

India's Strategic Posture and Its Impact on Pakistan-China Bilateral Relations

Romina Suhail

PhD Scholar, Department of IR Qurtuba University Peshawar Campus.
romina.faizan@gmail.com

Dr Aziz Ur Rahman

Associate Professor Department of IR& Political Science Qurtuba University
 Peshawar Campus aziz@qurtuba.edu.pk

Abstract: *This paper analyzes how India's shifting strategic posture shapes the dynamics of Pakistan–China bilateral relations. It examines India's military modernization, growing partnerships with major powers, and its assertive regional policies. These developments have intensified security concerns for both Pakistan and China, leading to deeper strategic convergence between them. The study also explores how India's rise affects regional balance-of-power calculations in South Asia. Additionally, it assesses the implications of India's Indo-Pacific engagement for Sino-Pak cooperation. Overall, the paper argues that India's strategic orientation remains a key determinant influencing Pakistan–China political, military, and economic alignment.*

Keywords: India's strategic posture; Pakistan–China relations; South Asian security; balance of power; strategic rivalry; Indo-Pacific; military modernization; regional dynamics

Introduction

The strategic relationship between China and Pakistan has long been regarded as one of the most enduring partnerships in South Asia, frequently known as a "all-weather

friendship. This bilateral relationship has expanded over the past ten years beyond typical defense cooperation to include cooperation in a variety of areas, including economic and geopolitical ones. One significant advancement in this collaboration is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which was introduced in 2015 as a component of China's expansive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Small, 2015). With a planned investment of over \$60 billion, CPEC aims to develop infrastructure, energy, and trade routes, connecting China's Xinjiang province to Pakistan's Gwadar Port, thereby providing China direct access to the Arabian Sea (Sial, 2014).

While CPEC has been hailed by Pakistan as a catalyst for economic transformation and strategic depth, it has raised serious geopolitical concerns in India. New Delhi views the project not only as an infringement on its territorial sovereignty particularly due to its passage through Gilgit-Baltistan, a disputed region but also as a strategic maneuver by China to expand its influence in the Indian Ocean Region (Pant, 2017). Consequently, the India-China-Pakistan strategic triangle has grown more complex, with each actor recalibrating its foreign policy priorities in response shifting regional alignments (Tellis, 2020).

China's growing engagement with Pakistan, especially through infrastructure investments to and defense support, is perceived by India as a form of strategic encirclement, often referred to as the "String of Pearls" strategy (Jacob, 2020). In response, India has sought to deepen its partnerships with the United States, Japan, and Australia, while also investing in alternative connectivity projects such as the

Chabahar Port in Iran. These advancements have fueled a complex geopolitical struggle in South Asia, centering regional strategic calculations around the Sino-Pak cooperation (Baloch, 2019).

In this context, it becomes imperative to analyse how the Indian factor influences Sino-Pak relations, especially in terms of diplomatic responses, military posturing, and economic competition. Comprehending these dynamics is crucial for evaluating the wider ramifications for global power politics as well as for understanding South Asia's changing security architecture.

China maintains complex and contrasting relationships with both India and Pakistan, shaped by strategic, economic, and geopolitical considerations. With Pakistan, China has developed an all-weather strategic cooperative partnership, primarily rooted in shared regional interests and mutual concerns about India. This relationship has deepened through initiatives like the China- Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which enhances China's influence in South Asia while providing Pakistan with critical infrastructure and economic support (Small, 2015). In contrast, China's ties with India are more competitive, characterized by both cooperation and contention. While China and India engage in economic trade and multilateral forums such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), their relationship is strained by longstanding border disputes, particularly in the Galwan Valley and Arunachal Pradesh (Pant & Joshi, 2020). As a result, China's strategic balancing between Pakistan and India plays a pivotal role in shaping the regional dynamics of South Asia, for India, CPEC is not simply an infrastructure initiative but a geopolitical challenge that consolidates the China- Pakistan alliance at the expense of its own influence in the region.

