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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
CPEC, BRI, SEZ's, All Weather Friends, Strategic Depth	The present study is to examine the strategic relationship between China and Pakistan has become a pillar of 21st-century regional dynamics. Despite having a lengthy history that traces back to the 1950s, the cooperation has recently accelerated due to mutual objectives in the diverse areas of global governance, financial growth, and regional stability. By the 21st century, this partnership has expanded beyond its traditional confines to encompass the multidimensional framework, with key pillars resting on the economic cooperation, security collaboration and political alignment. Both countries came closer since then as mutually beneficial countries who would serve as each other's supporter not only in regional peace but the world's geopolitics matters. The methodology used in current research is primarily qualitative method and all data given in this study would be collected from journals, official reports of organizations. CPEC represents a crucial economic fillip for Pakistan, providing it with the means to confront its acute power deficit, improve its infrastructure & create jobs. The results emphasize significance of fostering cultural interaction, strengthening regional security alliance, strengthening the economic cooperation, together with tackling the global governance issues.
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INTRODUCTION

The term strategic originates from Latin word 'strategos', signifying 'tricks of war.' The Pakistan-China strategic partnership, which began in the mid-20th century, has evolved into one of the most comprehensive and enduring bilateral relationships in contemporary geopolitics. The 21st century economic partnership between Pakistan and China star mutually significant projects to focus the strategic place of both countries (Ahmad, Tahir, Hussian & Ismail, 2024). UFFTF, flagship project

of massive Chinese initiative, called Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), focuses on economic cooperation amid two countries. CPEC, which was signed in 2015, has Pakistan as an important bridge between China and Arabian Sea and it has shortened the route for China's goods and energy imports and given alternative route for energy imports for China. CPEC, with regard to economic, has played an extremely influential role. Among several multi-billion dollar infrastructure projects, including road nexus complexes, power plants, railways and Gwadar being strategically crucial port (Javaid & Jahangir, 2015).

The Gwadar port is considered central to both countries, providing China with its first direct access to Arabian Sea, and offering Pakistan the opportunity to turn itself into a regional trade hub. Security cooperation between Pakistan and China has always been central to their relationship, based on mutual concern at regional instability, especially with respect to India and Afghanistan. In this connection, both countries have long considered each other staunch security allies in tumultuous region (Javaid & Jahangir, 2015). Pakistan occupies a strategic position that is vital for China's wider security and geostrategic interests, especially as it pertains to protecting its western regions and investments in those areas. The security relationship is complicated, spanning military cooperation to intelligence sharing to joint war games (Ismail & Fitriani, 2022). This military partnership has been critical to strengthening the Pakistan's defense potential, especially as it is confronting security challenges from its historical adversarial relations with India. In addition, the China and Pakistan have cooperated in area of civil nuclear technology, and China has provided the substantial support to Pakistan civilian nuclear energy program, despite the leading concerns by other countries.

Counterterrorism collaboration, too, has deepened in the 21st century. China's fears of extremist forces, including those with the connections to Uyghur separatists in Xinjiang, are in parallel with Pakistan's efforts to battle homegrown terrorism. Islamabad has assured Beijing that groups that might threaten China's western provinces will not be allowed to operate from Pakistani soil. China, in turn, has supported Pakistan's actions to fight terrorism, supplying the country with equipment, training and intelligence (Ismail, Hassan, Haq & Mir, 2023). The separatist groups and militants have also launched attacks on Chinese workers and projects in the region, forcing both Pakistan and China to double down on security initiatives. Driven by shared strategic interests, economic interdependence, and mutual concerns over regional security, this partnership has had profound implications on South Asian and broader regional politics (Javaid, 2021). is cooperation bolsters Pakistan deterrence against regional threats and contributes to China regional influence. Pakistan has also raised 'special security division' for protection of CPEC projects and Chinese nationals and stressed that both the nations are equally determined to ensure the security and integrity of our common economic projects.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The establishment of Pakistan-China relations both states enjoyed good relations. In these areas bilateral commerce and trade, defense cooperation, China-Pakistan civil nuclear cooperation, the energy corridor and Gwadar Sea port are most important. The PRC cooperated IRP since formation of diplomatic relations and Islamabad also supported Beijing in her early days when she facing

