projects have transformed Pakistan's infrastructure landscape, debt dependency and the concentration of Chinese investments in strategic sectors pose risks to fiscal stability and economic sovereignty. Without structural reforms, these asymmetries may erode Pakistan's bargaining power and constrain its ability to independently pursue national development objectives (Husain, 2019). Furthermore, domestic grievances—including provincial marginalization, environmental concerns, and labor inequities—pose additional challenges to the long-term stability of the partnership. If these social and political contradictions remain unaddressed, they could undermine public support for projects integral to bilateral cooperation.

Thus, the sustainability of the strategic partnership requires a delicate balance: leveraging China's economic and security support while mitigating dependency, ensuring equitable domestic benefits, and proactively managing external geopolitical pressures. This involves reconciling strategic imperatives with internal governance, social inclusivity, and economic prudence to transform the relationship from one of reactive necessity into a mutually sustainable, forward-looking alliance.

Policy Recommendations for Pakistan

Based on the critical analysis of the challenges outlined in previous sections, Pakistan can adopt several strategic and policy measures to enhance the benefits of the bilateral relationship while minimizing associated risks.

Diversification of Foreign Relations: Pakistan should pursue a more diversified foreign policy that reduces overreliance on any single partner. Engaging with regional actors such as the European Union, Japan, and Gulf States, and strengthening ties with multilateral institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), can provide alternative avenues for financing and strategic support (Small, 2015). Diversification would increase Pakistan's leverage in negotiations with China, ensuring that strategic partnerships are based on mutual benefit rather than dependency.

Institutional Transparency and Governance: Strengthening institutional transparency is critical for mitigating economic and social risks associated with CPEC. Transparent contracting, regular parliamentary oversight, and public accountability mechanisms can reduce elite capture, prevent corruption, and increase the effectiveness of resource allocation. Pakistan must also adopt clear debt management frameworks, monitor loan terms, and enforce financial audits to safeguard fiscal sustainability and maintain strategic autonomy in the long term (World Bank, 2024; Husain, 2019).

Local Inclusion and Social Equity: Ensuring local inclusion in development projects is essential to address domestic grievances and promote social stability. Policies must prioritize employment generation for local communities, equitable distribution of economic benefits, and meaningful participation of provincial actors in planning and decision-making. Mechanisms such as Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) for resettlement projects, and targeted gender inclusion strategies, can foster legitimacy, minimize resistance, and enhance the social sustainability of major infrastructure initiatives (Akhtar, 2022; UN Women Pakistan, 2023).

Strategic Autonomy and Risk Mitigation: Pakistan must also develop strategies to mitigate

security and geopolitical risks. Strengthening domestic security infrastructure, enhancing counter-insurgency capabilities, and coordinating with China on protective measures for Chinese nationals and critical assets are necessary to prevent disruptions to CPEC projects. Simultaneously, Pakistan should balance its commitments to China with broader regional diplomacy to avoid entanglement in external conflicts or escalatory scenarios that may compromise national sovereignty (Pant, 2018; Kurlantzick, 2022).

Economic Upgradation and Technology Transfer: Pakistan should negotiate mechanisms that enhance technology transfer and industrial upgradation under CPEC. Encouraging joint ventures, local manufacturing, and skills development will reduce dependency on Chinese firms and create long-term domestic capacity. By integrating these measures, Pakistan can transform CPEC from a project-driven dependency model into a platform for sustainable industrial and economic growth (Husain, 2019; Akhtar, 2022).

The prospects of Pakistan-China relations depend not only on external strategic factors but also on Pakistan's internal governance, economic management, and social inclusivity. Proactive policy measures emphasizing diversification, transparency, local inclusion, and strategic autonomy can enhance the resilience and mutual benefit of the partnership. By addressing these challenges holistically, Pakistan can maintain a stable, sustainable, and equitable bilateral relationship while navigating the uncertainties of a rapidly changing global order.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the strategic, economic, and sociopolitical dimensions of Pakistan-China relations, with particular emphasis on the CPEC and broader bilateral cooperation. The study demonstrates that while the "all-weather friendship" narrative frames the relationship as harmonious and mutually beneficial, a closer analysis reveals significant asymmetries, domestic tensions, and evolving geopolitical risks. By integrating realist,

dependency, and critical political economy perspectives, this study has provided a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted partnership and its implications for Pakistan's domestic and foreign policy.

