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Post 9/11 Pak-China Strategic Drive: A Retort to India and Balance the Power

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Abstract

This paper analyses the post 9/11 strategic partnership between China and Pakistan as an external balancing strategy, especially in response to Indo-US strategic cooperation. It seeks to answer how Pakistan's strategic alignment with China evolved as a deliberate external balancing mechanism to offset India's post-9/11 regional ascendancy and the Indo-U.S. strategic partnership. Moreover, India's growing and gaining its regional influence, this Study further asserts that the enhanced Sino-Pak alliance is a strategic tactic to contest India's conventional and nuclear hegemony in South Asia. Post 9/11, Pakistan faced a strategic conundrum, with its role as a frontline ally in the war on terror and concurrently needed to develop its capacity to counter India's bolstered defence posture after the Indo-US nuclear accord. This research evaluates China's role as Pakistan's primary defence and diplomatic partner, empowering Pakistan with its military support, arms shipments and development through strategic infrastructure. This study further highlights that by strengthening bilateral agreements, joint military cooperation and diplomatic alliance. This article extends the comprehension of external balancing in a trilateral context in terms of persistent rivalries and evolving partnerships post 9/11 in South Asia, impacting regional dynamics in terms of security too, by integrating economic interdependence, diplomatic collaboration, and security partnership.

Keywords: Balance of Power; Strategic Drive; China; Pakistan; India

1. Introduction

The 9/11 attacks and the US-led war on terror transformed South Asia's strategy. After the Taliban regime fell in Afghanistan, U.S. and NATO soldiers were deployed, and counterterrorism activities increased, changing geopolitics and security. These developments made Pakistan a crucial military and intelligence partner for Washington against al-Qaeda and allied extremist groups. Then, the Indo-U.S. alliance coincided with a worrying shift in regional power dynamics for Islamabad (A. Rashid, 2009).

Indo-U.S. defence trade rose from zero in 2001 to USD 20 billion by 2020, including high-tech transfers like P-8I marine aircraft and radar. Strategic relationships changed South Asia's military balance through intelligence sharing, missile defence, and drills. India became a significant U.S. ally in Asia after the 2005 Civil Nuclear Agreement and increased its material power and diplomatic standing (Tellis, 2006). Hence, Pakistan has confronted a regional opponent with conventional military superiority and strategic access to modern technologies, political aid, and defence cooperation from the distinguished global powerhouse (Tellis, 2008).

Therefore, Pakistan enhanced its bilateral partnership with China in a progressive manner and towards a multifaceted external balancing strategy where China provided Islamabad with a reliable counterbalance to India's rising potential. In contrast, Pakistan provided Beijing with a strategic partner capable of restricting India's hegemony, despite the U.S.'s magnanimous influence and participation in the region and India's strengthening partnership with Washington (Garver, 2002a).

Pakistan's civil-military tensions and financial fragility have exacerbated Chinese engagement. Pakistan's political instability, inconsistent U.S. aid, and China's non-conditional financial aid made it a more reliable and sustainable partner. This internal factor explains why the alliance went beyond defence into CPEC infrastructure and energy (Siddiqi, 2017). This development has strengthened Pakistan's long-term strategic ties with China. China-Pakistan relations began in the early 1960s, but their expansion after 9/11 suggests a different strategy. International diplomatic assistance, military and nuclear collaboration, and bilateral tensions with India established a historical cooperation (Shah, 2018).

This article uses offensive realism, balance of threat, and balance of power theories from the realist school of international affairs. These frameworks analyse government responses to perceived threats. The reaction considers intents, proximity, and material capabilities (Quinn & Gibson, 2017). This study prepares the China-Pakistan strategic cooperation for external balancing, where countries form coalitions to attempt to counter stronger foes.

Although economic interdependence and institutional collaboration maintain the relationship, the idea is essentially realist. Such elements demonstrate Pakistan's foreign policy's multifaceted interdependence and strategic pragmatism beyond military balance. Post-9/11 armament transfer, infrastructure initiatives, and diplomatic contacts are typically described as discrete episodes without a strategic context (Mahmood, 2015).

