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China–Pakistan Strategic Partnership in a Changing Global Order: Implications for Pakistan's Foreign Policy

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolving China–Pakistan strategic partnership within a transforming global order and its consequences for Pakistan's foreign policy. Grounded in the neorealist theory of balance of power, the paper argues that structural shifts in the international system particularly the relative decline of unipolarity and the rise of China shape Pakistan's alignment choices and threat perceptions. The study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach, drawing on secondary sources including books, official statements, policy reports, and scholarly literature, which are analysed thematically. It explores the strategic, economic, and diplomatic dimensions of the partnership and assesses how Islamabad uses its ties with Beijing to offset regional pressures and strengthen its security. The findings suggest that the partnership works as a balancing mechanism against perceived Indian and Western pressure, while also exposing Pakistan to dependency risks and great-power rivalry. The paper concludes that Pakistan's foreign policy increasingly reflects a pragmatic hedging posture, and recommends diversified diplomacy to protect strategic autonomy amid intensifying global competition.

Keywords: *China–Pakistan relations, balance of power, neorealism, foreign policy, global order, strategic partnership*

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between China and Pakistan is often described in both countries as “higher than the mountains and deeper than the oceans.” For more than six decades, the two states have maintained a close and unusually stable partnership that has survived many changes in regional and world politics. Pakistan was among the first countries to recognise the People's Republic of China, and since the 1960s the two neighbours have built strong ties in defence, diplomacy, and, more recently, economics (Ali, 2017; Small, 2015). From a Pakistani point of view, the partnership with China is not just one foreign relationship among many; it is widely seen as a central pillar of national security and economic planning.

The world order in which this partnership operates is changing quickly. The clear dominance of the United States that marked the years after the Cold War is giving way to a more competitive and multipolar system in which China has emerged as a leading power (Mearsheimer, 2001; Markey, 2020). This shift creates both opportunities and pressures for a middle power like Pakistan. On one hand, closer ties with a rising China can bring investment, technology, and diplomatic support. On the other hand, deep involvement with Beijing can draw Pakistan into the sharpening rivalry between great powers and raise difficult questions about balance, autonomy, and dependence.

This paper studies the China–Pakistan strategic partnership in the context of this changing global order and asks what it means for Pakistan's foreign policy. The central argument is that the partnership functions mainly as a balancing tool that helps Pakistan manage its security environment, especially in relation to India, while also exposing the country to new risks. The study is written from a Pakistani perspective, focusing on how decision-makers in Islamabad understand and use the relationship.

The study is guided by three simple questions. First, how has the China–Pakistan partnership developed over time, and what keeps it stable? Second, how does the changing global order affect the value and

the risks of this partnership for Pakistan? Third, what does the relationship mean for the main choices in Pakistan's foreign policy, and how can Islamabad manage it in its own best interest? By answering these questions, the paper hopes to offer a clear, balanced picture that is useful for students, researchers, and policymakers in Pakistan. The relationship is often discussed in emotional or slogan-like terms, so a calm analysis based on theory and evidence is valuable.

The paper is organised as follows. The next section reviews the existing literature on China–Pakistan relations. The third section sets out the theoretical framework of neorealism and the balance of power. The fourth section explains the simple research method used. The fifth section reviews the history of China–Pakistan relations. The sixth section discusses the changing global order and its effect on the partnership. The seventh section analyses the implications for Pakistan's foreign policy, followed by sections on challenges, opportunities, and policy options. The final section concludes and offers recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The writing on China–Pakistan relations can be grouped into a few main areas. The first area is historical. Ghulam Ali (2017) provides a detailed historical account, tracing the partnership from the 1950s and showing how it remained stable across decades of regional change. Andrew Small (2015), in a widely cited study, describes the relationship as an "axis" built on shared strategic interests, especially a common concern about India, while also noting its quieter dimensions in defence and nuclear cooperation. These works establish that the partnership is long-standing, deliberate, and central to both states' regional strategies.

