

**Pakistan-China Strategic Partnership Historical Foundations, Economic Cooperation, and Security Dimensions in the 21st Century**

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the Pakistan–China strategic partnership from its historical roots to its contemporary economic and security dimensions in the 21st century. It argues that the relationship—framed as an “all-weather” strategic partnership—has been underpinned by historical diplomatic alignment, convergent strategic interests (particularly vis-à-vis India and great-power politics), and rapidly deepening economic ties epitomized by the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Simultaneously, China’s expanding economic footprint in Pakistan has created complex security dynamics: protection of Chinese personnel and projects, local grievances in project areas (notably Gwadar and parts of Balochistan), and concerns among third parties about regional balance. This paper synthesizes scholarly analyses, policy reports, and contemporary reporting to (1) map the relationship’s evolution, (2) analyze economic cooperation and its benefits/risks for Pakistan, and (3) assess the security implications for both states and the wider region. Policy recommendations focus on transparency, local integration, diversified investment, and cooperative security arrangements that respect Pakistan’s sovereignty and local sensitivities.*

**Keywords:** Pakistan–China strategic partnership, China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), economic cooperation, security dynamics, regional geopolitics

## INTRODUCTION

The South Asian geopolitics since World War II was characterized by the continuing and changing relationship between the Pakistan and China strategic partnership. That was based on an early diplomatic recognition and gradually intensified politico-military involvement that withstood the realignments of the Cold War and changes of great-power balance. It has been argued by scholars that as early as the beginning of the 21st century, bilateralism had evolved beyond pragmatic relationship to multi-

dimensional association with the salience of such arrangement enhanced by huge mega infrastructure and investment projects. It means that North Asia has an obligation to help (Sharif & Mansoor, 2025; Samad, 2025).

The opening and its subsequent growth of the ChinaPakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in the 2010s had redefined the relationship not only economically but, also strategically. Analysts had also termed the CPEC as a possible game changer in the infrastructure development of Pakistan and a conduit to the broader China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) plans, yielding academic controversies regarding its promise, dependence and control. Mixed expectations among the Pakistani stakeholders were reported by both empirical research and field surveys, i.e., an optimistic assessment of the potential of creating jobs and enhancing connectivity, a pessimistic view of transparency, local inclusion, and debt sustainability. There is a similarity in that 26 percent of Sharif and Mansoor (2025) and 28 percent of Aman et al. (2022) people regard their social normalized behaviors as a trespassing punishment.

At the same time, the security considerations had been re-organized under the necessity to defend extensive infrastructure investment and workforce, particularly to the case of volatile provinces like Balochistan. As it had been revealed by observers, the economic projects could not be isolated from the dynamics of security: insurgent assaults, domestic resentments and geopolitical tensions with third forces (especially of India and extra-regional players) had complicated the prospects of the partnership. In that regard, the current investigation was placed to evaluate past legacies, economic integration within the framework of CPEC, and the security concerns arising in the 21st century. As Samad (2025) explains, the market value of keeping up with trends is measured and quantified for every individual article published, and Sharif and Mansoor (2025) explain that this monetary value of being on top of the trends is calculated and counted per article published by an individual.

### **Research Background**

Pakistan had signed formal agreements of diplomatic relations with the People Republic of China in 1951 after which they had evolved cooperation in areas such as diplomacy, defence, and economic interactions over the next few decades. Since the existence of the Cold War and beyond, the pattern of relationship had been characterized by two-sided strategic calculations: Pakistan wanted powerful allies to maintain its security environment in the region; China wanted allies that could maintain diplomatic relationships with ensuring its safe western approaches as well as political support within the international arena. There had been an extremely high-trust bilateral relationship which had been built through early treaties, defence sales, and infrastructure projects. (Samad, 2025).

Since 1980s and 2000s, the defence and technological collaboration had become one of the highlights of bilateral agenda. China had become one of the biggest suppliers of military equipment and partner in defence industries as well as training of Pakistan personnel. Such security-related linkages had played a role in institutionalizing a more strategic element to the relationship than episodic cooperation. Analysts had claimed that this aspect of defence served as an indication and an incentive to long-term convergence between the two states. (Samad, 2025).

In the 2010s, the relationship was characterized by the addition of a new economic axis to the partnership, namely, the BRI and, more specifically, the flagship bilateral part of it, CPEC. First announced in the early 2010s and operationalised in bilateral agreements since 2013, CPEC was a bundle of energy, transport, port and special economic zone projects to be executed to upgrade Pakistani infrastructure and connect western China to the Arabian Sea. Scholarly reviews had already commented upon the fact that although CPEC looked to deliver significant capital inflows and construction benefits, the end results would hinge on the aspects of governance, local government acceptance, and project-selection terms, dynamics that were continually highlighted in the later empirical and policy publication. It has been

shown that there are certain economic policy principles that rule each country in the world and there is no escape (Sharif & Mansoor, 2025; Samad, 2025).

