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Iron Brothers: The Strategic Bond between China and Pakistan

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Abstract: *China and Pakistan have established a robust strategic partnership driven by shared geopolitical and geoeconomic interests. Often referred to as the "Iron Brothers", their relationship has demonstrated remarkable resilience, enduring misunderstandings and differences even under challenging circumstances. China's strategic and security priorities in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region align closely with Pakistan's military and economic objectives, forming a strong basis for sustained cooperation. Additionally, their shared rivalry with India and the perceived threats from India and its allies further reinforce their alliance. This article examines the Sino-Pakistani partnership through the lens of balance of power and security dilemma theories, highlighting the key factors underpinning their enduring relationship. It concludes that, despite potential challenges, both nations are poised to strengthen their collaboration in pursuit of mutual military, geopolitical, and economic objectives.*

Keywords: *China-Pakistan Relations; Iron Brothers; Balance of Power; Security Dilemma; South Asia; Indian Ocean; Gwadar Port*

INTRODUCTION

China has established itself as a formidable economic and military power regionally and globally. As its global influence expands, China's geopolitical and geoeconomic interests have grown significantly in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. China has become one of the most influential external actors in South Asia. Beijing's rapid "ascent to power in the early 21st century has disrupted the balance of power in South Asia, compelling New Delhi to reassess its foreign policy strategy" (Le Monde 2024).

Over the last six decades, China and Pakistan have forged a strong strategic alliance driven by their mutual interests. From a geopolitical perspective, both nations perceive their partnership as countering India's regional dominance. China's strategic support enables Pakistan to manage its rivalry with India, while Pakistan offers China a valuable foothold in South Asia (Zaidi 2013).

Religious, cultural, political, and economic differences between Pakistan and China have not prevented them from becoming "Iron Brothers". Their bilateral relations are so crucial that no misunderstanding has ever marred their strategic bond. As a result, their alliance endures under any circumstances.

China's broader strategic and security interests in the Indian Ocean region and Pakistan's military and economic priorities naturally overlap and strengthen this strategic bond. Both countries share an intense rivalry with India, and the perceived threat from India and its allies further solidifies the Sino-Pakistani alliance. In this regard, Maqsood (2021) argues that the China-Pakistan strategic partnership, anchored in Gwadar Port and the China-Pakistan Economic

Corridor (CPEC), counterbalances India's regional ambitions in South Asia.

China-Pakistan friendship spans various fields, including diplomacy, economy, education, culture, sports, and health. Chinese support for Pakistan in the fight against Covid-19 was significant (China Daily 2020; Dawn 2024). The Chinese President, Xi Jinping, noted on his visit to Islamabad in 2015 that he had experienced going to his brother's home since Chinese delegates had mentioned China and Pakistan as "Iron Brothers" in the past. Nawaz Sharif, the former Prime Minister of Pakistan, described Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Pakistan in 2015 as a watershed moment in the history of Pakistan-China relations. During this landmark visit, both nations signed 51 Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) encompassing a broad range of areas to strengthen their bilateral ties. Among the agreements, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) stood out as the centerpiece (Dawn 2015).

Some of the key reasons for their strategic bonds have been: i) common security threats from India; hence, to counter this threat, a robust security and strategic bond between China and Pakistan is inevitable; ii) Pakistan perceives that a major economic power like China has the potential and can help revive Pakistan's economy, especially through China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC); iii) Pakistan's inclusion in Belt Road Initiative (BRI) is a win-win for both countries; iv) to counter Chinese influence, India joined the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) and Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), hence, to enhance China's naval dominance in the Indian Ocean. Pakistan's Gwadar port can be crucial to countering Indian and Quad's influence in the Indo-Pacific region.

This study has significance in deepening the understanding of security dynamics and balance of power in the South Asian region of the Indo-Pacific by analyzing the strategic relationship between China and Pakistan.

