

STRENGTHENING TIES: THE EVOLUTION OF THE PAKISTAN-CHINA STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP IN THE XI JINPING ERA

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ABSTRACT

The strategic partnership between Pakistan and China has significantly strengthened under Xi Jinping's leadership, which has been marked by robust economic, defense, and geopolitical cooperation. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are at the core of this collaboration, aimed to revolutionize Pakistan's infrastructure and foster regional connectivity. Despite encountering obstacles, this alliance remains pivotal in shaping regional geopolitics and fostering economic progress. This study examines the deepening strategic ties between Pakistan and China under Xi Jinping, focusing on the multifaceted dimensions of BRI and CPEC. It seeks to analyze the opportunities and challenges inherent in this evolving relationship for regional stability and development. Utilizing a qualitative study approach with a descriptive design, the study draws on secondary sources to offer a comprehensive analysis of the strategic, economic, and geopolitical dynamics characterizing the Pakistan-China partnership. The Pakistan-China strategic partnership under Xi Jinping has deepened, encompassing economic, defense, and geopolitical dimensions, with initiatives like BRI and CPEC playing central roles. This evolving alliance is crucial for regional stability and connectivity, despite facing challenges and geopolitical rivalries. Engage local communities and stakeholders to ensure equitable benefits and address grievances for inclusive and sustainable development of CPEC.

Keywords: regional connectivity, Pakistan-China, Xi Jinping, Belt and Road Initiative.

INTRODUCTION

The strategic partnership between Pakistan and China has evolved into a robust and multifaceted alliance, particularly under the leadership of Xi Jinping. This relationship, deeply rooted in mutual interests and shared visions, spans various domains, including economic, defense, and geopolitical spheres. The cornerstone of this partnership is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as its flagship project. This comprehensive initiative aims to enhance regional connectivity and transform Pakistan's economic landscape through extensive infrastructure development, including highways, railways, and energy projects. The evolving dynamics of the Pakistan-China strategic partnership in the Xi Jinping era reflect a convergence of interests that extends beyond mere economic cooperation, positioning both

nations as pivotal players in the broader geopolitical landscape of South Asia and beyond. At the heart of this strategic partnership lies the BRI, an ambitious global development strategy adopted by China involving infrastructure development and investments in various countries. The BRI seeks to revive the ancient Silk Road trade routes, creating new corridors of trade and economic cooperation. For Pakistan, CPEC is not just an economic venture but a potential game changer. It leverages Pakistan's geo-strategic location to facilitate trade and economic connectivity between China and other parts of the world, including Central Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. The development of Gwadar Port, a deep-sea port situated near the Strait of Hormuz, is particularly significant. It serves as a central hub for international trade and a strategic asset

in mitigating China's "Malacca Dilemma," which refers to its reliance on the narrow and geopolitically sensitive Strait of Malacca for energy imports.

CPEC's transformative potential for Pakistan is multifaceted. Economically, it promises to create new trade opportunities and enhance Pakistan's connectivity with global markets. Strategically, it bolsters Pakistan's defense capabilities and positions it as a key player in regional geopolitics. The development of Gwadar Port, for instance, not only facilitates trade but also enhances maritime security through joint naval patrols, thus contributing to regional stability. Furthermore, CPEC's extensive infrastructure projects, including highways and railways, aim to integrate Pakistan more closely with the global economy, fostering economic growth and development. Despite its promising prospects, CPEC faces significant challenges, particularly within Pakistan. There are contrasting narratives regarding its impact. On one hand, there is optimism about the economic benefits and prosperity it could bring. On the other hand, there are concerns about potential exploitation and the replication of historical precedents akin to the East India Company. These concerns underscore the importance of addressing local grievances and ensuring that the benefits of CPEC are equitably distributed. The slow progress of certain projects, coupled with local grievances over resource exploitation and lack of consultation, has led to resistance and increased insurgency, particularly in regions like Baluchistan. The disparity between investments in infrastructure and the actual benefits received by local populations has exacerbated tensions, highlighting the need for more inclusive development strategies.