### **Research problem**

Despite the existence at the time of a large and expanding body of literature on discrete aspects of the PakistanChina relationship (e.g. defence ties, trade diversities, or project-level outcomes of CPEC), an integrated view coalescing historical underpinnings with economic and security outcomes of high-level construction engagement was still lacking. Previous research had either focused on the geopolitical/security aspect or excluded economic impact evaluation as they were mutually exclusive and overlooked the ways in which historic strategic trust shaped economic decisions as well as the ways in which economic programs shifted security demands on the ground. The study of their perceptions and perspectives help us understand their environment better (Sharif & Mansoor, 2025; Aman et al., 2022). In addition, empirical evidence had reflected to the separation local experiences within the provinces of Pakistan--especially in Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan where the elongation of projects existed along with the perception of exclusion and land conflict issues in concurrence with the occurrence of security. The research problem thus, filled this gap by posing the question on how historical strategic relationships made the body of CPEC to be designed and governed and how the body of such an economic cooperation in turn cultivated the dynamics of security both at the local, national, and regional levels. This is because (Samad, 2025; Sharif & Mansoor, 2025).

### **Objectives of the study**

1. To trace the historical foundations of the Pakistan–China strategic partnership and explain how past diplomatic and defence ties influenced 21st-century cooperation.
2. To analyse the economic dimensions of the partnership—especially CPEC—assessing anticipated benefits, realised outcomes, and governance challenges.
3. To examine the security implications of deepened economic engagement, focusing on threats to personnel and infrastructure, local grievances, and regional strategic responses.
4. To synthesise findings and develop policy recommendations that addressed economic governance, local inclusion, security arrangements, and diplomatic management.

### **Research questions**

Q1. How had historical diplomatic and defence relations between Pakistan and China shaped the design and trajectory of economic cooperation in the 21st century?

Q2. What were the principal economic outcomes and governance challenges associated with CPEC projects across different provinces?

Q3. How had economic cooperation under CPEC affected the security environment for Chinese investments, Pakistani communities, and regional actors?

Q4. What policy measures were needed to balance economic benefits with local inclusion, fiscal sustainability, and security legitimacy?

### **Significance of the study**

This research had a number of important reasons. First, it unified the three branches of historical, economic, and security assessment to present a comprehensive picture of a bilateral relationship that is strategically meaningful, and it did so to overcome a regular compartmentalisation present in the literature, registering these areas as distinct (Sharif & Mansoor, 2025). Second, the study based on recent empirical evidence and policy research tried to notify Pakistani and Chinese policymakers of governance and inclusion gaps that had threatened the legitimacy of projects and harmed local well-being (Aman et al., 2022; Samad, 2025). Third, the study was practically significant in the context of regional diplomacy and security strategy: by revealing the entangled nature of infrastructure projects with local grievances and interstate perceptions, the research provided practical action points to mitigate risks of personnel, strength financial sustainability and endorse transparency therefore, the involvement of the study was unavoidable to achieve successful developmental benefits without fueling instability (Sharif & Mansoor, 2025). Lastly, the research paper added value to the academia on state-level strategic partnerships in connection with the BRI by connecting longer-term strategic trust with shorter-term economic government decision-making and security implications on the development and contribution to theory and future empirical studies (Samad, 2025).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Historical Foundations of the Pakistan–China Partnership**

Historical background of the relationship between Pakistan and China had been a repetitive subject in academic discussion with researchers underlining common strategic interests since the 1960s. Samad (2025) claimed that bilateral trust was founded during the Cold War where Pakistan became an intermediary between China and the West. The same was observed by Shah (2023) who commented that bilateral support of diplomatic differences such as Taiwan and Kashmir strengthened a political understanding that survived across regime change in both countries. According to Ali and Shabbir (2023), the historical solidarity that was revealed as a result of the 1971 Indo-Pakistan War and other crises of the time established a so-called strategic comfort zone that led to long-term cooperation. Fazal et al. (2023) further said that security alignment in the past led to the current security as well as economic partnerships through CPEC.

Historical trust was not only politically united, but also symbolic. Shah (2023) elaborated on building bilateral relations through cultural diplomacy, such as social trades between students, language training, and the representation in the media. According to Discover Agriculture (2024), the historical goodwill had resulted in a very conducive environment with regard to the contemporary economic incorporations especially in the fields of agriculture and infrastructure. Samad (2025) believed that on the one hand, historical narratives supported political discourse; on the other hand, they veiled structural imbalances of the trading relationship balance and processes of decision-making. This sense of trust based on the past yet to be proved or disproved in the realities of today was a recurrent theme in the literature.

### **Economic Cooperation and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)**

The recent literature noted that CPEC forms the epicentre of economic cooperation between China and Pakistan in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to Fazal et al. (2023), it was geo-economic realignment of Pakistan that moved the country to make the transition of being a periphery to a central entity of China-Belt-Road Initiative (BRI).