Literature review

The fundamental principles of the realist framework strategic depth, shared security concerns, and geopolitical pragmatism have traditionally influenced Pakistan-China bilateral ties. Both countries have developed ties in response to perceived regional challenges, especially India's expanding influence and military modernization, rather than because of shared ideologies. According to scholars like Tellis (2016) and Bokhari (2021), China's military and nuclear assistance for Pakistan is a planned action that reflects a traditional balance-of-power policy and aims to preserve the regional power balance. Zhao (2020), meantime, emphasizes that CPEC is a geostrategic route that ensures China's access to the Arabian Sea, avoiding chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca and strengthening its naval position in the Indian Ocean.

It is not only an economic project From Pakistan's point of view, CPEC provides strategic depth against Indian supremacy and expanding U.S.-India connections in addition to economic rejuvenation (Hussain & Ahmed, 2022). Nonetheless, other scholars, including Javaid (2018) and Korybko (2020), caution that Pakistan's growing reliance on China may eventually curtail its strategic independence, revealing imbalances in the partnership.

This exemplifies a sophisticated realist approach, which holds that although coalitions serve shared interests, they are frequently marked by shifting leverage and hierarchies. Thus, the resilience of the Sino-Pakistani partnership lies less in shared values and more in converging security imperatives and mutual efforts to balance India's rise in South Asia. From Pakistan's point of view, CPEC provides strategic depth against Indian supremacy and expanding U.S.-India connections in addition to economic rejuvenation (Hussain & Ahmed, 2022). Nonetheless, other scholars, including Javaid (2018) and Korybko (2020), caution that Pakistan's growing reliance on China may eventually curtail its strategic independence, revealing imbalances in the partnership.

Strategic Depth and Military Alliance

The enduring military and strategic alliance between Pakistan and China is fundamentally rooted in the pursuit of national interest, survival, and balance of power. Realists contend that in anarchic

international systems, governments behave selfishly to protect their sovereignty. This perspective is highly applicable to the China–Pakistan relationship, which has grown significantly since the 1960s, particularly following the Sino- Indian War of 1962 and the Indo-Pak wars in 1965 and 1971. The security dilemma created by India’s growing regional ambitions prompted Pakistan to deepen its ties with China, seeking a counterweight to Indian dominance in South Asia (Garver, 2002). China has played a vital role in modernizing Pakistan’s military capabilities through the transfer of defense technologies, joint military exercises, and co-development of key assets (Siddiqi, 2017).

CPEC and Indian factor

From a realist perspective, more than just a construction project, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a strategic geopolitical manoeuvre aimed at restructuring the regional balance of power in South Asia. Grounded in state-centric interests and power politics, CPEC simultaneously serves Beijing’s strategic objective of securing direct access to the Arabian Sea via Gwadar Port thus reducing its reliance on the vulnerable Strait of Malacca and Islamabad’s pursuit of economic revitalization and strategic depth (Zhao, 2020; Sial, 2021). Chinese scholars such as Zhao (2020) argue that CPEC is integral serving as a maritime pivot to project influence in the Indian Ocean as part of China's larger Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). From a Pakistani perspective, Sial (2021) emphasizes that CPEC is viewed as both an economic lifeline and a strategic counterweight to Indian dominance in the region. Analysts like Rehman (2022) and Korybko (2020), meanwhile, continue to express worries, warning that as a reflection of the realist idea of hierarchy within alliances, CPEC may strengthen dependency and build an asymmetric alliance.

Geopolitical Influence:

CPEC offers China an alternate route from the Malacca Strait, a vital but fragile chokepoint, to the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea (Small, 2015; Wolf, 2019). Pakistan’s Gwadar Port, a key CPEC project, solidifies its strategic alliance with China, creating a clear counterbalance to an uneasy relationship with India and further acting as a balance of power against Indian hegemony in the region (Raza, 2017; Wolf, 2019).

Regional Stability and Security

In realist theory, state behaviour is driven by the pursuit of national security, strategic interests, and the balance of power within an international system that is anarchic (Waltz, 1979). The accomplishment of CPEC, therefore, is inherently linked to Pakistan’s internal stability, particularly in volatile regions like Baluchistan, where insurgency and security concerns persist (Small, 2015; Tellis, 2017). The realist view highlights that for China and Pakistan, CPEC is more than just an economic initiative; it is a strategic move to enhance national security and to counterbalance India’s regional dominance.

