

## Sino-Pakistan Relations: A Historical Journey of 70 Years

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**Abstract:** *Pakistan-China friendship is the height of longstanding confidence, regardless of different cultures, political systems and religions. Both countries have evolved their bilateral relationship based on common values and belief systems. Pakistan recognized China in 1950. This relationship has been upgraded to a strategic partnership in 2005, signed a treaty following Friendship and Good Neighbourly relationship. Both countries have successfully managed their relationship over a long and tumultuous journey of 70 years. This study delineates Pakistan-China strategic relationships in different phases of history from 1950 to 2020.*

**Key Words:** Pakistan-China Friendship, Cold War, South Asia, Xi Jinping, Defense Relationship

### Introduction

Pakistan-China friendship is known as the 'all Weather Partnership'. Both countries show exemplary behaviour of following peaceful coexistence despite having enormous differences including political, social and economic. India appears a common enemy to both countries which incited to develop a durable entente. Chinese state interests compelled it to develop relations with small South Asian countries and superpowers, but never allowed any country to disturb harmonious Pakistan-China relations.

China supported Pakistan's Kashmir policy during the 60s and 70s changed into neutrality during the 80s because of a shift in Chinese foreign policy under Deng Xiaoping. Despite complicating geopolitics, both countries always remained stood on

firm ground. Pakistan -China relations cover multiple areas like defence, culture, economics high-level diplomatic exchanges and people-to-people contact.

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was started with the aim to connect China with Pakistan through Gilgit-Baltistan. It was the epitome of China-Pakistan long-lasting friendship. China poured \$ 62 billion into Pakistan's infrastructure development, energy projects and technological upgradation. Moreover, China's defence cooperation with Pakistan is also exemplary throughout their bilateral interactions.

The article will delineate the key events of the cold war that shaped the all-weather and time-tested friendship. The extensive study reveals that the 'triangular relationship' viewpoint from the domain of

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the US and the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) has been missing in the study of the China-Pakistan relationship. This perspective in the study will provide a nuanced understanding of the subject.

### **Pakistan-China Strategic Partnership**

China has always been a key player in Pakistan's foreign relations. Pakistan-China friendship has not developed overnight; it has experienced a lot of upheavals.

#### **(A) Early Historical Contacts**

China is an ancient civilization spanning thousands of years. China's belief system centred on the idea 'Middle Kingdom' and outside as barbarians (Hunt, [1984](#)). These ideas of China's centrality even hold relevance today. The Han dynasty was the first which established relations with Jib in Kashmir through the ancient silk route. Meanwhile, Chinese like Heun Tsang and Fahsien came to the region in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. These historical exchanges caused the spread of Islam and Buddhism in China, particularly Xinjiang and Tibet. These religious interactions formed a strong cultural, economic and social bond between two old civilizations of the world.

These pilgrimages used to visit northern India like Gilgit and Bihar (Butt, [2007](#)). The Indus Valley civilization also influenced Chinese art and culture. A site was excavated near Karachi which held numerous Chinese artifacts. Also, the silk route caused many exchanges between the two nations (Butt, [2007](#)). Chinese caravans passed through historical Xinjiang, crossing Ladakh and Gilgit, and entering into present Pakistan.

Trade exchanges existed between China and Bangladesh also. However, the Mughals and Afghan rulers were the first ones which established regular economic exchanges with China (Chaudhry, 1970). So, the China-Pakistan relationship traces

historical roots spanning thousands of years. CPEC is an effort to reinstate the historical roots between China and Pakistan.

#### **(B) Pakistan-China Relations (1949-1990)**

Pakistan's geostrategic position lured the cold war rivals like Russia and US to have Pakistan in their camp. The geographical remapping of Pakistan created a new country Bangladesh. Pakistan's key position in Eurasia, and its closeness to the Muslim world like central Asian states and Middle Eastern countries suited well to China's policymakers (Brzezinski, [1997](#)). Pakistan-China bilateral interaction can also be understood through the lens of regional and global powers.

##### **(a) Beginning of Diplomatic Relations (1949-1953)**

In 1950, diplomatic relations remained imbalanced and frosty because confusion prevailed on both sides. Earlier, Pakistan remained jumbled and hesitant about whether it should be accepted by China or not, because Pakistan's earlier inclination was with the West. At that time, Indians constantly harassed Pakistan from both the west and east side. Afghanistan was voicing for Pakhtunistan issue. Therefore, Pakistan could not afford to have more enemies (Bhola, [1986](#)). Secondly, the ideological strain was politicized by both sides. Thirdly, Pakistan had little knowledge of China. Fourthly, it was difficult for Pakistan to avoid cold war politics (Bhola, [1986](#)).