Moreover, the strategic interests of other global powers, particularly the United States and India, pose additional challenges to the seamless implementation of CPEC. The geopolitical rivalry in the region means that CPEC is not just an economic project but also a focal point of strategic competition. The broader implications of the Pakistan-China strategic partnership under Xi Jinping's leadership extend beyond bilateral relations. The BRI and CPEC are central to China's strategy of enhancing its global influence through economic diplomacy and infrastructure development. By investing in infrastructure and creating new trade routes, China aims to secure its economic interests and reduce dependency on maritime chokepoints. In addition to the economic and strategic dimensions, the Pakistan-

China partnership under Xi Jinping has significant geopolitical implications. The extension of CPEC into Afghanistan and potential links with Iran highlight the corridor's broader regional implications. This expansion reflects China's ambition to create a network of trade routes that enhance its influence and economic integration across Asia and into Europe. Such developments could potentially shift the regional balance of power, with China playing a more dominant role in shaping regional geopolitics. Furthermore, the integration of Iran into the BRI framework, through initiatives like the Iran-Pakistan-China Gas Pipeline, reflects a pragmatic approach to regional challenges. This cooperation could address mutual security concerns, enhance economic ties, and foster stability in the region.

The strategic relationship between Pakistan and China also extends to defense and security cooperation. Both nations share common concerns about regional stability and the need to counterbalance Indian influence. China's investments in Pakistan's defense capabilities, particularly through CPEC, aim to bolster Pakistan's strategic position in the region. Joint naval patrols and enhanced maritime cooperation are examples of how this partnership extends into military domains, further solidifying the alliance. Moreover, the strategic significance of Gwadar Port extends to its potential use for military purposes, enhancing the naval presence of both China and Pakistan in the Indian Ocean. This development is part of a broader strategy to counter regional threats and ensure secure trade routes.

Literature Review

The origins of Pakistan-China relations trace back to the early 1960s, driven by mutual geopolitical interests, particularly in counterbalancing India. Over the decades, this partnership has transformed from "friendly relations" to an "all-weather strategic cooperative partnership" (NUS Institute of South Asian Studies, 2024). The CPEC is the cornerstone of Pakistan-China relations, aimed at enhancing connectivity and boosting economic cooperation. Launched in 2013, CPEC has led to significant Chinese investments in Pakistan's infrastructure, energy, and industrial sectors. This project is viewed as mutually beneficial, addressing Pakistan's energy shortfalls and improving infrastructure while allowing China to secure a strategic trade route and strengthen its influence in South Asia (Global Times,

2024; NUS Institute of South Asian Studies, 2024). Military cooperation between Pakistan and China has also intensified, with China providing military equipment and technology to Pakistan. Joint ventures such as the production of JF-17 fighter aircrafts underscore this collaboration. Additionally, the two countries have engaged in joint military exercises and high-level defense dialogues to enhance strategic cooperation (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022). Diplomatically, China and Pakistan support each other on core issues. China backs Pakistan on its stance regarding Kashmir, while Pakistan supports China on issues related to Xinjiang, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. This mutual support is rooted in shared principles of non-interference and respect for sovereignty (NUS Institute of South Asian Studies, 2024; Global Times, 2024). Despite the strong partnership, the relationship faces challenges. Western media often criticize CPEC as a "debt trap" for Pakistan, although both nations dismiss these claims, emphasizing the developmental benefits of the projects. Security concerns, particularly related to terrorism in the region, pose additional risks to the partnership. However, both countries have established mechanisms to address these issues and ensure the safety of Chinese nationals working in Pakistan (Global Times, 2024).

The Pakistan-China strategic partnership has flourished in the Xi Jinping era, characterized by comprehensive economic, military, and diplomatic cooperation. This relationship is expected to further deepen as both countries continue to align their strategic interests and work towards shared goals of regional stability and development.

Theoretical Framework

In international relations, the theory of **Neorealism**, also known as Structural Realism, provides a robust lens through which to analyze the evolution of the Pakistan-China strategic partnership during the Xi Jinping era. As outlined by Kenneth Waltz (1979), Neorealism emphasizes that the international system is inherently anarchic, meaning that no central authority exists to enforce rules or order. In this self-help system, states must prioritize their survival, and in doing so, they seek to maximize their relative power vis-à-vis other states. The relationship between Pakistan and China, particularly under Xi Jinping's leadership, can be understood within this framework, as both countries seek to balance against regional and global powers, enhance their security, and strengthen

their strategic positions. Historically, Pakistan and China have maintained close ties since the early 1950s, characterized by deep political, military, and economic cooperation. This partnership has been shaped by mutual interests in countering common adversaries, such as India and the United States. Pakistan has consistently sought China's support to counterbalance India's growing influence in the region, especially in terms of military strength and economic clout. For China, Pakistan represents a critical ally in South Asia, a region where India and the United States hold significant sway. These considerations fit well within Neorealism's emphasis on power dynamics and the pursuit of national interests in an anarchic global order. The theory posits that states form alliances and partnerships not out of ideological alignment but to ensure their survival and maximize their security. In this context, the deepening of Pakistan-China relations can be seen as a response to the evolving regional power structure, particularly as India strengthens its strategic partnerships with the United States, Japan, and other Western powers (Mearsheimer, 2001).