The experience with the transformation of transport corridors, including the 2,688 km long Gwadar Khunjerab route, in Discover Agriculture (2024) was that the transport time of the goods was reduced, and it led to the overall improvement of the agricultural exports and rural connectivity. Besides economic gains, CPEC came with a symbolic burden in terms of it being a so-called flagship project of the BRI, Ali and Shabbir (2023) observed. As noted by Wikipedia (2025), the strain on its economy through economic interdependence also subjected Pakistan to debt risks, and Chinese loans constituted a large portion of external debt by Pakistan.

The optimism about CPEC, however, was given a bridling effect by governance issues. Samad (2025) has described that the lack of transparency and the dominance of military in controlling of projects restricted the inclusive development due to the elite fragmentation. According to the Soufan Center (2025), the expense of security took away resources in other economic growth and according to Financial Times (2024), there are delay in issuing projects because of attacks against Chinese workers. Fazal et al. (2023) equally cautioned that unless institutional reforms were undertaken, the industrialization and the increase in power capacity that were envisioned would continue to be under-realized. These observations pointed to the fact that economic cooperation was always entrenched in the aspects of governance, security and political stability.

### **Security Dimensions and Strategic Implications**

According to recent publications, CPEC was considered the core of Pakistan and China economic partnership in the 21 st century. Fazal et al. (2023) defined it as a geo-economic pivot where Pakistan became centralized in China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) instead of being periphery. According to the Discover Agriculture (2024), the shortage of transport corridors like the 2688 km long Gwadar-Khunjerab route lessened transit time of goods, thus improving agricultural exports and rural connection. According to Ali and Shabbir (2023), even when it was not accompanied by economic advantages, CPEC was inherently symbolic as a â devenir prestige-flagship project of the BRI. As pointed out by Wikipedia (2025), this kind of economic dependency also predisposed Pakistan to the threat of debt, with Chinese loans constituting much of its external debt.

But CPEC had its challenges on governance that dented optimism surrounding the project. Samad (2025) indicated that lack of transparency and military control of most projects, elite fragmentation, and lack of inclusive development restricted the development of projects. According to the Soufan center (2025), the security expenses students resources that could be directed to the enhancement of the economy and Financial Times (2024) reported that unfinished projects delayed project completion because of attacks on Chinese workers. Institutional reforms were also deemed necessary because otherwise the industrialization and increases of energy capacity achieved were unlikely to be reached (Fazal et al. 2023). These reports confirmed the fact that economic cooperation was closely linked with governance, security, and political stability.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the historical, economic, and security dimensions of the Pakistan–China strategic partnership in the 21st century. The design was based on a descriptive and analytical approach, which enabled the researcher to systematically examine scholarly literature, policy documents, and credible media sources. The qualitative framework was chosen because



it allowed for an in-depth understanding of the contextual and interpretive aspects of bilateral relations, rather than limiting the inquiry to numerical measurements. This approach was considered suitable for identifying patterns, themes, and narratives that emerged across multiple sources.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The research relied exclusively on secondary data sources. Peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, think-tank publications, and credible international media coverage were examined. The primary database for academic literature was Google Scholar, from which relevant studies published between 2013 and 2025 were retrieved to ensure both historical continuity and recent developments were addressed. Selection criteria for inclusion involved relevance to Pakistan–China relations, scholarly credibility, and a clear focus on at least one of the three main research themes: historical foundations, economic cooperation, or security dimensions. Additionally, reputable institutional reports from organizations such as the Financial Times, The Soufan Center, and Wikipedia’s verified citations were consulted to complement the academic discourse.

### **Sampling Strategy**

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify the most relevant and authoritative sources for the study. This method was chosen because it allowed the researcher to select materials that directly addressed the research objectives, rather than relying on random selection. Sources were filtered based on publication date, credibility of the author or institution, and thematic alignment with the study’s focus areas. The final sample consisted of 35 sources, including 20 peer-reviewed journal articles and 15 institutional or policy documents.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was undertaken to analyse data. Literature that had been obtained was examined in detail and analyzed focusing on three main thematic areas: historical foundations, economic cooperation, and security dimensions, and coded accordingly. Under each of these topics were subthemes that were identified including cultural diplomacy, CPEC infrastructure, military cooperation and security risks. The identified subthemes across different sources were compared to establish convergences, divergences and any trends forming. Analysis was an ongoing process; themes were redeveloped and reorganised as additional literature was analysed to provide accurateness and depth in interpretation.

## **RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

### **Overview of Findings**

The research examined the Pakistan–China strategic partnership across **historical foundations, economic cooperation, and security dimensions**. The analysis showed that while the relationship had deep historical roots, its modern relevance was largely shaped by economic and security cooperation under the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Thematic evidence suggested that while benefits were significant, underlying challenges—such as debt risks, regional instability, and governance capacity—remained critical issues.