isolation from West. The shed lights on the political-linkage, cooperation on economy and defense as well as collaboration on international forum like SCO and UNO. They also engage in nuclear and energy cooperation and also mentions the prospects of future cooperation between two states. In future prospects cooperation in energy and trade and best use of Gwadar port is possible between Beijing and Islamabad. This paper explores all the previous cooperation as well as highlighted future prospects of shared interest which increased the value of this paper (Khan, 2011). The impact of the CPEC on Pakistan's power dynamics. Thus, it analyzes the country's national power elements, categorized into hard and soft power and explores how CPEC enhances these elements through smart power strategies.

Pakistan's strategic geographic location is leveraged to strengthen its influence via CPEC, notably through development of Gwadar Port, which plays a crucial role in connecting China to European and African markets. CPEC would establish industrial zones, build infrastructure and initiate power projects and thus enhance the hard power of Pakistan. Greater outreach to European and African markets across CPEC routes can also support Pakistan's soft power in this period through people-to-people contacts. As an icon project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), CPEC should help bring more equitable development and better cross connections in region (Fatima, Amna & Saeed, 2024). The challenges and prospects of China Pakistan Economic Corridor heightened security competition in the region. The CPEC will change the cooperation between Pakistan and China to the new level of time-tested partnership. The basic purpose of the CPEC is to connect the Chinese western region to Pakistan Gwadar deep Sea port by the network of railways and road. There are more than fifty major projects of under CPEC and the CPEC is the part of China's OBOR (One Belt One Road) policy. CPEC will provide the trade route for the natural resources rich area of Central Asia via Afghanistan.

It will boost up Pakistan's economy and will fulfill energy shortage of Pakistan. CPEC also provide shortest routes to access China in markets of Middle East, Central Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America. They further said that CPEC will expand economy and trade, boost regional connectivity, overcome energy crisis and it can also develop people to people contact. In this work writers explore all the benefits, opportunities and challenges of CPEC for Pakistan (Abid & Ashfaq, 2015). The common border harmonizing economies of western PRC and Pakistan and the geo-strategic and regional geo-economic requirements are the fundamental elements for the cooperation of China and Pakistan. The Gwadar Sea Port project and the Kashgar Special Economic Zone (KSEZ) is a long way to more trade and economic relations amid two reliable friends China and Pakistan. According to researcher that Pakistan will play a vital role in international especially in regional economic integration. The geographical location of Pakistan plays significant role regarding to economic prospective. He says that the Bin Qasim and Karachi port are now playing key role in Pakistan economy but when Gwadar deep Sea port became functional it will change the scenario of trade & economy of Pakistan.

The Kashgar Economic Zone and Gwadar Sea port will be the game changer for the whole region, economic cooperation and further opportunities to strengthen economic relations (Khan, 2013). To explain the bilateral relations of first ten years of 21st Century. He said that the sixty-year bilateral

ties odd partnership because there is ideological difference between them and the communism & Islam are two different paths of life and ideologies. But the primary driving force between their cooperation is their national interest and the supreme national interest is to contain India by all means. There are two reasons of China-Pakistan cooperation the first is to contain India and her influence and second is China wants to create her influence in South Asia through Pakistan along the eastern border with China and western border with Pakistan. Furthermore, he articulates that Beijing will replace America to provide military and economic assistance to Pakistan. The treaty of friendship of 2005 played major role to developed China-Pakistan relations. This work provides the whole story of Pakistan and China's relations since the establishment of their bilateral relations (Rakisits, 2012).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research would have been carried out the historical, descriptive and analytical approaches to proceed and draw the conclusion. So, this research also included the descriptive and analytical method of research for data collection. For this purpose, qualitative method has been used. All the data given in current study would be collected from the books, journals, official reports of the organizations, experts available on internet for instance, secondary methods for the research were consulted and analyzed the recommendations. To gains a more comprehensive understanding of Pakistan-China strategic partnership in 21st century. The internet data collecting would be the primary method.