The rise of Xi Jinping to China's leadership in 2012 has further accelerated the growth of Pakistan-China relations. Under Xi's vision of China's global role, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was launched, with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) emerging as a flagship project. The CPEC, which involves multibillion-dollar investments in infrastructure, energy, and transportation projects in Pakistan, illustrates the strategic importance of this partnership. For China, CPEC is a critical component of its broader efforts to expand its influence in South Asia and counterbalance India's growing economic and military power. Additionally, CPEC provides China with access to the Arabian Sea via Pakistan's Gwadar Port, which is strategically significant as it offers an alternative route for Chinese goods to bypass the Malacca Strait—a chokepoint in global maritime trade. Neorealism helps explain this development by highlighting China's desire to secure its economic and strategic interests in a competitive international environment. By investing heavily in Pakistan, China is solidifying an alliance that not only benefits its economy but also strengthens its geopolitical foothold in South Asia, enhancing its overall power position. For Pakistan, the partnership with China under Xi Jinping has provided a critical counterweight to India, which has continued to expand its military capabilities and deepen its ties

with the United States. India's growing influence poses a direct threat to Pakistan's national security, a concern that Neorealism emphasizes as a primary motivation for state behavior. Pakistan has long viewed its relationship with China as essential for maintaining a balance of power in South Asia. This is particularly evident in the military domain, where China has been a major supplier of advanced weapons systems to Pakistan. The two countries have also engaged in joint military exercises and strategic dialogues, further strengthening their defense cooperation. This aspect of the partnership aligns with Neorealism's argument that states enhance their security through military alliances and strategic partnerships to deter potential adversaries. The Pakistan-China military relationship serves as a form of external balancing, where Pakistan seeks to counter the growing power of India by aligning with a stronger state, China (Waltz, 1979).

Neorealism also provides a framework for understanding the broader regional and global implications of the Pakistan-China partnership. Both countries have positioned their relationship as a strategic counterweight to the United States' influence in the region. The U.S. pivot to Asia, aimed at containing China's rise, and the deepening of U.S.-India relations have pushed China and Pakistan closer together. The U.S.-India strategic partnership, which includes defense cooperation, nuclear agreements, and joint military exercises, is perceived by both China and Pakistan as a direct challenge to their interests. In response, China and Pakistan have intensified their cooperation in areas such as defense, intelligence sharing, and regional security initiatives. This dynamic fits within Neorealism's explanation of how states form alliances to balance against perceived threats. The Pakistan-China partnership serves as a mechanism for both countries to protect their interests and enhance their relative power in an increasingly competitive international environment. The economic dimension of the Pakistan-China relationship is also critical in the context of Neorealism. While Neorealism traditionally emphasizes military power, it also recognizes the importance of economic power as a means of securing national interests. The CPEC, as part of China's broader BRI, has significant economic implications for both countries. For Pakistan, CPEC has brought substantial Chinese investments in infrastructure and energy projects, which are critical for Pakistan's economic development and stability.

From China's perspective, CPEC is a means of securing its economic interests by creating new trade routes and expanding its influence in key regions. The economic interdependence created by CPEC further strengthens the strategic partnership between Pakistan and China, as both countries benefit from enhanced trade and investment ties. Neorealism explains this aspect of the relationship by highlighting how states use economic means to enhance their security and power in the international system (Mearsheimer, 2001).

The evolution of the Pakistan-China strategic partnership in the Xi Jinping era can be effectively analyzed through the lens of Neorealism. This theory emphasizes the importance of power, security, and the anarchic nature of the international system, all of which are key factors driving the deepening of relations between Pakistan and China. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China has pursued a more assertive global role, with Pakistan emerging as a critical ally in its efforts to counterbalance India and the United States. The CPEC, military cooperation, and strategic alignment between the two countries are all manifestations of Neorealist principles, as both Pakistan and China seek to enhance their security and power in an increasingly competitive international environment. By viewing the Pakistan-China partnership through the framework of Neorealism, it becomes clear that this relationship is driven by strategic considerations aimed at balancing against regional and global threats, rather than mere ideological or economic alignment.