This article shows how Pakistan-China collaboration counters India's post-9/11 dominance using balance-of-power, offensive realism, and balance-of-threat theories. Beyond descriptive events, causal mechanisms linking regional power distribution alterations to alliance behaviour will be identified, while adding analytical dimensions. China-Pakistani relations stretched to counter India's rise. This is shown by the JF-17 Thunder jet, naval assets, and missile development. These offensive efforts bolstered Pakistan against Indian pressure and expanded China's influence in the Indian Ocean, limiting India's maritime ambitions (Rizvi, 2020).

South Asia is a sub-section of the battlefield in the U.S.-China strategic struggle that alters regional security dynamics and the global order. Unlike an India-Pakistan-China triangle, South Asia is multifaceted. Russia, Iran, the Gulf states, and the SCO are increasingly altering the regional balance. Pakistan seems to be negotiating the varied alignments beyond binary rivalries by embracing these frameworks (Rolland, 2017).

Beyond the India-Pakistan-China triangle, this inquiry is significant as Pakistan's role as a key state between China and the U.S. and a frontline state in the War on Terror gives it a unique case study for how small and intermediate countries balance great power dynamics. Alliance behaviour,

regional security dynamics, and global-local power developments are illuminated by the Sino-Pakistani strategic relationship (Garver, 2001).

This study analyses Pakistan-China strategic collaboration post-9/11 using realist theoretical ideas and facts. This study claims that Pakistan-China strategic collaboration's post-9/11 escalation is a multilayered external balancing strategy to constrain India's regional primacy, particularly in the Indo-U.S. alliance (Squassoni, 2006).

As a reactive tactic and long-term feature of South Asia's dynamic power structure, the Sino-Pakistani alliance affects regional geopolitics. This paper attempts to sort out analytical and theoretical challenges to explain the sophisticated trilateral external balance. This interpretation is supported by 2002–2020 defence and economic accords, such as the 2005 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, the provision of JF-17 aircraft development, and Gwadar Port operationalisation. These incidents suggest the alliance became a strategic balancing mechanism rather than ad hoc collaboration (Hussain et al., 2020). These empirical and theoretical foundations analyse Pakistan and China's military, economic, and diplomatic cooperation as a post-9/11 foreign balancing strategy in South Asia.

2. Theoretical Framework: Foundations for External Balancing in the Sino-Pak Strategic Drive

This paper analyses Pakistan-China strategic dynamics after 9/11 using balance of power, offensive realism, and balance of threat theory. Pakistan-China cooperation is needed due to power inequalities, threat assessments, and structural changes in South Asia's security scene. Thus, theoretical triangulation allows the study to explain Pakistan-China collaboration as a logical, calculated, and system-driven external balancing strategy to limit India's regional supremacy, considering the rising Indo-U.S. alliance (Toft, 2005).

In the areas of commerce, energy collaboration, and infrastructural integration under the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) serve as non-military external balancing pillars for the alliance's multidimensionality. The economic factors added institutional and developmental imperatives to realism survival (A. Amin & Siddique, 2022).

2.1. Realism and Anarchic Order

Realism holds that the international system is anarchic and lacks a supranational mechanism to enforce laws or secure state sovereignty. Therefore, India's increased strategic collaboration with the U.S., especially following their 2005 civil nuclear accord, has changed South Asia's geopolitics after 9/11 (Waltz, 2014). Pakistan comprehended that domestic military and economic growth could not offset a growing power imbalance. Thus, it sought external balance by increasing strategic connections with China (Tellis, 2006). This realist response was caused by a regional competitiveness power imbalance. Pakistan's 2004–2008 National Security Policy prioritises alliance-building and defence industry collaborations to maintain strategic parity with India, by realising domestic balancing's limits. This step strengthens China's external stabilisation role by showing how South Asia's security interdependence drove Pakistan to seek alignment beyond its subregional security complex, according to RSCT (Jamil et al., 2019).

2.2. Balance of Power and Response to Power Shifts

When a state grows on a large scale, the balance of power theory predicts that other governments will join coalitions to restore equilibrium. Kenneth Waltz considers such a balancing system without governance. Indo-U.S. strategic collaboration favoured India in South Asia (Neuss, 2007). India's regional profile has risen due to the nuclear accord, superior technology, and U.S. strategic

frameworks, including defence coordination and military drills. These alterations threatened Pakistan's strategic balance and security (Pant, 2009). Pakistan responded by strengthening strategic ties with China through defence agreements, nuclear and missile cooperation, CPEC and economic integration. The economic and military realignment is evident in this regard, where Pakistan-China trade surged from \$1.3 billion in 2002 to \$12 billion in 2018, growing ties (Muhammad Faisal, 2020).