Lastly, the US did not accept communist China, however, conditions like 'India's act of devaluation currency' forced Pakistan to recognize China. At that moment, the Chinese presented a better deal of 'coal for cotton' from 1949 to 1950 (Chaudhary, 1970). Pakistan became the first Muslim and third country which recognized China's new government. Pakistan also hoped that after

having veto power in the UN, China would help Pakistan in the UNO security council (Amin, [2000](#)). Chinese drive to consolidate its territorial integrity in Taiwan and Tibet caused more clashes between China and USA. It also impacted Pakistan's foreign policy outlook.

Being a Commonwealth country, Pakistan looked to the West for its socioeconomic stability and growth. However, Pakistan successfully befriended with USA and China, USSR became more hostile. Pakistan also remained neutral on matters greatly concerned the Western powers like the Tibet issue. Zafarullah Kahn also supported China in her permanent seat in the UNO security council (Arif, [1984](#)).

In July 1951, major general MN Raza was appointed as the first ambassador to Peking (Goswami, [1971](#)). In addition, an unidentified China-Pakistan border was peaceful and China's position was not clear. Pakistan also contracted a trade agreement with China. Hughley enhanced Pakistan export in 1953, 54 (Dixit, [1987](#)).

### **(b) Pakistan-China-India Border Dispute and Bandung Diplomacy (1954-1970)**

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Earlier in 1954, the USA deliberated a strategy to fight Communism in Asia through the collective security system. Pakistan's Secretary of Defense Iskandar Mirza and army chief general Ayyub Khan visited the USA. As a consequence, Pakistan inked down two collective security pacts with USA i.e., the South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954 and Central Treaty Organization (CENTRO) recognized as Baghdad Pact in 1955 (Amin and Naseer, [2011](#)). Pakistan allowed the US for constructing a military base in Peshawar; however, Pakistan could not gain the benefits of a mutual defence agreement despite getting some economic and military aid from 1953 to 1961.

Pakistan's refusal to visit USSR was taken as a hostile gesture. USSR incited an anti-Pakistan campaign by cheating the Pakhtunistan issue and favoured India on the Kashmir issue (Levi, [1962](#)). China blamed the USA for committing a subversive attitude toward Asia. China also showed a great hatred for Pakistan's alliance with SEATO and CENTO. A People Daily correspondence blamed Pakistan which would jeopardize the security of Asia through the American alliance system and Pakistan would become an American war base (Syed, 1974).

Pakistan tilted foreign policy towards the West brought a great hue and cry in the country. Prime Minister Muhammad Ali Bogra planned to cool down the anti-west sentiments through Bandung diplomacy. PM ensured Chou Enlai that US-Pakistan relations are not a threat to Pakistan-China relations. Moreover, he accepted the invitation of Chou Enlai to attend the Bandung conference (Goswami, [1971](#)).

In 1955, the head of Afro-Asian countries assembled in Bandung. China and India's relations were in full swing. Both countries agreed to enact an accord 'Panchsheel' accord on Tibet. This agreement laid down the five principles of peaceful coexistence. Pakistan remained successful in ensuring Chou Enlai that Pakistan would not become the part of anti-China alliance. China also permitted Pakistan's 'seven pillars of peace' (Chaudhry, 1970).

Bandung conference paved the way for smooth diplomatic, economic, social and people-to-people contact between China and Pakistan. Furthermore, China's Kashmir policy has remained that Pakistan-China should settle the Kashmir dispute through dialogue and diplomacy. Similarly, China fully realized the fact that Pakistan is an important connecting point to the middle east and the Indian Ocean. On the other hand, the India-China boundary dispute

began to emerge as an important potential threat.

In 1950, the USA gave India nuclear technology instead of Pakistan which instigated non-proliferation in South Asia (Muhammad, [2009](#)). President Ayub again sought pro-western diplomacy in order to generate legitimacy for his regime (Kundi, [2009](#)). Pakistan interfered in the internal affairs of China. Pakistan denied Chinese sovereignty over Tibet, and Taiwan and greeted Haji mission of Taiwan in Karachi in 1959.

Ayub Khan gave a very controversial statement: Chinese possession of Tibet and the building of roads in Afghanistan pose a grave threat from the north. This is a serious problem that can not be ignored (Jain, [1981](#)). Ayub Khan's anti-China behaviour was taken as a serious challenge by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. He forewarned Ayub Khan that this behaviour could benefit India and challenge Pakistan's interests (Arif, [1984](#)).