RESULTS OF STUDY

Economic Cooperation

Economic ties between Pakistan and China in the 21st century is developing rapidly with Pakistan issuing up to \$500 million in RMB denominated bonds and \$500 million in Sukuk denominated bonds between 2012-13 to finance infrastructure. The CPEC has been established as major bilateral agreement with wide ranging implications for the region. Economic cooperation - an engine for future growth bilateral ties amid two countries have been increasingly solidified, and promotion of economic cooperation has played a vital role, particularly in the trade, investment and regional connectivity. The basis of Pak-China economic cooperation was actually laid several decades ago, however, only in the 21st century, these relations were institutionalized to even strategic level. Both nations also have a tradition of helping each other in terms of defense and diplomacy, so those are pretty strong bedrocks and give good foundation which broader economic cooperation can deepen. CPEC is network of infrastructure projects that are currently under construction through Pakistan, will connect Gwadar Port in Pakistan to China's Xinjiang region, to enable Chinese access to Indian Ocean and oil reserves of the Middle East, in one of major arteries of China's proposed 21st century Silk Road Initiative.

For Pakistan, in shape of CPEC it is an opportunity to bridge infrastructural deficiency and connect itself internally as well as globally. For Beijing CPEC is a perilous component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its goal is to securing shorter and more secure access to Arabian Sea, avoiding the longer route through South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca. Gwadar, situated at the mouth

of the Persian Gulf, offers China a strategic foothold to increase its trade efficiency and protect its energy imports from the Middle East. China has grown to become Pakistan's largest trading partner in recent years. In this linking, Bilateral trade between the two countries has grown significantly, reaching approximately \$18 billion by 2022, up from about \$4 billion in 2005. Despite this increase, Pakistan's trade deficit with the China remains a concern. China's exports to Pakistan far exceed Pakistani exports to China, resulting in a significant trade imbalance (Wolf, 2018). However, both governments have shown a commitment to reducing this gap through the measures such as tariff reductions and increased cooperation in the agricultural sectors. The following table shows the bilateral trade between Islamabad and Beijing from 2001 to 2024 in billion USD as well as table shows trade deficit.

Table 1 Summary of Bilateral Trade between Pakistan and China (2001-2024)

Year	Pakistan Exports to China (USD Billion)	Pakistan Imports from China (USD Billion)	Total Trade (USD Billion)	Trade Deficit (USD Billion)
2001	0.35	1.20	1.55	-0.85
2005	0.48	2.85	3.33	-2.37
2010	1.55	5.52	7.07	-3.97
2015	2.12	10.05	12.17	-7.93
2020	1.88	13.30	15.18	-11.42
2023	2.24	14.50	16.74	-12.26
2024	2.40 (Est.)	15.10 (Est.)	17.50 (Est.)	-12.70 (Est.)

Source: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics and Observatory of Economic Complexity

Energy Projects

Energy collaboration is key element of CPEC. Pakistan industry and economy remain handcuffed by energy sector decades of shortfalls and inefficiencies. China has been vital to Pakistan's energy capacity by building not only coal-fired facilities and their financing, but also plants for solar, wind, and hydroelectric power in its all-of-the-above program. Not only will these projects strengthen power generation but they will ensure the advancement of related businesses and infrastructure in country, positively impacting on Pakistan's economy. A number of mega energy and infrastructure projects have meaningfully improved Pakistan power generating ability and transmission capacity in the recent years.