Research Methodology

For the study "Strengthening Ties: The Evolution of the Pakistan-China Strategic Partnership in the Xi Jinping Era," a qualitative research methodology has been employed to thoroughly explore the multifaceted relationship between Pakistan and China. This approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of the strategic, economic, and geopolitical dimensions of their partnership. A descriptive research design was utilized, aiming to provide a comprehensive and detailed portrayal of the evolving dynamics under Xi Jinping's leadership. Data collection has been based on secondary sources, including a wide range of academic articles, government reports, policy analyses, and relevant literature. This method ensured a robust and diverse set of data, enabling the researchers to analyze trends, patterns, and the broader implications of the Pakistan-

China strategic alliance. By relying on secondary data, the study could leverage existing research and insights to construct a nuanced narrative of the bilateral relationship. The descriptive research design and qualitative methodology facilitated a holistic examination of the strategic partnership, highlighting key developments, challenges, and opportunities. This approach provided a detailed contextual understanding, essential for comprehending the complexity of the Pakistan-China relationship in the contemporary geopolitical landscape.

Pakistan-China Strategic Interaction.

Pakistan's foreign policy aims to develop mutually beneficial and friendly ties with countries worldwide, focusing on a peaceful neighborhood and the socio-economic development of the country. To address issues like terrorism, extremism, fundamentalism, separatism, and global warming, a fresh global cooperative approach is needed. These bilateral relationships range from tactical alliances to strategic partnerships (Munir, 2018). Pakistan and China, guided by the principle of peaceful coexistence, have aligned their approaches to major regional and international issues. Their strategic congruence spans defense, security, and economic fields. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) involves billions of dollars in investment, aiming to create a modern Silk Road, linking China's economy with Central Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. This initiative impacts 193 countries, representing 40% of global GDP, 63% of the world population, and involves a trillion-dollar investment from China. From 2014 to 2017, China's Communist Party invested nearly 120 billion dollars globally, as highlighted in its 2017 constitution.

Geo-Strategic Importance of CPEC: Implications for Pakistan

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is widely regarded as a game changer for Pakistan. Pakistan's geo-strategic location has been crucial in helping China realize its vision of enhanced trade and economic connectivity with other parts of the world. While CPEC has brought significant opportunities to Pakistan, it has also presented various challenges. In Pakistan, two contrasting narratives about CPEC exist. One narrative is optimistic, suggesting that CPEC will bring prosperity to the country, while the other is pessimistic, likening it to the East India Company (Mollestem, 2019). This paper explores the

geo-strategic importance of CPEC for Pakistan by examining its various geographical and strategic facets. It outlines how Pakistan can leverage its geographical position to reap multiple benefits from this economic corridor. The research highlights that CPEC is not just a trade route connecting different parts of China and other countries but also has political, cultural, and strategic dimensions. Furthermore, it will create new trade opportunities for Pakistan due to its strategic location (Ali, 2016). The paper also emphasizes that CPEC will enhance Pakistan's defense capabilities, particularly against India. Additionally, it discusses the challenges Pakistan may face due to CPEC, including potential threats to U.S. interests in the region and challenges to Indian dominance (McCartney, 2021).

Exploring the Geo-Strategic Dimension of CPEC

Pakistan's strategic location connects the South, East, West, and Central Asian regions, making it a significant geopolitical hub. On one side lies India, the world's second-most populous country, and on the other, resource and hydrocarbon-rich Iran and the Central Asian Republics. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a multi-billion dollar project under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), strengthens the enduring relationship between China and Pakistan, often described as higher than mountains, deeper than oceans, and sweeter than honey (Iqbal et al., 2021). CPEC links South and East Asia, creating economic connectivity with a critical geo-strategic dimension that warrants exploration. Its success will foster cooperation among South and East Asian nations in education, health, trade, currency, culture, energy, telecommunication, and infrastructure (Shabbir et al., 2021). BRI and CPEC have the potential to connect China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Russia, Europe, and many South Asian countries. The emergence of the Gwadar deep-sea port, located 600 km from the Strait of Hormuz—the world's largest oil chokepoint enhances Pakistan's geo-strategic importance (Rasool, 2020). This research, based on primary and secondary data using exploratory and analytical methods, highlights that CPEC, the flagship project of BRI, is transforming Pakistan economically, politically, and socially. The study focuses on exploring the previously overlooked geo-strategic dimensions of CPEC.