Likewise, China-India differences widened under the pretext of border disputes and the asylum of Dalai Lama in 1959. Despite all these endeavours, Pakistan presented the idea of joint defence against the north.... USSR and China, which India plainly refuted (Bhutto, [1978](#)). Under the rapidly changing geopolitical scenario, Ayub Khan introduced the 'Bilateralism strategy' of balancing Pakistan's relations with China, the USSR and the USA. Also, a peaceful relationship with all neighbours (Bhutto, [1990](#)).

Pakistan inked an oil agreement with USSR and a bilateral trade agreement with the USA. Likewise, Ayub Khan also demarcated the unidentified China-Pakistan border in 1963 peacefully. In return, China gained full support for admission to UNO. The India-China war began in 1962. India blamed China for violating its sovereignty in Ladakh and north east frontier agency (Maxwell, [1970](#)).

After China's ceasefire, Pakistan opposed India for a bogus war against China to get weapons from Western powers. On the other hand, the USA condemned China for waging an unjust war against India. Similarly, the USA also tried to create a wedge between Pakistan and China. After India showed unwillingness, China moved ahead with Pakistan to resolve the boundary dispute amicably (Van Kemenade, 2008).

On March 2, 1963, China signed a boundary agreement with Pakistan. Some policymakers believe that the Pakistan-China friendship went to climax after Pakistan gave 5180 square kilometres of land in northern Kashmir and Ladakh. In return, China gave 1942 sq Km area to Pakistan (Riedel and Sing, 2010). This agreement was a blow to India and USA. The USA labelled this treaty 'unlawful between friends as there is no common territorial link between Pakistan and China (Aziz, [1964](#)). Also, an air corridor agreement was inked down allowing each other airlines to operate freely along with other services.

During the 1965 war, China helped Pakistan militarily, economically and diplomatically. China augmented Pakistan's policy on Kashmir and vowed to retaliate against India. While the USA put an embargo on both Pakistan and India. This approach realized Pakistan that China is more friendly towards Pakistan. China also made a trade agreement with Pakistan 'the most favoured nation state'. China also supplied Pakistan with heavy machinery worth 15 million for a heavy mechanical complex in Taxila (Syed, 1974).

In 1963, China provided Pakistan \$ 50 million free loan to support economic link (Bhalla, [1999](#)). Keeping the cold war context in mind, China developed nuclear technology in 1964, which considerably enhanced its prestige in Asian politics. At that time, USA and USA were pursuing a peaceful coexistence policy. The USA

sought to halt China rising influence in Asia with the help of the USSR.

China fully planned to develop amicable relations with Pakistan and assured its administration about assisting Pakistan against foreign aggression. China also increased cultural cooperation with Pakistan and signed a cultural agreement in 1966 (Hasan and Qureshi, 1966). In reciprocity, Pakistan provided unconditional favour for the 'One China' policy and China's seat in UNO. China also presented \$ 445 million to Pakistan as foreign assistance between 1965 to 1971 (Bhola, 1986).

Throughout this period, the USA fully backed India in South Asia. China also tested its first hydrogen bomb in 1967, Pakistan viewed the test as a bulwark against hegemonic India. USSR also supported India to contain China. Furthermore, USSR began policies to stop China and extended its control of the Indian Ocean (Fisher, 1971). In 1971, Pakistan facilitated the talks between China and USA against USSR. The USA branded Pakistan as its only diplomatic channel to China (Reidel and Sing, 2010).

### **(c) A Strategic Engagement (1971-1990)**

The beginning of the 1970s began with new challenges for Pakistan under the pretext of the cold war. First, the mishandling of East Pakistan by politicians gave India a chance to intervene in East Pakistan. Thus, Bangladesh came into being and East Pakistan was dismembered (Sidky, 1981). Second, US-China reconciliation Pakistan aimed to reinforce its position vis a vis India-USSR relations. USSR-India Friendship and Peace Treaty of 1971 changed the perception of state behaviour. So, the early 70s era is known as the *détente* between the USA and China and the culmination of the *détente* between the USA and the USSR.

Under the growing Indian nefarious activities, China forewarned Pakistan to keep the East tranquil (Tamimi, 2011). However, the USA-China-Pakistan nexus became hollowed in the 1971 war. Instead of sending military aid to Pakistan, the USA deployed its 7<sup>th</sup> fleet to protect America. This approach forced Pakistan to leave SEATO and CENTO in 1972 and 1979.

China also extended verbal support and condemnation of India through UNO Security Council resolutions (Choudhary, 1982). China's neutral behaviour in East Pakistan made the relations between both countries frosty. Also, China's lack of support in the East Pakistan crisis led to speculations that the Chinese party and military leadership were not on the same page (Bhola, 1986).