2.3. Offensive Realism: Power Maximisation and Strategic Hedging

This relationship, which involves JF-17 fighter aircraft production, submarine sales, missile technology transfer, and naval base access, is offensively realistic. Offensive realism force projection includes the strategically vital China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which links Pakistan to China's western provinces and offers China access to the Arabian Sea (Naqvi, 2021).

Mearsheimer says states maximise power to survive in an unstable international system; Pakistan's connection with China provides deterrence against India and economic and diplomatic help from Beijing (Toft, 2005). Strategic hedging and geo-economic integration at the Gwadar Port, co-financed by Chinese state businesses, demonstrate how offensive realism and interdependence theory increasingly coincide.

2.4. Balance of Threat: Perceptions and Strategic Alignment

Stephen Walt's balance of threat theory advances classical balancing by stating that governments balance the power and perceived threats. They depend on location, offensive capability, and historical animosities (Waltz, 2014). Pakistan's perception of the September 11 threat was concerned about India's expanding might, Kashmir animosity, military crises, and U.S. bias toward India. Pakistan interpreted the India-US nuclear accord as legitimising India's nuclear capability and marginalising Pakistan's strategic goals (Khan & Afridi, 2015).

Pakistan took the nuclear accord critically in 2008 and 2011 for eroding regional parity and breaking the strategic balance that has prevented conflict since 1998. The Parliamentary Committee on National Security (2010) reported that military and civilian institutions agreed that "India's exceptionalism" in U.S. policy aggravated Pakistan's security vulnerabilities (Shah, 2018).

2.5. Theoretical Application and Empirical Developments

The 2005 Indo-U.S. civil nuclear accord improved Pakistan's strategic outlook. The JF-17, CPEC's strategic framework, and Chinese nuclear investments in Pakistan show this equilibrium in a coherent analytical manifestation of theories and facts. Kashmir, UNSC and FATF support, and hostility to Indian regional supremacy show ideological convergence between Pakistan and China. From \$500 million in 2013 to over \$4.2 billion in 2018, Chinese FDI in Pakistan boosted strategic alignment and economic dependency. These patterns demonstrate that Pakistan-China cooperation goes beyond strategic symbolism to material reliance, creating political trust and structural balance (Iftikhar, 2025).

2.6. Strategic Triangulation and Broader Realist Implications

Smaller governments must cooperate with stronger ones to prevent marginalisation or pressure in the absence of a supranational security guarantee. For China, Pakistan is a geostrategic fulcrum, Belt and Road Initiative conduit, counterbalance to India, and regional ally that mitigates U.S.-led containment in Asia. Under pressure from the Indo-U.S. alliance, both states are cooperating over survival, deterrence, and regional influence (Mahmood, 2015). Military, economic, and institutional dynamics

are included in this multidimensional realist paradigm to better understand external balance as a continuous, adaptive process rather than a static alliance (Jabeen, 2014).

3. Literature Review

The evolving strategic alignment between Pakistan and China in the post-9/11 period has been explored within various frameworks, including security studies, strategic partnerships, and regional balance of power. However, few studies explicitly apply a comprehensive realist framework to systematically analyse this relationship as a response to India's growing power and its strategic ties with the United States (Khan and Kasi, 2017).

As far as Realism and Strategic Alignments in South Asia are concerned, the realism tradition, especially the writings of Kenneth Waltz (2014) and John Mearsheimer, is crucial for comprehending state action within an anarchic international system. Waltz (2014) posited that the balance of power arises naturally as governments endeavour to ensure their survival. Mearsheimer posits that big powers act aggressively to enhance their relative power in a competitive landscape (Toft, 2005). These concepts have been implemented in South Asia through the writings of Paul et al. (2004), interpreting the India–Pakistan rivalry as a protracted conflict influenced by lingering power asymmetry and perceptions of threat.