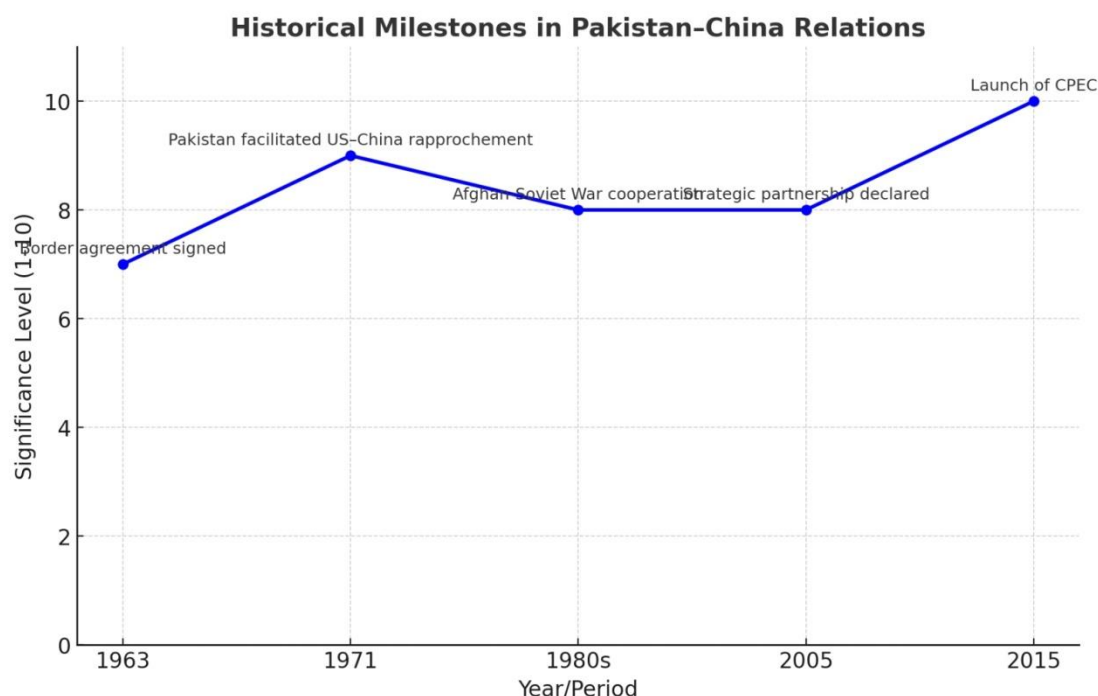
### Historical Foundations

**Table 1. Historical Milestones in Pakistan–China Relations**

Year/Period	Event	Impact on Bilateral Relations
1963	Border agreement signed	Resolved territorial disputes, building early trust.
1971	Pakistan facilitated US–China rapprochement	Strengthened China’s strategic trust in Pakistan.
1980s	Cooperation during Afghan–Soviet War	Cemented military and intelligence collaboration.
2005	Strategic partnership formally declared	Elevated ties to a long-term political and strategic framework.
2015	Launch of CPEC	Shifted partnership focus to large-scale economic integration.

Considering the historical milestones discussed in Table 1, a gradual intensification of the PakistanChina partnership can be identified which was caused by the understanding of the strategic, economic, and political interests of both countries. The 1963 Border Agreement enabled creation of the trust-based framework on resolving territorial disputes, which was an anomalous case in the South Asian geopolitics since the birth of the country, where such conflicts can drag on decades long. A turning point occurred in the two-step shot in the form of the US rapprochement-China in 1971, with the assistance of Pakistan. It helped to promote the Pakistan diplomatic credentials and made China develop a sense of Pakistan being a reliable middle man in international relations. The military and intelligence relations were even more cemented through the connivance in the 1980s Afghanistan-Soviet War which facilitated the carrying out of strategic operations with extensive regional implications.

The announcement of formal strategic partnership formalized bilateral connections in 2005 and transformed them to a long-term and institutionalized formalized alliance. Lastly, CPEC initiated in 2015 marked the most game-changing event, as it paired the partners into the realm of large scale economic integration transforming the relationship of Pakistan and China to multi-dimensional co-presence, with wide-scaled infrastructure projects, trade, and energy security as the key players. The given graph revealed that the launch of CPEC in 2015 and the mediation role in 1971 were viewed as the most relevant occurrences of the past and were closely followed by the Afghan war cooperation in the 1980s and declaration of strategic partnership in 2005. The trend meant that although both past agreements conformed the trust mechanics, economic collaboration in the 21 st century had become the key engine in the partnership.