ZA Bhutto strained hard to resolve the dispute with India through the Simla agreement while consolidating the China-Pakistan friendship. In 1970, Pakistan and China started joint ventures in the defence and security industry including Mechanical Complex, Ordinance Factory and Pakistan's largest aeronautical complex. In 1974, Pakistan was facing a security threat from India's nuclear test and the support of Afghans by the USSR. Bhutto showed a strong vision by initiating a nuclear program (Cheema, 1983).

In 1974, the foreign minister of China sanctioned Pakistan's policy to establish a nuclear-free zone in the region (Arif, 1984). In 1978, China-Pakistan also cooperated in the building of the Karakorum highway (Dixit, 1987). India and the West also criticized the role of China in Pakistan's nuclear program.

The USSR's grand strategy revolved around two pillars: first, to contain China. Second, making the USA less valuable in third-world countries. At that time, China was facing three-dimensional threats: first, the deployment of Soviet troops in Mongolia. Second, USSR supported anti-



China forces in the China-Vietnam War. Third, in 1978 Soviet expansion in Afghanistan. China was thoughtful of the fact that Baluchistan could be used to enter warm waters by the Soviets (Hilali, 2001).

Thus, the Afghanistan situation created a scenario in which the China-US-Pakistan nexus developed. China and US promised Pakistan financial, military and civil aid. US-China relations were based on give and take policy. China gained the most favoured nation status, modern technology, escalation in trade ties and good relations with Japan.

In Return, the USA gained China's support in third-world countries and Pakistan as a tool against Soviet expansion. China is also blamed for providing military assistance to Afghanistan (Hilali, 2001). Deng Xiaoping also made a policy of fixing differences with various Asian neighbours through the Pacific policy (Scalapino, 1991).

To make the Soviet troops easily withdraw, Gorbachev started the Soviet-China détente and US-Soviet entente. The USA was also sceptical about China-Pakistan relations and used India as a counterweight against China in South Asia (Burke and Ziring, 1990). In 1989, at the instance of Tianman Square USA pressurized Pakistan to condemn China over human rights issues. However, Pakistan refused to condemn China and fully supported the One China Policy and its stance over Tibet, Taiwan and Xinjiang.

Cold War came to an end. However, Pakistan remained a very low edge. She lost her part in the 1971 war and the Afghan war weighed heavily on Pakistan's economy and defense. Moreover, Pakistan lost the help of the USA in managing the Afghan refugees. On the other hand, China improved its economic ties with Pakistan and provided assistance to Afghan refugees.

### **(C) Post-Cold War (1991-2005)**

After the cold war ended, the strategic significance of Pakistan declined due to the emerging geopolitical scenario and its pampering of the Afghan Taliban. The USA became the sole superpower of the world. Also, nuclearization became the central theme in South Asia foreign policy. Triangular relations between India-China-Pakistan became frosty due to the Kashmir issue. India's unwillingness to solve the border dispute with China made Pakistan-China entente strong and firm. China emphasized solving these disputes through negotiation and under UNO Security Council resolutions.

It was assured by China that China-India relations would never marginalize China-Pakistan relations. After opening up its economic sector, China became the leading economic power in the world after the USA. Pakistan's export to the USA grew exponentially up to 30 million while imports from China also increased amounting to 70 million in the period 1994 to 1995. In 1990, the USA imposed economic and security sanctions on Pakistan and China. That was the occasion China came forward and did not bow before the USA on the issue of nuclear and missile technology proliferation.

In the defence sector, China provided assistance which ensured better capabilities for the Pakistan military. USA and India charged China for providing 500 ring magnets for the AQ laboratory. China was also accused of transferring M11 missiles with the technology of nuclear warhead transfer (Fisher, Dori, 1999). However, Pakistan and China denied these allegations.

Indian nuclear test was seen as a strategic imbalance in South Asia. Vajpayee blamed China for enabling Pakistan to get nuclear technology. China's muted response to Pakistan's nuclear explosion was taken as a signal of encouragement for Pakistan.

During the 1999 Kargil war, the USA tried to pacify both Pakistan and India averting a big nuclear war. Pakistan highly regards China as a reliable defence partner instead of the USA. In the Post-cold War period, China-Pakistan economic relations were not strong enough as compared to India. From 1990 to 2006, Pakistan's export to China has always been low as compared to imports.

China's economic relations with India have risen exponentially. In 2003, China and Pakistan framed the Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA), this agreement brought an exponential increase in Pakistan-China economic relations. Pakistan-China further contracted the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Good Neighbourly Relations in 2005. Shaukat Aziz said that the Pakistan-China cooperation treaty is a result of the USA-India strategic partnership (Tkacik, 2011).