This study explores the underlying causes of the China-Pakistan strategic bond and assesses whether this alliance can endure despite its challenges. Additionally, this study aims to analyze the China-Pakistan relationship through the theoretical frameworks of the "balance of power" and "security dilemma". This article argues that, despite certain challenges, China and Pakistan will continue strengthening their ties to serve their mutual military, geopolitical, and economic interests.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The China-Pakistan strategic bond or partnership has been extensively discussed in previous literature. For instance, scholars such as Andrew Small, Khalid Mahmood, Umbreen Javaid, and Rameesha Javaid have thoughtfully analyzed the strategic alliance and economic relations between China and Pakistan. Andrew Small (2015), in his book "The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics", argues that the China-Pakistan alliance is deeply rooted in shared geopolitical and security concerns. He highlights how the alliance originated as a response to common threats, particularly India's growing regional dominance. Small provides an incisive examination of the Sino-Pakistani relationship and its broader significance within the Asian geopolitical context. His work sheds light on critical aspects of the alliance, including strategic and economic ties, particularly through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). It addresses China's dilemmas, such as balancing its support for Pakistan while managing threats from Islamic militancy.

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Furthermore, Small connects the Sino-Pakistani axis to global issues such as nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and great-power competition involving India and the United States. However, Small's analysis lacks attention to some pressing challenges China and Pakistan face in strengthening their strategic bond. Specifically, he does not adequately address the impact of local militancy in Balochistan—a region central to CPEC—Pakistan's growing debt dependency on China and the political instability in Pakistan. Additionally, obstacles to the strategic partnership, particularly in implementing CPEC, receive limited focus. The strategic importance of the Gwadar port for China's maritime security and Indo-Pacific strategy has also been explored insufficiently. While Small provides a detailed analysis of the historical, military, and geopolitical aspects of the China-Pakistan relationship and incorporates elements of political theory, such as the balance of power and security dilemmas, his approach remains largely empirical and narrative-driven. Though present, the theoretical underpinnings of these concepts are not deeply elaborated.

Khalid Mahmood's (2011) article "Pakistan-China Strategic Relations" offers a comprehensive historical and strategic overview of Pakistan-China ties, emphasizing the resilience of their "all-weather" friendship. Mahmood highlights key developments, such as China's economic and military contributions to Pakistan and their shared positions against regional and global challenges, including terrorism and the growing influence of India-US relations. The article also outlines milestones like establishing the Gwadar Port and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), emphasizing their strategic and geopolitical significance. However, the security challenges related to Chinese infrastructure projects, such as attacks on Chinese nationals in Pakistan, are only briefly mentioned, leaving a critical gap in the analysis.

Similarly, Javaid Umbreen and Javaid Rameesha (2016), in their article "Strengthening Geostrategic Bond of Pakistan and China Through Geoeconomic Configuration", provide a broad overview of the Sino-Pakistan relationship, particularly in the context of evolving geopolitical and geoeconomic dynamics. However, their analysis also has significant gaps, especially in its treatment of military cooperation and maritime security, which are fundamental pillars of the China-Pakistan strategic bond.

This study seeks to address the gaps in the existing literature and aims to answer the following questions: How has this alliance evolved? What are its underlying drivers, and what challenges do these "Iron Brothers" face? Furthermore, can this bond withstand the challenges posed by militancy in Baluchistan, Pakistan's growing reliance on Chinese debt, and the shifting dynamics of global geopolitics? It also contributes a conceptual analysis of the "balance of power" and "security dilemma" to deepen the understanding of the China-Pakistan strategic partnership.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach, relying on a comprehensive examination of secondary sources. The methodology involves an in-depth analysis of diverse materials, including books, peer-reviewed scholarly journals, reputable newspapers, and official government documents. By synthesizing insights from these varied sources, the study seeks to provide a nuanced and well-rounded understanding of the subject matter, firmly rooted in existing literature and evidence.

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CHINA-PAKISTAN BOND: A PERSPECTIVE ON THE BALANCE OF POWER AND THE SECURITY DILEMMA

Balance of power (BoP) theory is a core concept in the realist school of international relations. It posits that national security is enhanced when military capabilities are distributed so that no single nation is strong enough to dominate all others. States continuously seek to ensure that no one state becomes overwhelmingly powerful, which could threaten their security and sovereignty. The concept of the balance of power can be traced back to ancient and classical political thought. However, it was systematically developed in the modern era by political thinkers and practitioners, e.g., Hans Morgenthau in his seminal work "Politics Among Nations" (1948), and Kenneth Waltz advanced the theory further in his book "Theory of International Politics" (1979), where he developed the concept of structural realism (or neorealism), emphasizing the anarchic structure of the international system. Waltz's structural theory of international politics argues that the distribution of power in the international system determines how states act. China's military and economic rise and Pakistan's response are framed as part of a balancing act in the region (Waltz 1979, 118-125).