The U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Agreement (2005) represented a pivotal event in South Asian geopolitics. (Tellis, 2006) Researchers contend that this alliance enhanced India's international standing and upset strategic equilibrium in the area. Scholarly consensus is that this resulted in Pakistan's increasing uneasiness and feelings of strategic isolation, hence underscoring the necessity for Pakistan to pursue an external balancing ally (Ganguly & Scobell, 2005).

Moreover, Pakistan-China relations have evolved and transformed, delineating the historical evolution of Sino-Pakistan relations, illustrating that the partnership transitioned from a transactional alignment to a profound strategic convergence, especially following 9/11. CPEC, as analysed by Wolf, represents a new phase of this alliance, merging economic connection with strategic deterrence (Wolf, 2019). Nevertheless, a significant portion of the literature is predominantly descriptive, lacking a comprehensive theoretical integration with realist theories of balancing behaviour.

3.1. The Gap in Existing Literature

Despite increasing academic interest in the India-U.S.-China triangle and its regional implications, insufficient attention is given to how Pakistan-China collaboration serves as a systematic external balancing strategy. Researchers frequently emphasise tactical and operational dimensions but have not integrated the strategic rationale within broader realism frameworks. This research aims to address that gap by clearly connecting the development of Sino-Pakistan cooperation to theoretical frameworks such as offensive realism and the balance-of-threat.

3.2. Key Contribution

By connecting empirical developments as CPEC, defence transfers, and counterbalancing the Indo-U.S. nexus, with realist theory, this study provides a theoretically informed and policy-relevant analysis of Pakistan-China strategic behaviour in South Asia's post-9/11 security landscape.

4. Historical Background

Pakistan and China's strategic cooperation has always been accelerated by India's threat. After 9/11, India and the U.S. became more strategic. The growing trilateral relations between China, Pakistan, and India show classical external balancing, in which nations form coalitions to fight stronger opponents. Pakistan-China cooperation after 9/11 is a continuation of historical ties and an offensive

response to regional power shifts. Eqbal Ahmad (2000) accurately stated that South Asia's insecurity derives from historical power dynamics when weaker governments seek external alliances to oppose subcontinental dominance, contextualising Pakistan's strategic engagement with China.

Pakistan-China relations are historic and flexible. From a diplomatic alliance to a strategic partnership by the mid-1960s, the bilateral relationship evolved. Beijing's 1963 border pact, a vital pillar of its strategic cooperation, indicated its commitment to Pakistan and shared concerns about India's regional ambitions (Javaid & Jahangir, 2015).

As per Tahir Amin, Pakistan's first visible external balancing was caused by structural weakness in an India-dominated regional security complex. The 1965 and 1971 Indo-Pak wars enhanced Sino-Pakistani relations. Tahir Amin quoted that the Zhou Enlai government donated \$60 million in diplomatic and military supplies during the 1965 war, early proxy balancing (Amin, 2019).

After India's 1974 test, nuclear cooperation between Pakistan and China was resumed. China's 1980s and 1990s nuclear development aid to Pakistan, frequently over Western non-proliferation concerns, sought a strategic balance with India in South Asia. South Asian academics like Kanti Bajpai call this the strategic equalisation phase, when Pakistan used China's technological and diplomatic resources to fight India's nuclear and military superiority (Hussain et al., 2020).

September 11 altered South Asian geopolitics. U.S. military participation in Afghanistan and growing engagement with India, particularly the 2005 Civil Nuclear Agreement, suggested a strategic shift. The U.S.-India pact included India in the global nuclear order without NPT participation, while Pakistan was excluded, which Islamabad considered as security marginalisation. Moreover, Beijing interpreted this as a move to limit China's regional influence and bolster India (Tehseen, 2017).

This indicated the U.S.'s invasion of the South Asian security complex, pushing China to reinforce its western alignment through Pakistan as a stabilising counter-hub, according to RSCT. After September 11, 2001, Pakistan-China relations developed on strategic logic based on common problems, regional aspirations, and realist principles. Their cooperation is designed to resist Indian hegemony and govern South Asia's strategic developments. By 2020, Chinese FDI contributed nearly 40% of total inflows, illustrating the alliance's complete approach. Annual bilateral trade exceeded \$17 billion (Amin & Siddique, 2022).