## **(D) Pakistan-China Relations from 2006 to 2020**

### **Economic Relations**

China-Pakistan relations continue to grow from 2006 to onwards. In 2006, Chinese President Hu Jintao visited Pakistan, the first visit in the past 10 years. China-Pakistan relations achieved new milestones in trade, technology, agriculture and education. The free trade agreement was also signed between both countries. In 2010, China also helped the flood-affected areas of Pakistan and promised to donate \$ 250 million for rescue and reconstruction. Various prime ministers and presidents of Pakistan visited China and contracted bilateral economic, trade, technology and education exchange programs.

China has been one of Pakistan's major trading partners. The bilateral trade between China and Pakistan was around \$ 20 billion in 2017. Military and technological transactions are the major aspect of China-Pakistan's economic relations and China

pledged to invest more in Pakistan's infrastructure, technological sector and military innovations (DAWN, 2012).

As China has become the largest economy in the world (by purchasing power parity), its economic miracle has ushered in a new era of development and progress for Pakistan. China Mobile planned to invest \$ 1 billion in Pakistan's telecommunication sector and training for employees (Shoaib, 2014).

China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was initiated in 2013. Its initial cost was \$ 47 billion touching \$ 62 billion in 2020. It intends to build infrastructure, energy projects and special economic zone. On 20 April 2015, Pakistan and China signed the CPEC agreement initiating a new era of development, progress and technological upgradation.

In 2017, prime minister Nawaz Sharif visited China. Many agreements were made including leasing out agricultural land to China. China planned to establish 'demonstration projects' in areas like growing multiple seed varieties and upgradation of agriculture technology. A fibre optic line would also be constructed for internet and surveillance. China Mobile, Haier and Huawei in telecommunication and Metallurgic Group Corporation (MCC) would also operate their business in Pakistan (Hussain, 2017).

Pakistan's economic relations are not limited to CPEC, energy and business, China is one of the largest debtors of Pakistan holding about 27% of Pakistan's debt (Siddique, 2022). Since Covid-19 started, Pakistan and China have worked hard to facilitate each other, setting a top trend for global cooperation in crisis situations. Initially, China provided Pakistan with more than 35 million doses.

### **Defence Relations**

Pakistan and China have a strong military

ties. The purpose of the strong military ties is to counter the hegemonic ambitions of India and the USA in the region. In recent years this military relationship has deepened through defence projects and agreements between Pakistan and China.

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute stated that Pakistan's 47% of arms procurements are made through China (Wezeman, 2014). Pakistan and China are busy with defence projects, which contain the joint venture of JF-17 thunder fighters (Catherine, 2018).

K-8 Karakorum, AWACS and Al-Khalid tanks, China has engineered this advanced weaponry for Pakistan, tilting the balance of power in Pakistan's favour. In 2015, China also provided eight submarines to Pakistan worth \$ 5 billion. China also lauded the counterterrorism efforts of Pakistan Against Al Qaeda, Tehreek Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and East Pakistan Turkistan Islamic Party (ETIM). Pakistan also helped China in rooting out ETIM members from tribal areas. Pakistan's approach has been focused on the agenda to check those militant organizations working against China.

## Conclusion

After thorough discussion, the fact can be deduced that the China-Pakistan strategic relationship has not grown overnight, it took seven decades to come into its present shape. The China-Pakistan strategic partnership has been a very crucial factor in South Asian geopolitics. India, being a common enemy of both countries, brought a further deepening of bilateral relations.

In the context of global and regional scenarios, defence cooperation strengthened

other fields like trade, commerce and technological cooperation. In the post-cold War scenario, however, India is deepening its trade relations with China. India-China trade volume is larger than that of Pakistan. As a lesson, Pakistan needs to grow its trade relations with China while concentrating its attention on national growth. After analyzing China-Pakistan relations from 1950 to 2020, these are the following findings:

- China-Pakistan relations are the best example of peaceful coexistence, noninterference and win-win cooperation. Despite the fact that both countries have different ideologies, political systems and ways of life.
- While the USA advances dependency on small power, China forwards 'self-reliance and self-sufficiency' in other countries. China has assisted Pakistan unconditionally and always refrained from political interference. Pakistan-China relations have always been consistent and moving forward in a positive direction.
- On the other hand, India enjoys a special status by having an 'exceptional partnership' with Russia and USA.
- Covid-19 has further strengthened China's position in South Asia. China's export has increased and aided with medical accessories to small South Asian nations. Pakistan also got a lot of help amidst the Covid-19 crisis. While on the other hand, India and China were less visible in the Covid-19 crisis.



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