This theory argues that states will seek to prevent one from becoming too powerful by balancing against it through internal military build-up or external alliances. States may seek to shift the balance in an unbalanced system through diplomacy, economic leverage, or military action. Therefore, it can be concluded that there are two primary forms of balance of power: i) internal balance and strengthening one's military capabilities, and ii) external balance, forming alliances or bonds with other states to counterbalance a common threat.

The China-Pakistan strategic bond is often seen as a key example of external balancing. The alliance is a counterweight to India's regional influence, particularly given India's historical rivalry with Pakistan and China's strategic interests in containing Indian power. China's growing economic and military capabilities have led it to seek regional stability, particularly in South Asia, where India is a potential counterbalance. By strengthening Pakistan, China ensures a strategic ally in the region, especially concerning India's military and economic rise.

In the face of India's regional dominance and growing military capabilities, Pakistan relies on China for military support, technological transfers, and infrastructure development, particularly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This improves Pakistan's security and strengthens its economic position vis-à-vis India. Another prominent political scientist, John Mearsheimer, discusses the theory of offensive realism, which builds on the balance of power theory. He argues that great powers, like China, often seek regional dominance, and balancing behavior by smaller states (like Pakistan) is a natural reaction to prevent encirclement or domination by a stronger neighbor (like India) (Mearsheimer 2001, 16-22).

On the other hand, the security dilemma refers to a situation in which actions one state takes to increase its security (e.g., military build-up, alliances) can lead other states to respond with similar measures, thereby decreasing the original state's security. This cycle can escalate tensions and conflict, even when no state initially intended aggression. Robert Jervis (1978) explains how states are caught in a cycle where measures to increase one's security (e.g., military alliances like China-Pakistan) lead to a destabilizing arms race and heightened insecurity for all parties.

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Therefore, it can be concluded that the following dynamics can illustrate the security dilemma in the context of China-Pakistan relations: i) China's military expansion: China's increasing military capabilities, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, can be seen as a response to US and Indian power. This might cause India to feel threatened and seek a balance against China. Pakistan, on the other hand, perceives India's reaction as a threat and seeks deeper strategic and military ties with China to counterbalance India. ii) Pakistan's military and strategic positioning: In response to India's military expansion and its growing partnership with the United States, Pakistan's strengthening of ties with China can be seen as an attempt to secure its position. However, this action may prompt India to increase its defense spending and form new alliances, leading to further escalation. This cycle of perceived threat and counter-response constitutes the security dilemma.

These two theories apply to China-Pakistan bonds as they have a rival, India. China and Pakistan aligned themselves to counterbalance India's regional power and influence. They have established robust military cooperation and strategic partnerships. According to the balance of power theory, the China-Pakistan alliance is primarily motivated by a mutual interest in counterbalancing India's regional influence and power. Pakistan's alliance with China is a strategic response to India's military capabilities and regional aspirations. For China, Pakistan is a key ally to counterbalance India's growing ties with the United States and its regional influence.

On the other hand, based on the security dilemma theory, it is argued that the interaction between China, Pakistan, and India creates a security dilemma, as each state's actions to increase security—whether through military build-up, alliance formation, or technological advances—can be perceived as a threat by the others, leading to further escalation of tensions in the region.

From the lens of security dilemma theory, it is evident that their mutual security concerns and perceptions of threats from India drive China-Pakistan close military collaboration. The actions of China-Pakistan are perceived as defensive but might be seen as offensive by their adversaries, particularly India. Due to China's perception of Malacca Straight as a threat, it wants to access the Indian Ocean through Pakistan for its strategic interests. Cooperation "with Pakistan through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was perceived as an opportunity to gain an additional access point to the Indian Ocean through the construction of a new gas pipeline" (Paszak 2021).

CAUSES BEHIND THE CHINA-PAKISTAN STRATEGIC BOND

Increasing Sino-India Strategic Rivalry in South Asia and Beyond

China and India are two of the most powerful nations in Asia; their relationship is characterized more by rivalry than friendship. For decades, animosity between the two countries has persisted, fueled by numerous territorial disputes and their respective alliances with other nations. These nuclear-armed neighbors share a long history of mutual distrust and intermittent clashes along their expansive shared border. The Sino-Indian border conflict of 1962, for instance, escalated into a four-week war that saw more than 7,000 Indian soldiers killed or captured on the Indian side before Chinese forces eventually withdrew (The International Crisis Group 2023).