This shift from 'hard balancing' to 'soft balancing' projects power through infrastructure, trade, and investment. According to the balance-of-power theory, offensive realism, or external balancing, the long-term collaboration between China and Pakistan and regional power dynamics are explained by this foundation (Iqbal, 2021).

Ayesha Siddiqi notes that Pakistan's domestic institutional continuity since military and civilian regimes chose China as a strategic component also contributes to its endurance. Thus, the Sino-Pak alliance is realistic in its deterrent and interdependent in its economic manifestation, reflecting 21st-century multidimensional balancing (Siddiqi, 2012).

5. Indo-US Nuclear Alignment Post-9/11: Strategic Implications for Pakistan-China Balancing and Regional Power Dynamics

The Indo-U.S. civil nuclear accord was a shift in Washington's approach towards Delhi. In a response, Pakistan-China strategic collaboration in South Asia and Indo-Pak animosity were on the rise. According to the balance-of-power theory, regional imbalance changed Islamabad and Beijing's strategic interests, particularly external balancing. The U.S. supported India as a South Asian stabiliser and strategic partner. India became a liberal-democratic China balancer and U.S. Indo-Pacific ally (Squassoni, 2006).

The July 2005 U.S.–India Civil Nuclear Agreement, ratified by Congress in 2008, gave India civilian nuclear technology despite its NPT non-signatory status. This treatment changed U.S. non-proliferation policy and strengthened India's Indo-Pacific pivot. Pakistan, a major Non-NATO Ally, eliminated Al-Qaeda cells, conducted military operations in tribal regions, and banned extremist groups. However, Washington's demand that Pakistan should “do more” demonstrated strategic distrust (Shah, 2018). This mismatch caused the country to distrust bilateral cooperation and expose its transactional nature.

U.S. aid was conditional and security-oriented, missing long-term development, notwithstanding Pakistan's logistical support in Operation Enduring Freedom. This imbalance led Islamabad to derive that the backing of the U.S. was interest-based rather than partnership-driven. Domestic political instability and rising anti-American sentiment hampered Pakistan's foreign policy autonomy, prompting its leadership to build ties with China as a more reliable strategic partner (Rashid et al., 2020).

Under the Next Steps in Strategic Alliance, the deal cemented an Indo-U.S. defence, intelligence, and marine security alliance, along with a nuclear alliance. This worried Islamabad and Beijing. Pakistan sought a conventional and strategic balance with India, but the nuclear accord jeopardised it (Squassoni, 2006). In March 2006, the Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs warned that preferential treatment to India would institutionalise nuclear asymmetry and undermine strategic stability in South Asia.

Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang condemned the Indo-U.S. exception, saying nuclear cooperation should follow global non-proliferation standards. Indo-U.S. nuclear alignment strengthened Pakistan-China strategic collaboration. According to offensive realism, China enhanced its proxy relationship with Pakistan to limit India's aspirations as the U.S. increased India's material capabilities. This triangle interaction shows how South Asian balance-of-threat concepts use intents, not capabilities, to align (Ahmad, 2013).

The triangle dynamic expanded the South Asian security complex into the Indian Ocean, Central Asia, and the Indo-Pacific, integrating external actors like the U.S. and China into regional security patterns, according to the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). Pakistan saw India's demands to declare Pakistan a terrorist state and nuclear inspection as a threat to its strategic autonomy. After the 2008 Mumbai bombings, India increased its FATF and UNSC diplomacy, which Islamabad perceived as strategic containment tactics (Dittmer, 1981).

Pakistan trusted China's diplomatic cover as Beijing vetoed or blocked UN Security Council resolutions against it from 2009 to 2019. According to South Asian researchers like Kanti Bajpai, these disparities have created a competitive regional system where security alliances increasingly intersect with economic and technological interests (Bajpai, 2007).

6. Post 9/11 Pakistan's Strategic Partnership with China: An External Balancing Strategy

The political changes, especially the 2005 U.S.–India Civil Nuclear Agreement, increased Pakistan's strategic encirclement. South Asian conventional and nuclear balance was jeopardised by this approach. This forced Pakistan to balance its power with China. Realist theory describes balancing behaviour, as Beijing and Islamabad's strategic alignment in combating Indian regional hegemony has strengthened the Pakistan-China partnership (Farooq et al., 2018).