CPEC and Geo-Strategic Paradigm of Gawadar

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) holds pivotal importance due to Pakistan's strategic geographic position in the region. The Gwadar Port, located near the critical Strait of Hormuz, is key to this significance. CPEC and Gwadar are set to revolutionize Pakistan's economy, transforming it into a new emerging model. This research highlights the geo-strategic significance of Gwadar using geographical and economic approaches, qualitative descriptive methodology, and SWOT analysis (Gul et al., 2021). The primary objective of this study is to analyze the various components of the developmental project that enhance Gwadar's importance. Gwadar serves as an international trade route and commercial hub in the region. The development of this deep-sea port has bolstered regional and economic cooperation through improved road connectivity and maritime routes (Afghan et al., 2022). The study finds that CPEC is a substantial mega-project aimed at propelling Pakistan's economic take-off and rise. China and Pakistan share common maritime interests in the region, and Gwadar Port can facilitate joint naval patrols in the Indian Ocean, enhancing the naval presence of both nations. Consequently, CPEC is seen as a catalyst for transformational change in Pakistan's economic profile and that of other regional countries (Ahmad, 2019). Conceptually, CPEC is characterized as a game changer and a catalyst for economic revolution in Pakistan, driving regional economic prosperity. It is poised to make Pakistan one of the most attractive transit trade routes in the world.

Baluchistan, CPEC, and Geopolitical Challenges in the Xi Jinping Era

The slow progress of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) reflects a global trend, with 70% of its funding from Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), 25% from loans, and 5% from grants. However, private companies are hesitant to invest in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Khan, 2020). China's debt sustainability and repayment terms are putting pressure on recipient countries like Russia, Mongolia, and Pakistan, potentially jeopardizing their sovereignty (Abbas, 2019). Despite promises, no significant projects have been established in Gwadar outside a 19km road in Baluchistan, leading to local grievances. Industrialization in the region remains at 60%, and 40% of Makran has not been integrated into the initiative (Ullah, 2023). Conflicts of interest

persist in Baluchistan, particularly in the energy sector. Slow transitions in thermal power plants, line losses, and circular debt are major issues. There is significant regional disparity between Baluchistan and the rest of Pakistan in terms of infrastructure and development. The local populace and political leadership are largely resistant to the project due to a lack of consultation and perceived exploitation of resources like Reko Diq, Saindak, and natural gas, resulting in trust deficits (Abbas et al., 2019). Under Xi Jinping's leadership, the CPEC project has not significantly impacted Baluchistan, with Chinese investments focusing more on financial gain rather than human development, poverty alleviation, higher education, and human resource development, contrasting with the economic policies of the World Bank. While the national grid has benefited from the addition of 7500 MW of energy through CPEC, Baluchistan has not seen corresponding facilities or improvements in its energy sector (Meo et al., 2019). Although CPEC has generated employment opportunities, private investment, and initiated trade with neighboring countries, Baluchistan remains largely excluded, suffering from increased insurgency and ethnic conflicts.

CPEC Malacca Dilemma and Regional Integration

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) offers significant prospects for regional economic integration, linking various regions of the Asian continent, including underdeveloped areas of Pakistan with its main cities (Jaleel et al 2019). Within Asia, economic, social, and political integration is notably less advanced compared to regions like the European Union and ASEAN. This lack of integration has prevented South Asia from fully benefiting from globalization and regionalism. As part of the larger Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), CPEC facilitates regional connectivity between South and West Asia, as well as South, Central, and East Asia. Additionally, CPEC provides China an alternative to bypass the Malacca Dilemma. In 2003, former Chinese President Hu Jintao highlighted the challenges China faced in the Malacca Strait and South China Sea regarding international maritime trade (Javed & Ismail, 2021). While China physically controls the South China Sea, the Malacca Strait is monitored by the Indian Navy, exacerbating the Indo-China rivalry and complicating Chinese trade routes. This issue is referred to as the "Malacca Dilemma."

CPEC offers China the shortest route to the Middle East and Africa, from where it imports over 50% of its crude oil. Thus, CPEC serves as a strategic safeguard for China against disruptions in the South China Sea and helps mitigate the Malacca Dilemma. Moreover, CPEC enhances China's strategic positioning in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) relative to India and the United States.