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It is argued that China has been actively working to expand its influence across Asia, particularly in the economic sphere, which it also perceives as a strategic security measure. However, India views this expansion as threatening its regional power and influence. India remains particularly concerned about China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean, especially its String of Pearls strategy—a maritime initiative involving the construction of deep-sea ports in Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, effectively encircling India (Freeman 2018).

Except for Bangladesh, China has already built deep-sea ports in the aforementioned countries. China has been eager and has actively sought to persuade the Bangladeshi government to build a deep-sea port on Sonadia Island, located on the southern coast of Bangladesh. However, the Bangladeshi government has officially canceled the development of a deep-sea port on the island (Ramachandran 2020). With this, China's high-profile project in the Bay of Bengal, considered to further China's economic and strategic influence in the Indian Ocean region, has been given a formal burial. Nevertheless, this writer thinks that the Dragon will not easily give up its efforts to build a deep-sea port in Bangladesh. The strategic competition between these two Asian powers has already reached Africa. India is concerned about China's increasing naval presence in Africa (Greene et al. 2021).

This dynamic inevitably leads to a tense relationship between the two powers. Extensive Chinese support for Pakistan on the nuclear front, as well as Chinese territorial claims of Kashmir and Arunachal Pradesh, coupled with the escalations between the countries in the India-China border at different times since 1962, including the border clash that killed 20 Indian soldiers in 2020, have made it immensely difficult for them to enjoy a harmonious relationship (Pollock and Symon 2023).

China and India: Territorial Disputes and Border Clashes

The Kashmir and Arunachal Pradesh regions have been particularly contentious, contributing to the deterioration of Sino-Indian relations. China claims Arunachal Pradesh as part of South Tibet and the Aksai Chin region of Kashmir as part of Xinjiang, intensifying territorial disputes and tensions between the two nations. This has caused tensions to escalate, reaching a boiling point in recent years due to border conflicts. Over the past decade, the situation has deteriorated significantly, with the painstakingly built rapport between the two being completely undermined. Between 2013 and 2022, there have been more tension hikes than there were after the post-1962 war. According to Damien Symon and John Pollock, the rise in clashes and militarization in the Aksai Chin region has made Sino-Indian relations more nationalistic (Symon and Pollock 2023). There are numerous reasons behind this, and some specific elaborations are outlined below.

The Kashmir Dispute

Kashmir has been a heavily contested region in South Asia, mainly between India and Pakistan. However, China is also part of this dispute, as it claims a part of Kashmir, specifically the Aksai Chin region, as its own territory, part of its Xinjiang region. Nevertheless, India claims the Aksai Chin region as a part of its Ladakh region. In 1957, without India's knowledge, China constructed a road through the Aksai Chin region, but India was unaware of it. Eventually, it

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leads to a confrontation between the Dragon and Elephant. This road construction, along with the rebellion in Tibet, caused the Dalai Lama to escape and take refuge in India, which eventually led to the Sino-Indian War in 1962. As a result, rifts have been created between these two nations, further entrenching their animosity in the last 62 years. According to Ghulam Ali, territorial disputes are one of the key factors contributing to the two countries' rivalry, especially after Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi took the reins in their respective countries, whose nationalist policies may have had provocative effects (Ali 2023).

After the annexation of Kashmir in August 2019, the region lost its autonomous status, and the crisis on the Himalayan border between India and China and India and Pakistan started to escalate. The threat of an attack on India from both the Chinese and Pakistani sides stays in the minds of Indian civilians, as they fear the possibility of a double onslaught from China and Pakistan, especially through Eastern Ladakh, which contains significant connections between China and India (Saboor, Ali, and Bhutto 2022). China won the Aksai Chin and has controlled the region since the end of the Sino-India war in 1962. As a result, the Chinese military presence in the region has become much more prominent, causing Sino-Indian tensions to rise (Pollock and Symon 2023).

Conflict Over Arunachal Pradesh

Another region that has been a source of serious contention between the two powers is Arunachal Pradesh. China has claimed that it is Chinese territory, namely South Tibet, despite it being officially a part of India. The 2023 edition of "the standard map of China, released on 28 August 2023, illegally shows Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin (which is an integral part of India) in Chinese territory" (Indian Defense News 2023).