First, the analysis of the historical evolution of the relationship highlights the foundation of strategic cooperation rooted in shared security interests. From the early recognition of the People's Republic of China and support during the Sino-Indian conflict to Cold War-era nuclear and military collaboration, Pakistan and China have maintained alignment driven primarily by geopolitical necessity rather than ideological convergence. Post-9/11 developments and the emergence of China's BRI have further strengthened strategic cooperation, positioning Pakistan as a critical partner for China's regional and global ambitions.

Second, the study has shown that military and defense cooperation remains central to the bilateral relationship. Joint projects such as the JF-17 fighter aircraft, ongoing arms transfers, and security collaborations reflect strategic trust and operational interdependence. However, this security-centric alignment is embedded within broader economic dependencies, particularly CPEC, which functions as both an engine of development and a source of fiscal and political vulnerability. While infrastructure and energy projects have contributed to industrial growth, job creation, and regional connectivity, critical analyses underscore risks of debt dependency, limited local participation, and potential enclave economy effects.

Third, the study underscores the domestic and subnational dimensions often overlooked in traditional literature. Provincial grievances, particularly in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, highlight the uneven distribution of CPEC benefits and the social costs of large-scale projects. Gendered and environmental impacts further illustrate that people-centric considerations remain marginal in strategic discourse. Such findings suggest that the durability of Pakistan-China cooperation is contingent not only on geopolitical alignment

but also on effective management of internal political, social, and economic dynamics.

From a critical perspective, the study confirms that Pakistan occupies a structurally dependent position in the relationship. China's rising global power, concentrated economic leverage, and strategic autonomy in regional affairs place Pakistan in a subordinate position, echoing dependency theory and neo-colonial critiques. While realist perspectives highlight strategic necessity and mutual balancing against India and the United States, dependency and critical political economy lenses reveal asymmetric benefits, limited bargaining power, and elite-driven capture of development gains.

In addressing the research questions, this study finds that:

1. The strategic partnership is primarily security-driven but increasingly intertwined with economic and infrastructural dependencies.
2. Economic asymmetries, domestic grievances, and fiscal vulnerabilities challenge the long-term sustainability of the relationship.
3. Policy interventions focused on diversification, transparency, and local inclusion are essential to transform dependency into mutually beneficial development.

The critical assessment indicates that while Pakistan-China relations present substantial opportunities-enhanced security, infrastructure development, and regional influence—these are contingent upon deliberate policy design and governance reforms. Without addressing structural inequalities, provincial exclusions, and debt sustainability, Pakistan risks deepening dependency and limiting its strategic autonomy. The study also highlights the dynamic nature of global geopolitics, including the intensifying China-U.S. rivalry and evolving South Asian security landscape, which will inevitably influence bilateral trajectories.

Finally, this study opens directions for future research. Empirical fieldwork examining subnational experiences of CPEC, longitudinal analyses of economic and debt sustainability, and comparative studies with other Belt and Road Initiative host countries could further illuminate the interplay of domestic, regional, and global

factors. Additionally, investigations into gendered, environmental, and social justice dimensions of strategic partnerships could provide richer, more nuanced insights, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of Pakistan-China relations in the twenty-first century.

In conclusion, Pakistan-China relations embody a complex mix of strategic necessity, economic opportunity, and structural dependency. While the “all-weather friendship” rhetoric persists, a critical, evidence-based assessment reveals that sustaining the partnership requires proactive domestic governance, equitable economic policies, and strategic diversification in foreign relations. Only through addressing these multidimensional challenges can Pakistan ensure that its relationship with China remains both sustainable and mutually advantageous in an increasingly contested global order.

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