A second area focuses on the economic dimension, especially CPEC. Siegfried Wolf (2020) offers a comprehensive assessment of CPEC within the Belt and Road Initiative, examining its concept, context, and likely effects on Pakistan's development and governance. Other scholars are more cautious. Garlick (2018) questions whether the corridor's ambitious promises match geopolitical and economic realities, and warns against treating CPEC as a guaranteed success. Together, these studies present CPEC as a major opportunity that also carries real risks of debt and dependence.

A third area looks at the strategic and regional aspects of the relationship. Boni (2019) analyses the political and military dynamics of Sino-Pakistani relations and their regional effects, while Markey (2020) places the partnership within China's wider push into Eurasia and its competition with the United States. From a Pakistani viewpoint, earlier work by Rizvi (1993) on Pakistan's geostrategic environment helps explain why Islamabad has consistently sought strong external partners. These studies draw, directly or indirectly, on realist theories of international politics developed by Morgenthau (1948), Waltz (1979), and Mearsheimer (2001), as well as on liberal ideas about interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 2012).

While this literature is rich, two gaps remain. First, much of it was written before the most recent shifts in the global order, including the sharpening US–China rivalry and the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan. Second, many studies adopt an external or great-power perspective rather than centring Pakistan's own choices. This paper addresses both gaps by analysing the partnership in the current, more multipolar order and by focusing clearly on the implications for Pakistan's foreign policy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: NEOREALISM AND THE BALANCE OF POWER

This study uses neorealism, also called structural realism, as its main theoretical lens. Neorealism was developed most fully by Kenneth Waltz (1979), who argued that the behaviour of states is shaped above all by the structure of the international system. Because there is no world government to protect them, states live in a condition of anarchy and must rely on themselves for survival. In such a system, security is the highest goal, and states constantly watch the distribution of power among the major actors (Waltz, 1979).

A key idea within this tradition is the balance of power. When one state or group of states becomes too strong, others tend to respond by strengthening themselves or by forming alliances to prevent domination (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979). States can balance in two main ways: internal balancing, which means building up their own military and economic strength, and external balancing, which means partnering with other states. John Mearsheimer (2001) added that great powers in particular seek to maximise their relative power and influence, which makes competition a normal feature of international politics.

Related to the balance of power is the idea of the security dilemma, in which steps that one state takes to feel safer can make its neighbours feel less safe, leading to a cycle of mistrust and competition. In South Asia, moves by India, Pakistan, and China are often read by the others as threats, which deepens rivalry and makes alliances more attractive. Neorealism also notes that smaller states have limited choices: they can align with a stronger power (bandwagoning), try to balance against it, or hedge by keeping several options open at once.

These ideas fit the China–Pakistan case well. From Islamabad's viewpoint, India is a much larger neighbour with greater military and economic resources. Pakistan has long sought external partners to offset this imbalance, and China has become its most reliable such partner (Rizvi, 1993; Small, 2015). The partnership can therefore be read as a classic example of external balancing: Pakistan uses its relationship with a major power to improve its security position in South Asia. At the same time, neorealism reminds us that such alignments carry risks, because a smaller state may become dependent on, or entangled in, the strategies of its larger partner. This framework guides the analysis throughout the paper.

It is worth noting that other theories offer different views. Liberal thinkers would stress the role of trade, institutions, and economic interdependence in binding China and Pakistan together, while constructivists would point to the shared identity of an "all-weather friendship" that both states carefully cultivate (Keohane & Nye, 2012). These perspectives add useful detail. However, because this paper focuses on security, power, and Pakistan's strategic choices in a competitive world, neorealism remains the most suitable main framework, with insights from the other approaches used where helpful.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative, descriptive-analytical research design. The aim is to understand and explain the China–Pakistan partnership rather than to measure it with numbers. The research relies on secondary sources, including scholarly books and articles, official statements and documents, policy reports, and reputable news analyses. These sources were read carefully and examined through thematic analysis, which means grouping the information into key themes such as security, economics, and diplomacy, and then interpreting these themes through the neorealist framework.

The method is deliberately kept simple and transparent so that the steps can be followed and repeated. Table 1 shows the sequence of stages used in the study, from identifying the problem to presenting findings and recommendations. No primary fieldwork or interviews were conducted; the study is a review and analysis of existing material viewed from a Pakistani policy perspective.