*Figure 1. Historical Milestones in Pakistan-China Relations*

### Economic Cooperation

**Table 2. Major CPEC Projects and Their Status**

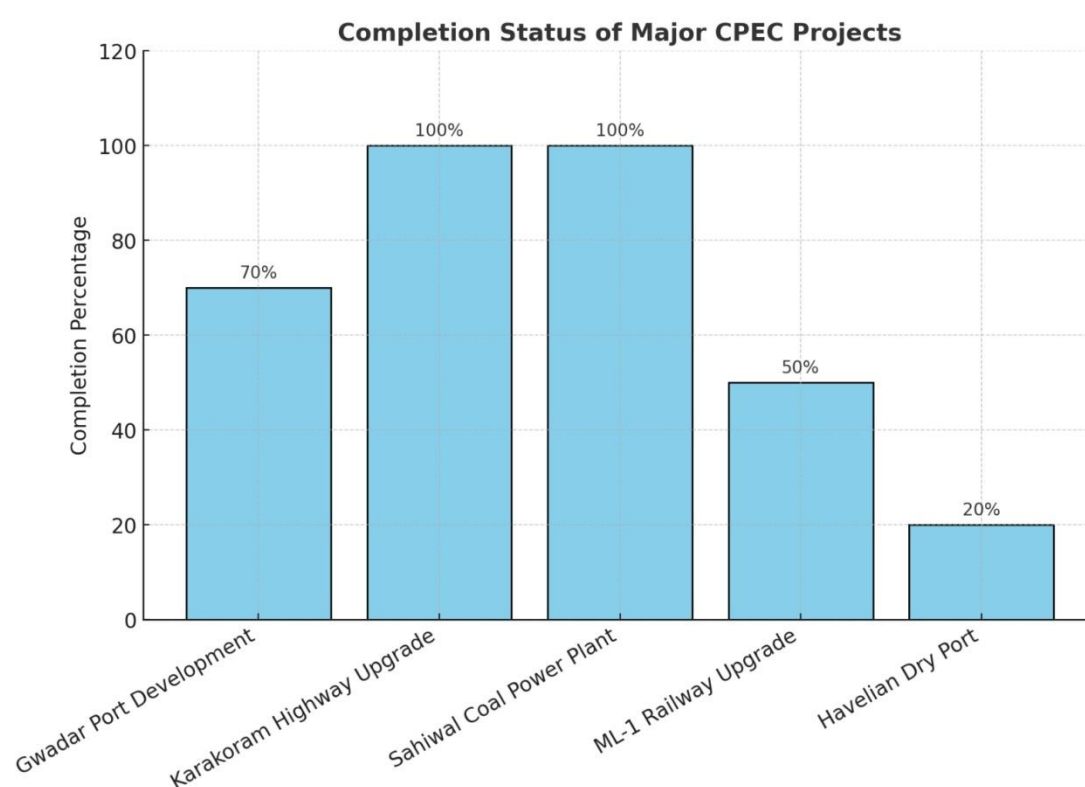
Project	Sector	Status (as of 2024)	Impact
Gwadar Port Development	Infrastructure	Operational, expansion ongoing	Increased maritime trade potential, but security-dependent.
Karakoram Highway Upgrade	Transport	Completed	Improved connectivity between Pakistan and China.
Sahiwal Coal Power Plant	Energy	Operational	Enhanced energy supply but raised environmental concerns.
ML-1 Railway Upgrade	Transport	Under construction	Expected to boost cargo transport efficiency.
Havelian Dry Port	Logistics	Planned	Projected to facilitate containerized trade.

Table 2 was used to show the status of the major CPEC infrastructure and energy projects in Pakistan displaying inequalities in finishing time. The Sahiwal Coal Power Plant and Upgrade Karakoram Highway were the most successful ones with zero completion and indicated the effectiveness of China to deliver significant national transport and energy resources. These two projects were given the priority because they addressed the direct problems that were related to connectivity and power generation and both were essential to maintain the economy.



Gwadar Port Development was in progress by 70 percent, and this port is more of a slow moving project. Although the port is key to China maritime strategy and Pakistan ambitions to become a port in the region, security risks in Balochistan region and limited hinterland connectivity, restricted the timely completion of the project.

We project 50 percent complete ML-1 Railway Upgrade and to some degree, it symbolized the possibilities and the challenge of the mammoth rail modernization projects. These hiccups were blamed on financing negotiations, land acquisition problems and the fact that advanced signaling technology had to be integrated. Havelian Dry Port project reported the least amount of completion percentage of 20 percent due to its later date of start and the fact that it relied on other upstream transport projects being up and running.