3.1 Pakistan- China Strategic Objectives in the Xi Jinping Era

China aims to enhance its political and economic influence globally, particularly in regions already dominated by the USA and EU, from Asia to Europe. To secure sea routes and reduce dependency on maritime chokepoints, China promotes economic growth through strategic relations, including the Silk Road, maritime routes, and land corridors in CPEC and BRI. The BRI encompasses highways, railways, and infrastructure but lacks investment in higher education and human resource development (Ahmed et al., 2022). Xi Jinping emphasizes addressing issues like climate change, global disputes, world trade, and technology through a soft approach in international politics, underscoring the rule of law and the ideology of the Communist Party of China. He advocates for global unity and cooperation, envisioning China's rise as a new world power through economic reforms and strict party governance (Gul et al., 2022). The One Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) under Xi Jinping facilitates consumer power and infrastructure development, benefiting over a billion people. In 2017, China's economy reached \$12.238 trillion, a 40% increase attributed to the BRI. With 15 strategic partners and investments totaling \$1.9 trillion across 900 projects, the BRI and CPEC embody Xi Jinping's strategic vision. His foreign policy in the 21st century, particularly in the Indo-Pacific and Africa, underscores the geopolitical significance of Pakistan and its neighbors (Bencivelli, & Tonelli, 2020). China's ambition to extend CPEC to Afghanistan and influence in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives reflects its goal to assert dominance in the South China Sea, Taiwan Strait, and the Indian Ocean, countering India's alliances with ASEAN and the Quad. Xi Jinping's realistic approach to these issues is evident in his policies (Parveen & Shah, 2021). President Xi stated that China has entered a "new normal" in trade, with sustained GDP growth. Drawing from the ancient maritime Silk Road, the BRI, initiated in 2013, aims to connect the world to

China through infrastructure and investment. Despite a decrease in BRI investments to \$28.4 billion in the first half of 2022, Xi's strategic vision includes restoring diplomatic ties, such as between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and forming alliances across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. China's goal is to create a large bloc united by economic and strategic interests, countering the liberal and democratic order with an authoritarian ideology.

BRI and Xi Jinping's Doctrine

The international power dynamics are shifting as global leaders compete with China's One Belt & One Road (BRI) initiative. Since its inception in 2013, Western policymakers have attempted to undermine the BRI's scope and strategic importance through a fifth-generation hybrid war, spreading confusion and conflicts. Despite these efforts, the Economist London reported in August 2023 that the BRI has created 420,000 jobs and lifted 40 million people out of poverty in its member countries over the last decade, demonstrating its significant impact (Wu, 2018). According to the World Bank, the BRI, once completed, could reduce travel times along economic corridors by 12%, increase trade by 2.7% to 9.7%, raise incomes by up to 3.4%, and lift 7.6 million people out of extreme poverty. Moreover, China has prioritized promoting low-carbon and green development under the BRI framework, signing agreements with the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and other international organizations to support eco-environmental conservation (Bencivelli & Tonelli, 2020). China is investing an estimated US\$8 trillion in African, Asian, and European nations under the BRI, funded by government policy banks, commercial banks, and Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs). The BRI has established economic corridors between China and countries like Pakistan, Laos, Thailand, Brunei, Myanmar, Mongolia, and Russia. Over the past decade, China has signed Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with 152 countries and 32 international organizations, making it the world's leading overseas investor with FDI rising from US\$82 billion in 2012 to US\$154 billion by 2020 (Deng, 2021).

Geopolitical tensions have heightened, as seen at the G20 Annual Summit in New Delhi, where global leaders announced the US-India-Middle East-Europe Corridor, aiming to counter China's BRI. This corridor reflects strategic measures by the G20 to

challenge China's economic ties and connectivity in the Middle East and Africa. The inclusion of the African Union as a full member of the G20 underscores this strategy, countering China's influence in Africa (Torres, 2019). US President Joe Biden's efforts to counter the BRI include pitching Washington as an alternative partner for developing countries, emphasizing openness, inclusiveness, modernization, and qualitative industrialization. The newly announced corridor aims to bridge ports across continents, promoting clean energy and connectivity (Akhter, 2022). Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's endorsement of the deal highlights India's strategic ambitions. The corridor aims to link Middle Eastern countries by rail and connect them to India by port, facilitating energy and trade flows from the Gulf to Europe. However, achieving this vision requires substantial funding, political harmony, and human capital (Wang, & Yi, 2021). The BRI has already connected more than 152 countries, making it an ideal platform for global connectivity. Despite India's concerns and propaganda against the BRI and CPEC, the new corridor represents a significant geopolitical and geostrategic shift in US-India policy. The I2U2 forum, established by the US, India, UAE, and Israel, marked the beginning of this new deal, potentially marginalizing Pakistan, Iran, and CPEC.

Is Xi Jinping Militarises the BRI?