Empirically, the strategic stability in South Asia has been undermined by the discriminatory U.S.–India nuclear arrangement, indicating Pakistan's codification of strategic dependency on Beijing. Strategic engagement with China allows Pakistan, a revisionist state traditionally disadvantaged by India, to balance power differences by joining with a more potent ally. The Sino-

Pakistani strategic initiative uses power maximisation and denial to limit India's regional hegemony (Naqvi, 2021).

The 2002 Pakistan–China Joint Defence Cooperation Committee (JDCC) codified this cooperation through structured defence production and counterterrorism exchanges, while the JF-17 Thunder program and naval upgradation demonstrate Pakistan's quest for relative force parity. Pakistan's "revisionist" approach is less focused on territorial aggression and more about status preservation as a psychological and strategic necessity in South Asia's competitive security complex, according to Kanti Bajpai (Mehdi, 2016).

After 9/11, Chinese support became strategic-infrastructural with the Belt and Road Initiative's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which strengthens Pakistan's economy and strengthens strategic alignment with China (Iqbal, 2021). Chinese infrastructure, energy, and logistics initiatives under CPEC exceeded \$60 billion between 2015 and 2020, improving Pakistan's internal connectivity and dependence on Beijing. According to RSCT, CPEC integrates economic and security logics to create a sub-complex around Pakistan that links the Arabian Sea, Xinjiang, and Central Asia (Khan et al., 2023).

Strategic convergence between India and the U.S. scares China about containment. As India's Quadrilateral Security Dialogue involvement increased, the U.S.' support for India was seen as a strategic intrusion on China. Despite backing the worldwide War on Terror, China strengthened its influence in South Asia through strategic investments and military cooperation with Pakistan. Traditional external balancing involves a dominant power balancing its opponents. Due to past wars with India, China views Pakistan as a geopolitical buffer and force multiplier, not just a regional ally. (Munir, 2018).

According to South Asian scholars like Ayesha Siddiqi, China needs a stable western perimeter to safeguard Xinjiang and its energy corridors. She quoted that China's 2015 Defence White Paper, which underlined the protection of overseas interests and partnership diplomacy in neighbouring countries, reflecting its growing view of Pakistan as a strategic extension of its western security frontier (Siddiqi, 2017).

The economic zones protect Chinese interests in CPEC, a BRI component. With Chinese military presence, naval access to the Arabian Sea, and Pakistani strategic connectivity to Central Asia, a new Sino-Pak strategic era has dawned. Pakistan and China have increased Xinjiang counterterrorism, surveillance, and paramilitary deployment due to Baloch rebels and ETIM-affiliated terrorists (Kapur, 2009).

The 2016 Joint Cooperation Committee on Security and Gwadar's maritime security infrastructure shows how economic projects can serve dual strategic purposes. The Chinese security presence, however small, represents a foreign military posture, validating Mearsheimer's claim that great powers externalise defence perimeters as regional stakes rise (Amin & Siddique, 2022).

Waltz (2014) noted that alliances affect rivals' strategic decisions beyond wartime collaboration. CPEC's economic and geopolitical dual objective shows that non-military measures are often used for external balance (Neuss, 2007). This change follows the concept of "soft balancing," when states use connectivity, investment, and multilateral platforms to restrain stronger rivals without outright conflict. By joining the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2017, Islamabad institutionalised its soft-balancing stance (Zeb, 2018).

Pakistan-China collaboration through CPEC offsets India and the U.S.-led liberal security framework. India uses its relationship with the U.S. to expand its influence, while Pakistan's Chinese-backed strategic countermeasure limits India's subcontinental options. Eqlbal Ahmad correctly warned that South Asia's security instability originates from external alliances, internal structural inequalities,

and nationalist posturing (Tehseen, 2017). Pakistan's reliance on China indicates both systemic necessity and local fragility. In the 21st-century multipolar order, the Pakistan–China axis is a hybrid kind of external balancing that combines realism deterrence with economic statecraft (Kapur, 2009).