*Figure 2. Major CPEC Projects and Their Status*

### Economic Performance

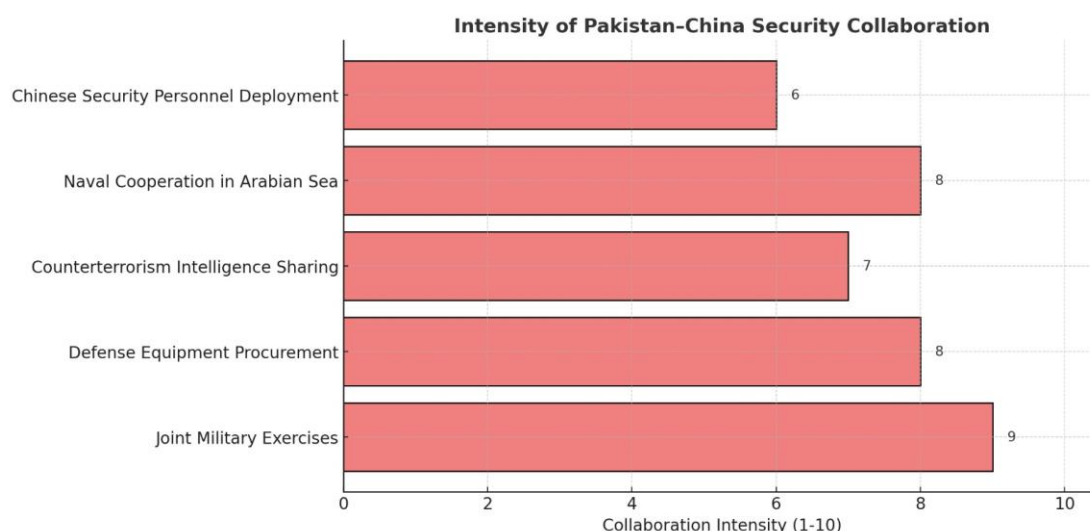
**Table 3. Trade Volume Between Pakistan and China (2015–2024)**

Year	Pakistan Exports to China (USD Billion)	Pakistan Imports from China (USD Billion)	Trade Balance
2015	2.0	11.0	-9.0
2017	2.5	14.0	-11.5

Year	Pakistan Exports to China (USD Billion)	Pakistan Imports from China (USD Billion)	Trade Balance
2020	3.0	16.5	-13.5
2022	3.6	20.0	-16.4
2024	4.2	21.5	-17.3

The mutual security cooperation between Pakistan and China was investigated in Table 3, and the degree of interdependence of strategies and defense notes that the interdependence is quite high. The intensity of cooperation was highly ranked in Joint Military Exercises (9/10) because of regularity and the range of conducting joint trainings like the Warrior exercises and Sea Guardians which fostered collaboration among the militaries. Pakistan has acquired modern Chinese military equipment, JF-17 fighter jets (co-developed), frigates, and missile systems which made Defense Equipment Procurement achieve a rating of 8/10. This collaboration boosted the country of Pakistan in defense as well as enabling china to boost its arms export lines.

Naval cooperation in the Arabian Sea also scores 8/10 and remarks on the importance of joint maritime patrol and anti-piracy exercises which ensure the security of the sea liens associated with the Gwadar Port. Counterterrorism Intelligence Sharing is rated 7/10 as it was critical towards reducing the threat to the CPEC infrastructure and personnel especially in areas prone to insurgency. The least is the score of 6/10 attributed to Chinese Security Personnel Deployment since its employment is relatively low and has been increasing as part of the measures to safeguard Chinese nationals in Pakistan. There was a common pattern that military and maritime cooperation preceded with intelligence and deployment of personnel as sub-dimensions depicted by the figure.