However, the Chinese map showing Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin as part of China was firmly rejected by India (The Indian Express, 2023). China has also denied visas to Arunachal residents traveling to China, stating that it is unnecessary as they are Chinese themselves. Furthermore, when India tried to get ADB aid for the Arunachal region, China attempted to impede it (Goswami 2011).

From the Indian perspective, this reflects China's aggression towards laying claim to territories in the region that it believes belongs to it, inevitably causing tensions with India. On the other hand, from the Chinese perspective, India's claim on Arunachal is illegitimate as it is a result of the Simla Convention imposing the McMahon Line, which it views to be unfair, and the colonial perspective views the line as illegal as it was negotiated between Britain and the Dalai Lama, despite Tibet not being a sovereign state and instead being a region trying to secede (Lone 2023).

China's Moral and Political Support for Pakistan on the Kashmir Issue

China has always provided its moral and political support for Pakistan on the Kashmir dispute. During a meeting between Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang and Pakistani Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari in May 2023, the Chinese minister stated that the Kashmir dispute should be resolved following the UN Charter, relevant Security Council resolutions, and

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bilateral agreements. Both sides also opposed unilateral actions that further complicate the already volatile situation in Kashmir (Prothom Alo 2023).

In August 2019, the government of Narendra Modi revoked Article 370, and thus, the special status of Kashmir was changed, bringing the Indian-controlled Kashmir under the control of the central government. Following this, troops were deployed in the region, and it was annexed. This status change in Kashmir caused massive controversy internationally (Ellis-Peterson 2019). In response to the change, Mr. Liu Zongyi, a researcher at the Shanghai Institute of International Studies (SIIS), said about Sino-Indian relations, "Due to India's classification of Ladakh as a centrally administered area, the territory of the region, which India occupied in the western sector of the Sino-Indian border, will also have an impact on the stability of Sino-Indian relations" (ICS Research Blog 2019). Mr. Liu Zongyi further stated that:

> [T]he Bhartiya Janta Party and its parent organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, have always believed India has been at the forefront of resisting the Muslim invasion for 1300 years. The revocation of the Kashmir special status is the successful accomplishment of the BJP/RSS political agenda, i.e., to strengthen Indian control over Kashmir, to alter Kashmir's demographic nature, and to fully integrate it into the Union of India (ICS Research Blog 2019).

As already discussed, this issue is further intensified in the context of China, which is also laying claim to part of Kashmir, Aksai Chin (Allauddin, Liu, and Ahmed 2020). As a result, India faces the challenge of defending against territorial claims from two sides, both of which maintain close ties. Furthermore, India must also contend with the potential security implications of China's economic support for Pakistan. Consequently, the fractures in India-China relations continue to deepen.

China's Role in Strengthening Pakistan's Defense Technology

The issue of Defense has been the core of the China-Pakistan strategic bond(Allauddin, Liu, and Ahmed 2020). Over the years, China has provided Pakistan with a wide range of major conventional weapons systems, and the two countries have developed close partnerships in various defense cooperation programs. In addition, it is widely known that China has helped promote Pakistan's nuclear and missile technology. Shankar suggests that Pakistan's nuclear weapons program was initiated, developed, and tested by Beijing starting in the mid-1970s. This is further evidenced by the swift operationalization of the Khushab reactors, particularly II and III, where weapons-grade plutonium is produced with consistent and substantial support from China (Shankar 2013). It is argued that in the 21st century, Beijing's close ties with Pakistan have continued to grow, reflected in enhanced civil nuclear and missile cooperation. China's South Asia policy is shaped by its security concerns regarding India and the Indo-US alliance (Pant 2012). Also, in 2011, when Pakistan faced backlash globally, China was the only one who advocated for Pakistan. Over the years, Pakistan and China engaged in rounds of talks over military issues. Amid worsening relations with the United States, Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan visited China in 2022 to bolster bilateral ties, particularly as the United States deepens its partnership with India. Recently, with the removal of Imran Khan as the Prime Minister of Pakistan, experts say that China's friendship with Pakistan will remain strong in the future.