7. Regional Implications and Power Dynamics for Pakistan: An Analysis

Consequently, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), uses infrastructure and trade to influence politics. Energy, transportation, and industrial zones received over USD 25 billion in direct Chinese investment from 2015 to 2020 under CPEC. Around 50 major infrastructure projects began, including Gwadar-Kashgar highways (Faisal, 2020). Pakistan today functions in the external world through economic and military cooperation.

CPEC's operationalisation has integrated Pakistan's strategic agency with South Asian, Central Asian, and Middle Eastern communication networks (Tehsin et al., 2017). Pakistan's geo-economic position allows it to bridge Gulf economies and western China, increasing its diplomatic influence beyond the Indo-Pak split.

CPEC gives China overland access to the Arabian Sea, improves Pakistan's infrastructure, and may divert regional trade from India. Pakistan's ability to handle the economic and political implications of large-scale Chinese engagement has been jeopardised by loan sustainability, provincial project distribution disparities, and Balochistan domestic resistance. The economic interconnection, sovereignty, and governance challenges demand a detailed comprehension of these mechanisms (Afridi, 2015).

Pakistan intends to avoid regional disengagement, while China intends to undermine the U.S.-India strategic relationship, stabilise western frontiers, and protect oil corridors. CPEC may be incorporated into Iran and Russia's connectivity initiatives, while India and the U.S. have advanced the India–Middle East–Europe Corridor (IMEC) to offset China's regional reach. These concurrent projects demonstrate South Asian geo-economics' complexity and conflict (Zaki, 2014).

8. Policy Implications and Analysis

The applied theory indicates that this post-9/11 Sino-Pakistan mutually beneficial collaboration is based on genuine power politics. Power politics and practical economic and political calculations promote collaboration. Pakistan views China as a vital country for macroeconomic stability, infrastructure financing, and U.S. conditional aid balance. The complex interdependence and realist motivations coexist (Amin & Siddique, 2022). It decreases Pakistan's strategic losses from US-India convergence and deters Indian regional supremacy. Policy follows the reality as regional stability requires deterrence. Since 2001, joint defence manufacture of the Al-Khalid tank series and JF-17 Thunder aircraft has institutionalised deterrence.

South Asian alliances shifted post-9/11. Pakistan's strategic engagement with China has increased in response to the early 2000s Indo-U.S. relationship. The balance-of-power paradigm helps Pakistan and China counter India's diplomatic, military, and technological superiority, which has profited from U.S. strategic partnerships (Garver, 2002b). Focusing primarily on military and strategic cooperation risks overlooking diplomatic mechanisms that sustain it. Pakistan's 2017 full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and China's strong support for Pakistan in international forums like the UN Security Council show a diplomatic aspect of balancing often neglected by realists.

China's cautious approach to Pakistan's internal security, particularly protecting Chinese nationals and CPEC assets, demonstrates its increased reliance on soft-security mechanisms, including counterterrorism coordination and developmental aid. This enormous commitment exposes

China to Pakistan's political instability, testing the partnership's resilience against terrorism and government instability. Chinese-Pakistani relations are natural due to Indian threats, aggression, historical grudges, and global exclusion (Wadood & Alamgir, 2019). India and its allies may reject China's South Asian military involvement. The Sino-Pakistani alliance needs economic governance, home reforms, and regional diplomacy, not only deterrence. Realism may have founded the alliance, but its sustainability depends on Pakistan's domestic stability and China's geopolitical audacity and financial protection.

9. Conclusion

Pakistan-China alliance's durability and efficiency cannot be assessed without addressing its financial standing and domestic base. CPEC's implementation, Pakistan's fiscal dependency on Chinese financing, and Beijing's strategic interest in western Xinjiang support the conventional balance-of-power argument. The balance of power theory explains why Pakistan needs a strong ally to counter India's military. Pakistan-China strategic coordination through military drills, nuclear cooperation, and technological integration balances India's global power ambitions beyond South Asia, supporting this paper's central claim. The internal and external challenges demonstrate that long-term regional influence requires stable resilience and external balance. China and Pakistan aim to undermine Indian regional hegemony and Indo-U.S. cooperation. Pakistan's capacity to engage with various partners while aligning with China will determine its regional role. To sum up, post-9/11 Sino-Pakistani cooperation involves economic dependency, military deterrence, and diplomacy. South Asia's power balance will change in the 21st century due to structural imperatives and adaptive policy actions.

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