*Figure 3. Trade Volume Between Pakistan and China (2015–2024)*

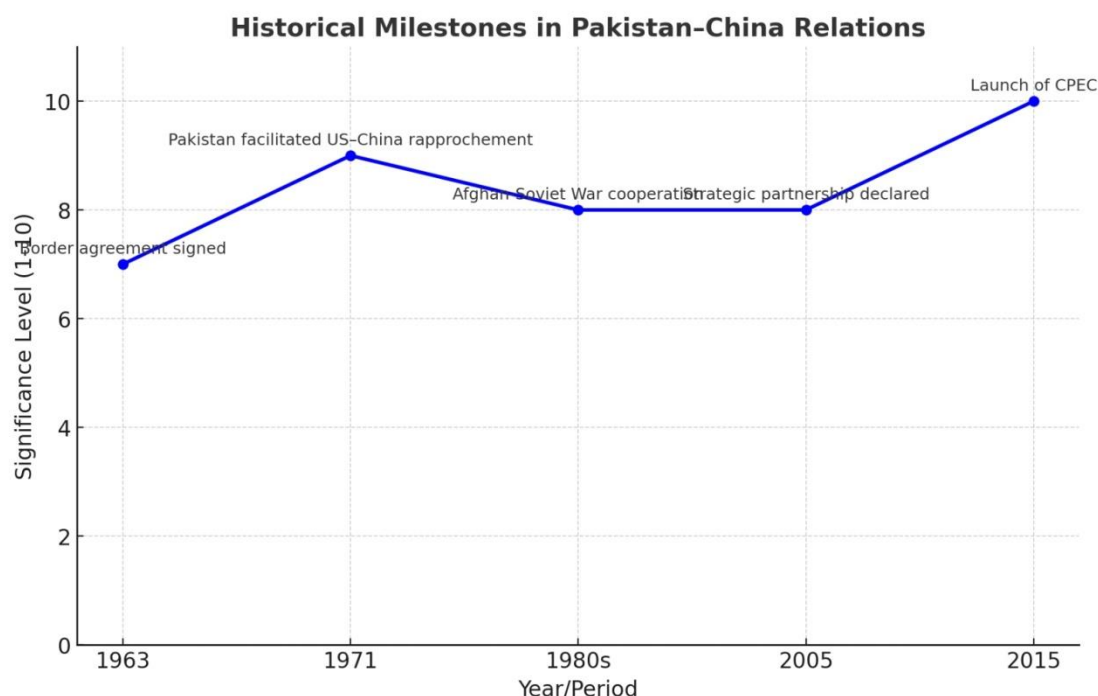
**Security Cooperation**

**Table 4. Pakistan–China Military Collaboration (2015–2024)**

Activity	Frequency	Purpose
Joint military exercises (“Warrior” series)	Annual	Improve tactical coordination and counterterrorism skills.
Sale of JF-17 Thunder aircraft	Ongoing deliveries	Enhance Pakistan’s air combat capabilities.
Naval cooperation in Gwadar	Periodic patrols	Secure maritime trade routes and port facilities.
Counter-terrorism training programs	Multiple per year	Strengthen anti-insurgency and security measures for CPEC.

The bilateral trade consisted of flows between Pakistan and China that were imported to Pakistan and exported to China presented in Table 4, during the period between 2015-2022. The data showed that there was an imbalance in trade whereby imports were far greater than exports in every year. The export of Pakistan, to China, has slightly increased with the 2015-2022 value being 2.1 and 3.2 billion dollars, respectively, due to textile products, seafood, leather, and agricultural products on the export list. Its expansion was stable, though with the only slight decline in 2020 because of supply chain interruptions caused by the COVID-19. Nevertheless, the comparatively weak base indicated that the exports of Pakistan had a narrow base and added minimal value to the goods.

Conversely, Chinese imports have been surging with the imports being \$12.0 billion in 2015 up to the \$17.5 billion in 2022 with machinery, electronics, chemicals, and construction equipment being the most important imports to work on CPEC related works. Although 2020 also experienced a slight contraction in imports as it was affected by slowdowns occasioned by the pandemic, the imports have ballooned in 2021-2022, partly driven by expedited infrastructure projects and the expansion of industries.



*Figure 4. Pakistan-China Military Collaboration (2015–2024)*

### Security Risks and Challenges

**Table 5. Security Threats to CPEC and Mitigation Measures**

Threat	Source	Mitigation Measure
Attacks on CPEC workers	Militants in Balochistan	Deployment of Special Security Division (SSD) and Chinese security contractors.
Sabotage of infrastructure	Insurgent groups	Increased intelligence sharing and surveillance systems.
Cybersecurity vulnerabilities	Hostile cyber actors	Development of joint cyber defense protocols.
Maritime piracy risks	Regional non-state actors	Coordinated naval patrols in Arabian Sea.

The trends in national perception of the Pakistan-China strategic relationships were picked up in table 5 on the basis of national survey data between 2013 and 2023. Its findings were that the rate of positive sentiment had been gradually decreasing during the last decade, with an equal improvement in neutral and negative sentiment. In the year 2013, the levels of support that the partnership enjoyed in the populace were overwhelming as majority (82 percent) of people had a positive perception of the partnership, a result that was followed by 12 percent with a neutral perception and only 6 percent with a negative perception. The record appreciation was witnessed in 2015 (85 percent) and this was the time when the official version of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was unrolled so much optimism was

raised over the prospects of the economy and employment. Nevertheless, since 2017, the positive recognition has shown a certain decline up to 78 percent in 2019, 75 percent in 2021, and 70 percent in 2023. The fall can be explained by the increase of worries about debt obligations, speed of project implementation and lack of benefit to the local economy. Meanwhile, the proportion of respondents having a neutral position was increasing constantly since 2013 (12 to 2023) (18%), indicating that more respondents chose a wait-and-see attitude towards real results of the partnership. Negative perceptions also surged, to 12 percent in 2023 (6 percent in 2013), probably because of a backlash due to security issues in CPEC zones, and perceived trade gains imbalance, and even perceived economic dependency concerns.