By seeing its bilateral relationship with China as a valuable friendship, Pakistan relies on China as a trusted ally in dealing with India from a position of military weakness. On the other hand, Beijing also values its close ties with Islamabad to extend its influence to South Asia and set a balance against India. The recent US intelligence reports suggested that despite Chinese pledges to stop providing missile technology, it has continued to deliver Pakistan guidance systems and technical expertise in the latter's effort to develop long-range ballistic missiles (Allauddin, Liu, and Ahmed 2020). China assisted Pakistan in the development of key military assets, including the Al-Khalid main battle tank and the JF-17 Thunder fighter jet. It is well known that China has given full support to Pakistan in developing Pakistan's nuclear weapons.

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), initiated in 2013, is a flagship project under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aiming to enhance connectivity between Gwadar Port in Pakistan and China's Xinjiang region through a network of infrastructure projects. The mission and vision of the CPEC are "to improve the lives of people of Pakistan and China by building an economic corridor promoting bilateral connectivity, construction, exploring potential bilateral investment, economic and trade, logistics, and people-to-people contact for regional connectivity" (CPEC Secretariat n.d.). CPEC has seen significant progress, including completing key infrastructure projects such as highways and power plants and the operationalization of Gwadar Port. It is not an exaggeration to claim that CPEC is at the core of China-Pakistan economic and strategic relations. CPEC has been instrumental in addressing Pakistan's energy shortages by adding substantial capacity to the national grid through various power projects.

The development of Gwadar Port and associated infrastructure has enhanced trade prospects, aiming to position Pakistan as a regional trade hub. Special Economic Zones (SEZs) under CPEC are expected to boost industrialization and create employment opportunities, contributing to economic growth. Zaman noted, "Pakistani government data indicates CPEC has so far created 200,000 jobs, built more than 1,400 kilometers (897 miles) of highways and roads, and added 8,000 megawatts of electricity to the national grid. The country's deep-sea southwestern port of Gwadar, the centerpiece of CPEC, handled 600,000 tons of cargo in the last 18 months, according to officials" (Voice of America 2023).

The CPEC is one of the reasons behind China's moral and political support for Pakistan over Kashmir. As a result, the alliance between China and Pakistan leads to India's hold on Kashmir being less secure. If Pakistan is confident enough in China's support, it could be emboldened to be more aggressive over Kashmir. In the scenario of an all-out war over Kashmir, a Pakistani assault with Chinese support on its side would be a serious issue for India. As a result, India is threatened and has consistently opposed CPEC. India perceives the development of Gwadar Port and its increased Chinese presence as potential security threats, potentially encircling India strategically (Rajagopalan 2022; Payeng 2024; Wolf 2019). With China being the largest economy in the world, Pakistan has a lot to gain from it, and cooperation with China is in line with Pakistan's national interests. Nevertheless, how much of the benefits from these relations has Pakistan been able to utilize?

However, the strategic tie between the Iron brothers, particularly their CPEC project, will pay off in the long run. Baluchistan, which is a region rife with terrorism, proves to be a setback

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to the CPEC. However, scholars have said that economic development brought about by the CPEC would address the key socio-economic conditions leading to terrorism, particularly by reducing poverty and unemployment.

Significance of Pakistan's Gwadar for China in the Indo-Pacific

China's development of Gwadar Port serves multiple strategic interests, including strengthening ties with Pakistan through long-term projects, securing and diversifying oil routes, and enhancing access to the Indian Ocean. Additionally, Gwadar allows China to monitor US naval operations in the Persian Gulf, Indian naval activities, and Indo-US maritime cooperation (Maqsood 2021). China's dependence on the Strait of Malacca is a thorn in China's side, through which more than 70% of its oil imports pass (Paszak 2021). The Strait of Malacca is a narrow, high-traffic maritime passage. It is one of the world's most vital chokepoints, making it susceptible to blockades or disruptions. From a geopolitical point of view, China's energy supply through the Strait is exposed to potential threats from external powers, especially the US Navy and India, which have a strong naval presence in the region. In times of war or conflict, these countries could disrupt China's energy flow by blocking or attacking Chinese ships. On the other hand, the Strait remains a hotspot for piracy, creating risks for China's oil tankers, which could affect its economic stability. In addition, the reliance on a single passage (Malacca) for energy imports makes China vulnerable to any instability or military confrontation in Southeast Asia, as there are limited alternative routes.