By the end of 2022, 150 countries and 32 international organizations had signed over 200 cooperation documents related to joint infrastructure projects with China under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This ambitious plan aims to build global infrastructure, connecting China to its trading partners and strengthening bilateral relations. The BRI serves as a new platform for global governance and multilateral development (Dunford, 2021). However, the USA and its allies remain suspicious of China's intentions, concerned that the BRI's debt trap diplomacy may undermine opportunities for expanding China's economic, strategic, and geopolitical power. They fear this could help China shape a new order of global and regional governance. Despite these concerns, many international organizations under the United Nations system have connected and participated in BRI projects (Teer et al., 2021). Under Xi Jinping's leadership, the BRI reflects a realist paradigm, projecting China's state interests to maximize power through economic and trade channels within the international system. Xi has

emphasized adherence to international rule of law and promoted people-to-people diplomacy, navigating a theoretical approach to realism. By avoiding direct conflicts and focusing on development initiatives like CPEC and BRI, China aims to counter prevailing hegemonic influences and sabotage efforts, promoting global development and cooperation.

China's Belt and Road Initiative Prospects for Pak-Iran Relations under XiJinping's reign

China and Iran recently struck a significant \$400 billion deal amid their "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" and as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. This landmark agreement has created an opportunity for Pakistan to strengthen its ties with Iran. Despite sharing a border, Pak-Iran relations have been shaky due to differing regional objectives. Pakistan's strategic alliance with Saudi Arabia and Iran's economic relations with India have been key concerns between the two neighboring countries. However, with regional dynamics shifting and China playing a more active role globally, there is a chance for cooperation between Pakistan and Iran (Mangi et al., 2021). China is already heavily involved in its Belt and Road Initiative, notably through projects like the Pakistan-China Economic Corridor (CPEC), initially valued at \$46 billion and expected to rise to \$62 billion. With a need for ample energy sources to sustain its industries, China's investment in Iran could potentially revitalize the long-delayed Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline, transforming it into an Iran-Pakistan-China Gas Pipeline. Additionally, both nations are keen on establishing links between the Gawadar and Chabahar ports, which are a mere 72 kilometers apart. These initiatives could strengthen border security cooperation and foster bilateral economic collaboration (Rizwanullah, 2020).

Iran faces economic challenges due to the US's "maximum pressure campaign," while Pakistan shares concerns about security and US involvement in the region, particularly given India's increasing strategic ties with the US. The expulsion of India from certain projects in Iran and the new China-Iran deal could positively impact trilateral cooperation between China, Pakistan, and Iran. Both Pakistan and Iran share discontent with US policies, providing an alternative avenue for cooperation with China (Ahsan, 2021). Under Chinese influence, closer ties between Pakistan and Iran offer a pragmatic approach to managing internal crises and devising a mutual

strategy for the region. CPEC, a flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative, holds strategic importance regionally and trans-regionally. As China plans to invest \$400 billion in Iran, exploring how CPEC and Chinese investment in Iran can complement each other is crucial. This could potentially elevate the traditional cooperation between Pakistan and Iran into a narrative of a "Pak-China-Iran trilateral partnership."

Conclusion

The strategic relationship between Pakistan and China has evolved significantly under the leadership of Xi Jinping, underscoring a deepening alliance characterized by comprehensive cooperation across various domains. This multifaceted partnership, encompassing economic, defense, and geopolitical dimensions, reflects a shared vision and mutual interests that have been reinforced through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Central to the Pakistan-China partnership is the BRI, with CPEC as its flagship project. This initiative not only aims to enhance regional connectivity but also seeks to transform Pakistan's economic landscape. CPEC involves extensive infrastructure development, including highways, railways, and energy projects, all designed to integrate Pakistan more closely with the global economy and facilitate trade routes linking China with Central Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. The scale of Chinese investment, which reached nearly \$120 billion globally from 2014 to 2017, highlights the strategic importance Beijing places on these initiatives. For Pakistan, CPEC is a potential game changer. Its geo-strategic location makes it a vital link in China's vision of enhanced trade and economic connectivity. The development of Gwadar Port, situated near the Strait of Hormuz, is particularly significant. As a deep-sea port, Gwadar is poised to become a central hub for international trade and a key component in China's strategy to bypass the Malacca Strait, thereby mitigating the "Malacca Dilemma." Despite the promising prospects, the CPEC initiative faces challenges. There are contrasting narratives within Pakistan—one optimistic about the economic benefits, and the other concerned about potential exploitation akin to historical precedents. These concerns highlight the importance of addressing local grievances and ensuring that the benefits of CPEC are equitably distributed.