The strategic positioning of CPEC, particularly through the Gwadar Port in Baluchistan, serves both countries’ interests by providing China with direct access to the Arabian Sea and reducing its dependency on the Malacca Strait a move that enhances Beijing’s maritime security and aligns with its broader Belt and Road Initiative objectives (Zhao, 2020).

Impact of the Indian Factor on China–Pakistan Relations (2010–2020)

From 2010 to 2020, India’s expanding strategic footprint in South Asia significantly influenced the trajectory of China–Pakistan relations. India’s opposition to CPEC, its growing alignment with the United States, and increased military posturing along its borders with both China and Pakistan catalyzed deeper Sino–Pakistani coordination in defense, diplomacy, and infrastructure development (Khan, 2020). This trilateral strategic contest has intensified geopolitical tensions in South Asia and contributed to a fluid regional power configuration driven by mutual threat perceptions and competitive alignments (Muni, 2016).

Methodology

It focuses on how Pakistan has strategically allied itself with China in order to offset India's dominance. It starts out by outlining the purpose and methodology of the study, which is based on qualitative research and takes a critical realism epistemological stance. The research design is then presented in the chapter, which argues for the use of thematic analysis to the interpretation of strategic and political events within a realist theoretical framework.

Additionally, it describes the ontological and epistemological presuppositions that support the study, fusing structural realist viewpoints with interpretivist insights to capture both agency and structural constraints. The methods of data collection and the selection of sources including scholarly literature, policy documents, and expert commentary are clearly specified. The chapter concludes by explaining the thematic analysis process, illustrating how key themes were identified, coded, and analyzed to answer the study's core research questions.

Rationale Behind the Sino–Pak Rapprochement: Strategic Convergence

The evolving China–Pakistan partnership must be understood as a deliberate strategic alignment shaped by mutual threat perceptions, systemic pressures, and the balancing logic central to realist international relations theory. In particular, neorealism or structural realism provides a compelling framework to interpret this rapprochement, as it posits that states, operating in an anarchic international system, form alliances primarily to ensure survival and maintain balance against perceived hegemons (Waltz, 1979).

From the early 2010s onward, both China and Pakistan began recalibrating their strategic priorities in response to India's growing economic and military clout. For Pakistan, India represents a long-standing existential threat—one rooted in historical conflicts, border disputes, and military confrontations such as the Kargil War and repeated skirmishes in Kashmir. For China, India's rise—especially its increasing strategic cooperation with the United States, Australia, and Japan—challenges Beijing's regional dominance and security perimeter (Brewster, 2020).

Consequently, the China–Pakistan rapprochement is not incidental but an example of classic realist balancing behavior. Pakistan relies on China not only for military hardware and economic investment but also for diplomatic support in international forums, particularly concerning the Kashmir dispute (Siddiqui, 2022). In return, China views Pakistan as a strategic pivot in South Asia, one that offers geographical access to the Arabian Sea via the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and serves as a counterweight to India's influence in regional forums (Zhang, 2023).

Critics argue that the Gwadar Port and related infrastructure have dual-use potential, enabling future Chinese naval deployments in the Arabian Sea (Malik, 2022). This intertwining of economic and military goals reflects a realist understanding of interdependence: states use economic tools not solely for prosperity, but to enhance strategic autonomy and influence.

From a realist standpoint, rapprochement is a rational response to shifting regional power balances. As India deepens its alignment with the West, both China and Pakistan perceive the need to fortify their bilateral relationship as a form of external balancing. The growing interdependence is thus not based merely on historical friendship but on evolving threat perceptions and strategic necessity (Mohan, 2021).

Strategic Narratives and India's Efforts to Undermine Pakistan's Investment Credibility

India has increasingly weaponized the narrative of Pakistan being a terrorist hub to influence international perceptions and discourage foreign investment, particularly from China. This narrative, which gained renewed momentum following targeted attacks on Chinese nationals working on CPEC-related projects, has been systematically leveraged by New Delhi in both regional and global forums (Pant & Joshi, 2022). India's approach aligns with classical realist principles, wherein information

warfare and perception management serve as instruments of statecraft to isolate adversaries and secure strategic advantage.