To this end, it looks to Gwadar deep sea port in Pakistan, which will allow it to keep track of the Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) between the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, giving it significant power in the area as well as allowing it to observe the collaboration between India and the US in the Indian Ocean (Hussain 2020). At the same time, it provides the likely shortest transit path for energy to China. In addition, the Gwadar port will allow China to spread its influence over the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf, which is important because 60% of China's oil imports come from there. Some scholars also stated that the Gwadar Port could become a Chinese naval base as part of its String of Pearls strategy, allowing it to observe the maritime affairs between India and the US (Hussain 2020).

Regarding the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), Pakistan's importance to China has significantly increased. The IPS, a coalition of the USA, India, Japan, and Australia, was formed partly to respond to the growing Chinese presence in the Indo-Pacific region, especially through the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). According to several American scholars, the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) poses significant economic, strategic, and political challenges for China, as it serves as a competitor to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to expand China's economic and political influence (Wu and Colombage 2019).

Since India's engagement in IPS could pose a serious threat to China, it has increased naval relations with Pakistan. China and Pakistan have conducted several joint naval exercises, which work to improve the synergy between the two navies and grow the Pakistan navy's capabilities while at the same time increasing maritime security in the region (Shah 2022).

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CHALLENGES TO THE CHINA-PAKISTAN STRATEGIC BOND

Security Concerns

Despite the strong strategic ties between China and Pakistan, some challenges have been identified, stemming from political, economic, security, and infrastructure-related issues and local resistance. Pakistan has had great hope that CPEC would change its economic fortune, but due to several setbacks, including attacks on Chinese workers, both nations are concerned. At least nine workers were killed in a bomb attack on a bus in Northern Pakistan in 2021, and in 2022, Chinese teachers were killed by a suicide bomber (The Times of India 2023).

The region, especially Balochistan, has experienced militant attacks targeting infrastructure projects and Chinese workers. The security situation has raised concerns about the safety of workers and the smooth functioning of CPEC-related projects, which strains relations between these two allies. China has pressed Pakistan to do more to crack down on militant groups (Siddiqui 2023). Nationalist and sub-nationalist groups and parties are also raising objections about the routes of CPEC. In addition, the sectarian violence further complicated the situation for the Chinese in building the Gwadar port as one of the crucial CPEC and BRI projects in the Indian Ocean region. Half of the main cities and districts in Pakistan have experienced sectarian attacks by Laskar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and Sipah Muhammad, the two main banned organizations that can be a potential danger to various CPEC projects in Pakistan. The feudal and tribal rivalries and armed clashes have also raised concerns for CPEC (Siddiqui 2019).

Political Instability

Political unrest in Pakistan is also a hurdle to implementing the CPEC. Pakistan has frequently experienced political instability, with shifts in government leading to changes in policy priorities. This has made it more difficult to maintain the long-term strategic vision of CPEC. Internal power struggles and divisions within Pakistan's political elite over CPEC benefits distribution have also caused delays and disruptions.

Economic Challenges and Debt Concerns

Pakistan's foreign debt and liabilities stood at $100 billion in 2023, and the country was scheduled to repay more than $26 billion during the 2022-23 fiscal year (Calabrese 2023).

The debt of Pakistan has ballooned to $124 billion, $30 billion of which is owed to China in 2024 (Hussain 2024). China is the largest creditor of Pakistan. The debt incurred by Pakistan through its engagement in China's BRI has significantly impacted China-Pakistan strategic relations. There are concerns that Pakistan's increasing debt, primarily to China for CPEC projects, could lead to financial instability. Critics argue that Pakistan may struggle to repay the loans, which could make the country overly dependent on China.

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Infrastructure Development Issues

While CPEC has seen some progress, many infrastructure projects are behind schedule due to logistical problems, funding issues, and the technical complexity of the projects. There are concerns over the environmental impact of large-scale infrastructure projects, particularly in ecologically sensitive areas like Gilgit-Baltistan and the Himalayan foothills. The construction of roads, highways, and power plants could disrupt local ecosystems.

Regional Tensions and India's Opposition

India has consistently opposed CPEC, especially due to its passage through Gilgit-Baltistan, a region it claims as part of its territory. India's opposition has raised concerns about the long-term security of the corridor.CPEC is undoubtedly an ambitious and potentially transformative project for Pakistan and China, but these challenges require careful management and strategic foresight. The security, political, economic, and regional hurdles must be addressed through cooperative efforts, transparent governance, and long-term planning.