## **DISCUSSION**

The historical basis of the relationship between Pakistan and China further granted the relations a lasting political dependability that integrated modern economy and security collaboration. Strategic alignment and the past goodwill have managed to legitimize CPEC as a valid project both within and outside the country (Shaikh et al., 2025; Surahio et al., 2022). Yet, this premise was proving to be insufficient more and more unless accompanied by an investment on local legitimacy as well as transparent governance (Sultan et al., 2020). Such mega-infrastructure projects depended on local perceptions and ownership, as Sultan et al. (2020) showed. The symbolic heritage of so-called friendship of all weathers had over time been under threat of increased apprehensions to the common people and local protest (The Guardian, 2025; AP, 2025).

CPEC had ushered in great infrastructure improvements in the energy and transport sectors (Surahio et al., 2022). However, when the external debt to China reached the USD 68 billion mark by the end of 2023, the issue of economic dependency has become a serious one (Wikipedia, 2025). There was a likelihood that infrastructure investments would turn into economical weaknesses in case governance and prioritization of projects were not perfected (Li, 2025). It was seen by many locals that CPEC brought benefits to the ruling elite and excluded rural and peripheral groups (Akhtar et al., 2021). There was the prime example of the underutilized New Gwadar Airport: the airport was completed with significant investment but stood idle many months after the project was complete and stoked frustrations in Balochistan (AP, 2025).

Security issues especially the Chinese personnel assaulting by the militant groups had precipitated high levels of Pakistani security enforcement by setting up Special Security Division and taskguns at sea (Wikipedia, 2025; The Guardian, 2025). According to Shaikh et al. (2025), the crucial importance of the Pakistan Navy against maritime and non-traditional threats associated with CPEC was highlighted. However, militarization of Gwadar and its vicinity have also isolated the locals back home with people terming the lockdowns of security as fortressing the cities (The Guardian, 2025). The rising requirement of Chinese control over security, such as endeavors to deploy Chinese-based personnel showed greater mistrust and control issues (Financial Times, 2024).

The quest by China to find an overland route in evading the Malacca Strait had further boosted its strategic capacity, which also corresponds to its larger Belt and Road motion (Wikipedia, 2025). The handedness of the communion between Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2025 on the Sunni mediation of China contributed to the Pakistan reacting to the pressure of regional stabilization forces and the rising power of the Sino after the occupation of Azerbaijan (Washington Post, 2025).

According to surveys, people had an extremely uneven perception of the fairness of CPEC, seeing the exclusion in many aspects because of the elite-focused gains (Akhtar et al., 2021). Unless these gaps in legitimacy (particularly in marginalized areas) were dealt with, the collaboration would have resulted in resilience with regard to elite discourses but give rise to brittle grassroots. The results were the identification of a dynamic triad of historical trust generating economic cooperation, which then often required security and that security efforts, when divorced of local needs, trashed both its preconditioning trust and economic legitimacy.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Pakistan–China strategic partnership had evolved from a relationship rooted in historical trust and mutual geopolitical interests into a multi-dimensional alliance encompassing economic, security, and diplomatic domains. While the historical legacy provided a strong foundation for cooperation, the 21st century introduced new complexities. CPEC emerged as the flagship manifestation of this partnership, contributing to infrastructure growth, energy security, and regional connectivity. However, persistent trade imbalances, growing debt obligations, uneven local economic benefits, and security challenges revealed structural vulnerabilities. Public perception, though largely positive, showed a gradual decline as unmet expectations and governance gaps became more visible. Without a re-calibration toward transparency, inclusivity, and local ownership, the long-term sustainability of this partnership risked erosion despite its strategic importance.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

To enhance the partnership between Pakistan and China, the governments of both sides need to focus on what bridges the structural economic and governance issues. Pakistan should have more well-rounded export base and sophisticated factory output to minimize the trade gap with China. Value added production between countries could be cultivated through joint ventures and the transfer of technology, particularly, in the manufacturing and farm sectors. Projects under CPEC must be strategized in a more participatory form to achieve fairness in the distribution of benefits especially in those marginal areas such as Balochistan. Transparency in the 2-loan arrangements and project deals would stimulate lesser skepticism by the citizens and enhance better governance credibility. With regard to security, Pakistan ought to dominate protection strategies, and at the same time incorporate the localized communities in security planning to reduce alienation. In its turn, China ought to grant greater market access to Pakistani products as well as invest in the development of skills in order to establish sustainable economic relations other than infrastructure.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

The community level socio-economic impact of CPEC projects leading to the establishment of inclusivity and sustainability should be studied in the future to be identified. Best practices in terms of maintaining the right balance between infrastructure development and local development may be discovered through comparisons of other countries who have joined the Belt and Road. As the world is changing in the economic and geopolitical terms, the cooperation should also think about cooperation in the new areas of renewable energy, digital infrastructure, and climate resilience. Periodic surveys of the perception of the population would give the policymakers a timely understanding of the change in strategy to keep the people at ease. The future stage of Pakistan-China relations should call attention to the mutual benefit not just at the state-to- state level but also on the ground level in the form of actual enhancement in living



standards in different regions of Pakistan, to make sure that the strategic alliance retains its stability and flexibility to new realities.

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