Beyond economic collaboration, the strategic congruence between Pakistan and China extends to defense and security. Both nations share common concerns about regional stability and the need to counterbalance Indian influence. China's investments in Pakistan's defense capabilities, particularly through CPEC, aim to bolster Pakistan's strategic position in the region. Joint naval patrols and enhanced maritime cooperation are examples of how this partnership extends into military domains, further solidifying the alliance. Moreover, the strategic significance of Gwadar Port extends to its potential use for military purposes, enhancing the naval presence of both China and Pakistan in the Indian Ocean. This development is part of a broader strategy to counter regional threats and ensure secure trade routes. CPEC's geo-strategic importance cannot be overstated. It not only serves as a trade route but also has significant political and cultural dimensions. By linking South Asia with East Asia and beyond, CPEC fosters economic connectivity with a critical geo-strategic dimension. The project's success could lead to greater cooperation among South and East Asian nations in various fields, including education, health, trade, and energy. Furthermore, the extension of CPEC into Afghanistan and potential links with Iran highlight the corridor's broader regional implications. This expansion reflects China's ambition to create a network of trade routes that enhance its influence and economic integration across Asia and into Europe. Such developments could potentially shift the regional balance of power, with China playing a more dominant role in shaping regional geopolitics.

While the strategic benefits of CPEC are evident, the project has not been without its challenges, particularly in regions like Baluchistan. The slow progress of certain projects, coupled with local grievances over resource exploitation and lack of consultation, has led to resistance and increased insurgency. The disparity between investments in infrastructure and the actual benefits received by local populations has exacerbated tensions, highlighting the need for more inclusive development strategies. Additionally, the strategic interests of other global powers, particularly the United States and India, pose challenges to the seamless implementation of CPEC. The geopolitical rivalry in the region means that CPEC is not just an economic project but also a focal point of strategic competition. The broader implications of the Pakistan-China strategic partnership under Xi Jinping's leadership

extend beyond bilateral relations. The BRI and CPEC are central to China's strategy of enhancing its global influence through economic diplomacy and infrastructure development. By investing in infrastructure and creating new trade routes, China aims to secure its economic interests and reduce dependency on maritime chokepoints. Moreover, the strategic alignment between Pakistan and China serves as a counterbalance to India's alliances with other regional powers and initiatives like the US-India-Middle East-Europe Corridor. This geopolitical dynamic underscores the importance of Pakistan as a key player in China's broader strategy to assert its influence in the Indian Ocean and beyond.

The evolving dynamics of the Pakistan-China relationship also highlight opportunities for enhanced regional cooperation. The potential integration of Iran into the BRI framework, through initiatives like the Iran-Pakistan-China Gas Pipeline, reflects a pragmatic approach to regional challenges. Such cooperation could address mutual security concerns, enhance economic ties, and foster stability in the region. In conclusion, the strategic relationship between Pakistan and China under Xi Jinping's leadership represents a multifaceted partnership with significant economic, defense, and geopolitical dimensions. The BRI and CPEC are central to this relationship, offering both opportunities and challenges. By addressing local grievances, ensuring inclusive development, and navigating regional geopolitical dynamics, Pakistan and China can strengthen their partnership and contribute to regional stability and prosperity. The continued evolution of this relationship will be crucial in shaping the future geopolitical landscape of South Asia and beyond.

Recommendations

Actively engage local communities, particularly in regions like Baluchistan, to ensure that their concerns are addressed and benefits are equitably distributed. This includes transparent communication about project goals, benefits, and potential impacts. Invest in local capacity building through education,

vocational training, and infrastructure development to ensure that local populations can actively participate in and benefit from the economic opportunities created by CPEC.

Strengthen security cooperation between Pakistan and China to protect CPEC infrastructure from insurgent attacks and regional conflicts. This includes joint security operations, intelligence sharing, and capacity building of local law enforcement agencies. Implement community-based security initiatives that involve local populations in maintaining security and stability, thereby fostering trust and cooperation between the state and local communities.

Diversify economic investments beyond infrastructure to include sectors like higher education, healthcare, technology, and human resource development. This will ensure a more holistic and sustainable economic growth model. Encourage public-private partnerships to leverage private sector expertise and investment in various projects, enhancing efficiency and innovation.

Adopt sustainable development practices to mitigate the environmental impacts of large-scale infrastructure projects. This includes conducting thorough environmental impact assessments and implementing measures to protect natural resources and biodiversity. Encourage Chinese companies involved in CPEC to adopt strong CSR practices that contribute to local community development, environmental protection, and social welfare.

Foster stronger regional cooperation by integrating CPEC with other regional initiatives and establishing partnerships with neighboring countries like Afghanistan and Iran. This will enhance regional connectivity and economic integration. Engage in proactive diplomatic efforts to address geopolitical tensions and foster a cooperative regional environment. This includes dialogue with major powers like the United States and India to ensure that CPEC is seen as a beneficial project for regional stability and economic development, rather than a source of conflict.

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