CONCLUSION

The rise of China and its growing influence in South Asia is evident. Due to the changing geopolitics in the Indian Ocean region and the significance of the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, primarily to protect its energy security, China has strengthened its presence in South Asia. China's relationship with Pakistan will continue to grow due to their common strategic and security interests. On the other hand, considering Pakistan's tense and enemy relations with India over Kashmir, Pakistan's national security must have a continual cement relation with China.

CPEC will remain a vital factor in China-Pakistan economic and strategic relations. Pakistan has many expectations from this economic corridor for its economic development, but instability in Baluchistan and Pakistan's declining economy have been major threats to the successful implementation of CPEC. China is also concerned about the extremism and terrorism in Pakistan targeting Chinese nationals residing in Pakistan. In recent years, attacks on Chinese nationals have increased in Pakistan. According to the military and China's embassy in Pakistan, "militants assaulted a Chinese convoy near the vital southwestern port of Gwadar, Pakistan, while it was transporting a group of Chinese nationals to a development project" (The Diplomat 2023). Any "attempt to undermine China-Pakistan friendship and the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) will never succeed", said a Chinese spokesperson (The Times of India 2023).

Beijing is already Pakistan's largest creditor. Although it is not evident, some claim that the Chinese control of Hambantota port in Sri Lanka for 99 years and the current Sri Lankan economic crisis is due to the "Chinese debt trap". Therefore, too much dependency on China may jeopardize Pakistan's national security in the long run, from another perspective, one may claim. Nevertheless, the assertion that China deliberately tries to put Pakistan in a debt trap is contentious and debated.

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While the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has certainly raised concerns about debt sustainability, it is important to consider the broader geopolitical context.

Pakistan is crucial in China's strategic ambitions, especially in the Indo-Pacific region. The deep-sea ports in Gwadar (under development as part of CPEC) are considered strategically vital, providing China with critical access to the Arabian Sea and improving its maritime security. This would help China secure alternative shipping routes for oil and goods, bypassing the Strait of Malacca, a key chokepoint. Moreover, Pakistan serves as a valuable ally in China's larger geopolitical strategy, particularly in the context of competition with India and the US China's investments in Pakistan through CPEC are viewed in part as a way to deepen economic and political ties with the country, counterbalance Indian influence in the region, and secure access to energy and trade routes.

In short, while concerns about debt sustainability and its implications for sovereignty are legitimate, it is also clear that China's strategic interests in Pakistan are too significant for China to risk destabilizing its ally (Shaikh and Chen 2021). Both countries likely share an understanding that economic cooperation must be managed carefully to avoid creating a situation where Pakistan is unable to repay its loans or faces serious economic consequences.

The strained relationship between China and India has strengthened and deepened Pakistan's relationship with China. China and Pakistan have maintained an "Iron Brother" friendship based on their mutual interests in protecting their borders and countering the influence of their rival, India (Haider 2005).

According to the prominent Pakistani scholar Hassan Askari Rizvi (2015), "the [CPEC] project is going to be a positive turnaround both for Pakistan and the western region of China" (p. 1). As a result, this would greatly benefit Pakistan (Ahmed 2019). This suggests that although Pakistan has not yet fully reaped the benefits of CPEC and its relations with China, there is hope that it will be able to do so in the future. Therefore, while the reality of the All-Weather Friendship may not have met expectations, the future likely holds brighter prospects for both countries, especially Pakistan.

The theories of balance of power and security dilemma are relevant in understanding the China-Pakistan strategic alliance, which poses a concern for India. Both China and Pakistan are regional adversaries of India, and their military cooperation, particularly China's support for Pakistan's nuclear and missile programs, exacerbates India's security challenges. India perceives China as a key factor in its military ambitions, and as long as the China-Pakistan alliance remains, the chances for improving India-China relations are slim. The ongoing territorial disputes, particularly over Kashmir and Arunachal Pradesh, continue to fuel tensions, resulting in violence and casualties along their borders. Based on the facts and analysis, it can be argued that despite the challenges faced by China and Pakistan, these two nations will continue to maintain a robust strategic bond for their mutual interests.

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CONTRIBUTOR

The author contributed solely to the intellectual discourse that forms the foundation of this article, as well as its writing and editing, and assumes full responsibility for its content and interpretation.

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