By repeatedly emphasizing Pakistan's alleged security instability and terrorism-related concerns, India seeks to delegitimize Pakistan as a reliable economic partner. This tactic has been especially potent in the wake of attacks on Chinese workers, which India frames as symptomatic of Pakistan's inability to secure foreign investments (Rana, 2023). In doing so, India aims to erode Chinese confidence in long-term commitments under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and to present itself as a more stable and lucrative alternative for Chinese and global investments in the Indo-Pacific region.

This persistent narrative attempts to recalibrate China's risk assessment by portraying Pakistan as a volatile and high-risk partner. From a realist lens, India's strategy reflects a broader effort to disrupt the Sino–Pak strategic axis by undermining its economic foundations. The implication is clear: if Pakistan is perceived as a diplomatic liability and a security black hole, China may be compelled to diversify its regional investments or even reconsider the scale and scope of its economic entanglements with Pakistan. Consequently, India's narrative-building serves not only to delegitimize Pakistan internationally but also to constrict its strategic room for shift in South Asia (Pant & Joshi, 2022; Rana, 2023).

China as a Balancer in Strategy

A determined strategic attempt to counterbalance India's regional dominance is Pakistan's strengthening bilateral ties with China. Pakistan's need to endure an anarchic international order where power dictates security and autonomy is reflected in this alignment when viewed through the prism of realism, especially structural realism (Waltz, 1979).

Chinese strategic engagement is not just economic; it also reflects Beijing's desire to influence the balance of power in South Asia, as seen by projects like the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Chung, 2017). For Pakistan, China's support at global forums like the UN Security Council on issues like Kashmir reaffirms its utility as a strategic partner (Bajoria & Vannithamby, 2021). Moreover, this alliance serves a dual function: while it provides Pakistan with diplomatic leverage and economic capital, it also grants China access to strategic routes such as Gwadar, allowing Beijing to project influence into the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean (Ali, 2019).

Scholars like Garver (2001) and Sial (2020) argue that this partnership is not ad hoc but part of a broader realignment strategy where Pakistan leverages Chinese support to neutralize Indian strategic gains. Notably, China's increasing military cooperation with Pakistan, through joint exercises, arms sales, and technology transfers, has reinforced this balancing posture (Cordesman & Lin, 2016). While critics argue that Pakistan's overdependence on China may reduce its strategic autonomy, others counter that in a hostile security environment, such alignment enhances its deterrence credibility and sustains regional parity (Wolf, 2019).

Conclusion

The India–Pakistan–China strategic triangle, when assessed through a realist paradigm, illustrates how Pakistan has strategically aligned with China to mitigate the multifaceted threats posed by India's regional ambitions. This chapter has demonstrated that Pakistan's approach is not merely reactionary but rooted in calculated power-balancing strategies. Military cooperation, economic integration via the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and diplomatic synchronization at global forums are designed to counter India's influence in South Asia and beyond (Rana, 2020; Garver, 2016; Zhang, 2022). The realist notion of security maximization in an anarchic international system underscores Pakistan's alignment with China as a means to preserve sovereignty and strategic space in an increasingly polarized regional order (Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001).

Nonetheless, this growing partnership comes with strategic complexities. While China's support bolsters Pakistan's deterrent posture against India, it also raises concerns over long-term dependency and reduced policy autonomy (Ali, 2020; Wolf, 2019). India's strategic partnerships—particularly through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), foundational defense agreements with the U.S., and economic ventures like the Chabahar Port—continue to challenge Pakistan's geostrategic positioning (Brewster, 2021; Tellis, 2020). In response, Pakistan's internal recalibrations—ranging from civil–military coordination on China policy to managing domestic narratives around CPEC—highlight a multidimensional strategy aimed at maintaining strategic relevance (Sial, 2021; Hussain, 2023). Ultimately, this chapter concludes that Pakistan's realist strategy is defined by adaptability: it seeks to counterbalance Indian ascendancy not only through hard power but also by leveraging diplomatic, economic, and informational instruments within a shifting global landscape (Bukhari & Sultana, 2022; Hu, 2022).

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