Industrial Cooperation & Special Economic Zones

Industrial cooperation and SEZs development are the core programs of their strategic partnership and development approach especially under the CPEC. The purpose of this industrial collaboration is to modernize Pakistan's industrial base, generate jobs and develop technical knowledge and production capacity. Moreover, it provides Chinese companies the gateway to Pakistan market and the extended markets in Central Asia, Middle East and Africa (Mahmood, 218). The two sides would zero in on sectors where Indian industry can set up shop coming under textile, cement, steel, Agro-processing, IT, pharma and chemicals by 2016. China's plan to shift its industry to Pakistan acquired urgency, particularly at a time when the labor cost within China is reaching skyscraper levels. Each CPEC SEZ is planned to have sectoral specialization based on comparative advantage of its location. For example, Karachi and Gwadar are suitable for the maritime-trade, logistics and

heavy machinery-based industries, whereas Bostan & Rashakai suit agriculture-based and light-engineering industries.

Industrial Relocation & Technology Transfer

One of most significant features of industrial collaboration under CPEC is possibility of industrial shift from China to Pakistan. Labour & environmental costs have made China east unsustainably expensive for the manufacturing. As Chinese firms do business in Pakistan, especially in SEZs, they may use advanced machinery, technology, managerial skills to help upgrade Pakistan industries. There is huge economic potential of the SEZs for employment and economic activities. The SEZs on CPEC is expected to provide tens of thousands direct and indirect employments. These jobs are at all levels, from unskilled to management, so it is across the spectrum really of Pakistani labor. This would generate even more economic activity, and help in developing those regions, “which are relatively less developed” through themselves such as Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The roads, railways, and port infrastructure under CPEC is designed to enhance connectivity, reduce transit cost and facilitate the local goods produced from these zones to domestic and international markets (Zaib, 2023). The industrial cooperation under CPEC has potential to transform Pakistan's economy, elevate its industrial capabilities and solidify the strategic partnership between China and Pakistan.

Financial Aid & Loans

China has extended several loans to Pakistan to support its balance of payments and fiscal stability. The financing is often channeled through Chinese banks and financial institutions, such as China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China, providing crucial support to Pakistan's struggling economy. Thus, both governments maintain that these loans are critical for sustaining Pakistan's development and economic growth. The financial aid and loans in the Pakistan-China strategic relations from 2001 to 2024 have been a cornerstone of bilateral partnership, particularly under the framework of the CPEC and other initiatives. The China's financial aid to Pakistan was primarily directed towards infrastructure and military cooperation in the early 2000s. From 1976 although China had given little consideration to the financial aid it provided for Pakistan, however it played a vital role in helping Pakistan deal with its financial crisis at that time. Some important areas include:

- i. Pakistan was able to modernize its military forces and acquire defence equipment (including JF-17 Thunder) with Chinese loans and grants.
- ii. Before signing CPEC Beijing provides the starting investments into Gwadar Port that further shaped the CPEC.

By 2024, concerns about Pakistan's rising debt to China had become a significant issue in domestic and international discourse. While China-Pak economic corridor investments were largely beneficial for Pakistan's infrastructure, they also increased Pakistan's external debt significantly, creating long-term repayment obligations. Critics of CPEC raised concerns about Pakistan falling into a “debt trap,” where high-interest loans from Chinese institutions could exacerbate Pakistan's fiscal challenges (Rasool et al., 2024). However, both Pakistani and Chinese officials maintained that the debt was manageable along with investments would generate sufficient economic development to

cover repayments.

Political & Diplomatic Relations

East Asia 2001-2024 China–Pakistan relations during the 21st century (2001–2024) have been also described by some Pakistani and Chinese sources as "higher than the mountains, deeper than the oceans, solidier than steel, dearer than eyesight, sweeter than honey, and so on". The Pakistan–China relationship has increasingly come to be regarded as vital bilateral relationship in Asia with shared geo-political interests, economic and infrastructural exchanges, and is not restricted to security concerns but reached into political cooperation and regional stability. Formal relations between both countries faced many hurdles as border dispute over Kashmir (and other issues) had created an atmosphere of mutual suspicion in which the two collided on several occasions: first in 1962, then in 1965, and later in 1971. The two nations held hands for the first time in 1951 and shared some good relationships over the next several decades. Friendship with China was born from mutual strategic interests against India and USSR, during the Cold War. The 1963 border agreement between two countries, Pakistan's facilitation of President Nixon's secret visit to China in 1971 and China's support for Pakistan in 1965 and 1971 wars against India are defining moments in the relationship (Shamsi, Ali & Mustafa, 2019).