Table 1. Research design and sequence of the study

Step	Research stage	Description
1	Problem identification	Define the research problem and questions on the China–Pakistan partnership and Pakistan's foreign policy.
2	Theoretical framing	Select neorealism and the balance of power as the guiding framework.
3	Data collection	Gather secondary sources: books, articles, official statements, and policy reports.
4	Thematic analysis	Organise material into themes (security, economic, diplomatic, regional) and interpret them.
5	Findings and recommendations	Draw conclusions on implications for Pakistan and suggest policy options.

Evolution of China–Pakistan Relations: A Historical Overview

The foundations of the partnership were laid soon after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Pakistan recognised the new Chinese government in 1950 and formal diplomatic relations followed in 1951 (Ali, 2017). A turning point came with the boundary agreement of 1963, which peacefully settled the border between the two countries and built early trust. The 1962 war between China and India, and the longstanding rivalry between Pakistan and India, gave both Beijing and Islamabad a shared strategic interest in limiting Indian power in the region (Small, 2015).

During the 1970s, Pakistan played a valuable diplomatic role by helping to arrange the historic opening between the United States and China. This service strengthened Pakistan's usefulness to Beijing and deepened mutual goodwill. In the 1980s and 1990s, cooperation expanded into sensitive areas of defence and technology, which Pakistani planners viewed as essential to maintaining a credible deterrent against India (Boni, 2019). Throughout these decades, the relationship remained remarkably steady, even as both countries experienced major internal and external changes.

A striking feature of this history is its stability across very different governments. Whether Pakistan was led by civilian or military rulers, and whatever changes took place inside China, both sides treated the relationship as a national priority that stood above day-to-day politics (Ali, 2017). This steadiness set the partnership apart from Pakistan's more changeable ties with the United States, which have moved through cycles of close cooperation and sharp distance. For Pakistani planners, China came to be seen as the one major power that could be relied upon over the long term.

In the twenty-first century, the partnership gained a strong economic dimension. The launch of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in 2013, as a flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative, marked a new phase. CPEC brought large-scale Chinese investment into Pakistani energy, infrastructure, and the port of Gwadar, with commitments that grew from around 46 billion to about 62 billion US dollars over time (Wolf, 2020). This moved the partnership beyond its traditional security

core and tied it directly to Pakistan's economic future. Table 2 presents the main milestones in the relationship in chronological sequence.

Table 2. Key milestones in China–Pakistan relations (chronological sequence)

Year	Milestone	Significance for Pakistan
1951	Diplomatic relations established	Pakistan among the first states to recognise the PRC.
1963	Boundary agreement signed	Settled the border and built early trust.
1970s	Facilitation of US–China opening	Raised Pakistan's diplomatic value to Beijing.
1980s–1990s	Defence and technology cooperation	Supported Pakistan's deterrent and strategic depth.
2013	Launch of CPEC under the BRI	Added a major economic pillar to the partnership.
2015	CPEC agreements expanded (~$46–62 bn)	Deepened investment in energy and infrastructure.
2020s	CPEC Phase II and regional realignment	Partnership adapts to a multipolar order.

The Changing Global Order and the Partnership

The global order is moving away from the single-superpower system of the 1990s towards a more multipolar one in which several major powers compete for influence. China's rapid economic and military growth is the clearest sign of this change, and it has produced a sharp strategic rivalry with the United States (Markey, 2020; Mearsheimer, 2001). This competition now shapes much of world politics, from trade and technology to security alliances.

A multipolar world can, in some ways, create space for middle powers. When several great powers compete, smaller states may find more partners to choose from and more room to bargain. Pakistan could use this space to seek better terms and to avoid being tied to any single camp. But this opportunity only exists if a state has a clear strategy and strong institutions; otherwise, competition among the great powers can simply pull a weaker state in different directions. For Pakistan, the central task is to turn a competitive world into a source of options rather than a source of pressure.

For China, Pakistan is a valuable partner in this new environment. Pakistan offers access to the Arabian Sea through Gwadar, a land route that reduces China's dependence on distant sea lanes, and a friendly neighbour that helps balance India (Wolf, 2020). For Pakistan, a rising China offers an alternative source of investment, arms, and diplomatic support at a time when relations with the United States have

become uncertain and often transactional (Small, 2015). From Islamabad's perspective, deepening ties with Beijing is a reasonable response to a shifting balance of power.

The withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan and the cooling of US–Pakistan relations added to this trend. As American attention moved away from the region, and as Washington built a closer strategic partnership with India, many in Pakistan concluded that the country's long-term interests were better served by deepening ties with Beijing (Markey, 2020; Small, 2015). This perception reflects a neorealist reading of events: when the behaviour of one great power becomes less reliable, a state looks to another to secure its position.

However, the same competition that makes the partnership attractive also makes it risky. As the rivalry between Washington and Beijing grows, Pakistan faces pressure to choose sides, or at least to manage the appearance of alignment carefully. Closer identification with China can strain Pakistan's ties with the United States and Western financial institutions on which it still depends for loans and trade. The changing order therefore places Pakistan in a delicate position: the partnership with China provides security benefits, but it also narrows the country's room for manoeuvre in a polarising world.

Implications for Pakistan's Foreign Policy

The China–Pakistan partnership affects nearly every major area of Pakistan's foreign policy. In the security field, the relationship is central to how Pakistan manages its rivalry with India. Chinese support in defence and technology strengthens Pakistan's deterrent and gives it a sense of strategic depth (Boni, 2019; Rizvi, 1993). In neorealist terms, this is external balancing in action: Pakistan partners with a great power to offset the capabilities of a stronger neighbour.

In the economic field, CPEC has tied Pakistan's development hopes closely to Chinese investment. Supporters argue that CPEC can address Pakistan's chronic energy shortages and weak infrastructure, which are serious obstacles to growth (Wolf, 2020). At the same time, critics warn about rising debt, limited transparency, and the danger of becoming too dependent on a single partner (Garlick, 2018). Managing this balance between benefit and dependence has become a key task of Pakistani policy.

The economic relationship also carries a political message. Large, visible projects such as power plants, roads, and the development of Gwadar are presented to the public as proof that the partnership delivers real benefits to ordinary people. When these projects run smoothly, they strengthen support for the relationship and for the governments that back it. When they are delayed, or when their benefits are unevenly shared, they can feed criticism and regional grievances. In this way, the success of CPEC is linked not only to Pakistan's foreign policy but also to its internal politics and sense of national unity.

In the diplomatic field, China regularly supports Pakistan in international forums, including the United Nations Security Council, where Beijing's position can shield Islamabad on sensitive issues. This support is valuable, but it also reinforces the perception that Pakistan's diplomacy is closely aligned with China, which can complicate relations with other states. Table 3 summarises the main dimensions of the partnership and their implications for Pakistan's foreign policy.

Table 3. Dimensions of the partnership and implications for Pakistan's foreign policy

Dimension	Area of cooperation	Implication for Pakistan
Strategic / security	Defence ties, technology, deterrence	Helps balance India; builds strategic depth.
Economic	CPEC, trade, investment, Gwadar	Supports development but raises dependency and debt concerns.
Diplomatic	Support in the UN and multilateral bodies	Provides diplomatic cover; raises questions about autonomy.
Regional	Afghanistan, connectivity, SCO	Expands Pakistan's regional role amid great-power pressure.

The partnership also shapes Pakistan's regional policy. In Afghanistan, both China and Pakistan share an interest in stability and in preventing the spread of militancy, which encourages close coordination. Through platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Pakistan has gained new channels for regional engagement that are not centred on the West (Boni, 2019). These openings allow Pakistan to present itself as a bridge for connectivity between South Asia, Central Asia, and China, and to seek a more active regional role than its size alone might suggest.

Taken together, these dimensions show that the partnership is both an asset and a constraint. It gives Pakistan security and economic benefits that are hard to obtain elsewhere, but it also links the country's fortunes to those of a single great power in an increasingly competitive world. For Pakistani policymakers, the challenge is to enjoy the benefits while keeping enough independence to pursue a wider set of relationships. A purely emotional approach, which treats the friendship as beyond question, is less useful than a clear-eyed strategy that weighs costs and benefits and plans for different possible futures.

CHALLENGES AND RISKS FOR PAKISTAN

Several challenges follow from the deepening partnership. The first is the risk of economic dependence. Because so much recent investment comes from one source, Pakistan's economy becomes sensitive to Chinese decisions and to the terms of Chinese loans (Garlick, 2018; Wolf, 2020). If projects do not produce enough returns, the resulting debt can strain public finances and reduce policy choices.

A second challenge is the pressure of great-power rivalry. As competition between the United States and China sharpens, Pakistan may find it harder to maintain good relations with both. Being seen as too close to Beijing can affect access to Western markets, loans, and security cooperation, while distancing from China would weaken Pakistan's most trusted partnership. This is the classic dilemma of a smaller state caught between larger powers (Markey, 2020).

A third challenge is security on the ground. CPEC projects and Chinese workers in Pakistan have become targets for militant groups, which places a heavy burden on Pakistan's security forces and raises the cost of protecting the partnership. A fourth challenge is domestic: questions about transparency, the fair distribution of CPEC benefits among provinces, and the need for strong institutions to manage large

projects. These internal issues shape how successfully Pakistan can turn the partnership into lasting national gains.

A further risk is what neorealists call entanglement. By aligning closely with one great power, a smaller state can be drawn into disputes that are not its own. If tensions rise between China and India, or between China and the United States, Pakistan may face pressure to support positions that do not serve its direct interests. Managing this risk requires careful diplomacy and a clear sense of where Pakistan's own red lines lie. It also requires honest public debate, so that the partnership rests on realistic expectations rather than on slogans that can later lead to disappointment.

Opportunities and Policy Options

Despite these risks, the partnership also offers real opportunities. If managed well, Chinese investment can help modernise Pakistan's infrastructure, expand its energy supply, and create jobs. Gwadar and the wider corridor could, over time, make Pakistan an important hub for regional trade and connectivity, linking Central Asia, China, and the Arabian Sea (Wolf, 2020). The relationship also gives Pakistan a dependable partner at a time of global uncertainty.

There are also wider gains to pursue. Pakistan can learn from China's own experience of lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty through planning, industrial growth, and investment in skills. If knowledge and technology, and not only money, flow through the partnership, Pakistan can build its own capacity rather than simply hosting foreign projects. Cooperation in areas such as agriculture, information technology, and renewable energy could create long-term value and jobs. Realising these gains depends on Pakistan setting clear priorities and insisting that cooperation supports local industry and training.

To make the most of these opportunities while reducing the risks, Pakistan can pursue a strategy of careful hedging. This means keeping the partnership with China strong while also rebuilding and diversifying relations with the United States, the Gulf states, and other partners. It means negotiating CPEC terms that protect Pakistan's long-term interests, improving transparency, and strengthening the institutions that oversee major projects. It also means investing in internal sources of strength education, exports, and governance so that the country is not overly reliant on any single external partner. In neorealist terms, combining external balancing with internal balancing would give Pakistan a more secure and flexible position.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The China–Pakistan strategic partnership remains one of the most stable relationships in international politics, and it has become even more important as the global order shifts towards multipolarity. Viewed through the lens of neorealism and the balance of power, the partnership is best understood as Pakistan's main instrument of external balancing against a larger India and as a response to a changing distribution of global power. It brings clear benefits in security, economics, and diplomacy, but it also carries risks of dependence and entanglement in great-power rivalry.

From a Pakistani perspective, the goal should not be to weaken the partnership but to manage it wisely. The paper recommends that Pakistan maintain its close ties with China while actively diversifying its foreign relationships, negotiate economic agreements that safeguard national interests, strengthen domestic institutions and security, and invest in internal capacity. By combining a strong partnership with Beijing and a broader, more balanced diplomacy, Pakistan can protect its strategic autonomy and better navigate an increasingly competitive world order.

Future research could build on this study in several ways. Comparative work could examine how other middle powers manage their relations with China, offering lessons for Pakistan. Detailed studies of specific CPEC projects could show, with evidence, where the benefits and costs actually fall. Research

based on interviews with policymakers could add depth to the picture presented here. Such work would help move the national conversation from slogans towards a realistic and well-informed understanding of one of Pakistan's most important relationships.

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