Security & Defense Collaboration

In 21st century, security and defense collaboration between Pakistan and China has significantly deepened, becoming a cornerstone of their strategic partnership. This collaboration includes joint military exercises, intelligence sharing and defense production agreements, with China supplying Pakistan with range of advanced weaponry, including fighter jets, submarines and missile systems. A notable development is the co-production of JF-17 Thunder fighter jet, a symbol of their defense cooperation (Naseer & Ahmad, 2021). China has played an influential and strategic role in heavy funding of Pakistan military, backing of Pakistan nuclear program, and modernization of Pakistan defense infrastructure. Joint useful efforts to keep open these critical shipping lanes and maintain peace & accessibility to lanes, with special reference to Afghanistan & broader Indian Ocean area, supported this alliance."

Military Cooperation

Over the past 20 years, Pakistan has increasingly looked to China as source for military equipment, securing China position as one of Pakistan main defense suppliers. Pakistan buys range of military equipment from China. The most notable outcome of this cooperation is joint production of JF-17 Thunder fighter jet, which has allowed Pakistan to update its air force and decrease its reliance on Western vendors.

Table 2 Shows key Chinese defense equipment acquired by Islamabad 2001 - 2024.

Year	Equipment	Description
2007	JF-17 Thunder	Joint fighter jet development
2015	Type 054A Frigate	Advanced naval frigates
2017	Wing Loong Drones	Combat drones for ISR and strikes
2022	HQ-9/P Long-Range SAM	Air defense missile system

Source: Author, 2024

Joint Military Exercises and Defense Agreements

Pakistan and China's joint military exercises have expanded both in size and complexity since 2001, in line with deepening collaboration between the two. Their military cooperation is epitomized by annual "Shaheen series" of air force exercises, "Sea Guardian" series of naval exercises, strengthening their ability to work together. In 2015, Pakistan and China entered treaties for additional defense cooperation as part of CPEC that would include sharp security measures for the protection of CPEC installations. These agreements show deep trust, and identical strategic intentions amid countries (Boon & Ong, 2021).

Table 3 Pak-China Joint Military Drills

Year	Exercise Name	Focus
2011	Shaheen-I	Air force drills, aerial combat
2013	Sea Guardian	Naval operations, anti-piracy
2015	Warrior	Counter-terrorism, ground forces
2020	Shaheen-IX	Complex aerial operations, ISR

Source: Author, 2024

China's Role in Supporting Pakistan's Nuclear Program

The Beijing has played a primary role in supporting Pakistan's nuclear program, both directly and indirectly, since the 1980s and support has continued into 21st century. The extent of cooperation is often kept secret due to international sensitivities, it is widely recognized that China has provided Pakistan with vital nuclear technologies and expertise to develop its nuclear deterrent capabilities. This cooperation includes assistance in nuclear reactor construction, missile technology transfer, most notably in aiding Pakistan to develop Shaheen missile series, capable of delivering nuclear warheads. China has been strong advocate for Pakistan in international forums, backup its nuclear energy program and helping to block efforts to restrict Pakistan access to nuclear technology. These efforts enabled Pakistan to develop robust nuclear arsenal, ensuring strategic solidity in South Asia (Maslennikova, 2016).

Table 4 Pak-China Nuclear Cooperation

Year	Area of Cooperation	Description
2001	Reactor Technology	Civil nuclear reactors for energy
2010	Missile Technology	Shaheen missile development support
2014	Defense Diplomacy	Support in international nuclear forums

Source: Compiled by author

Table 5 Arms Transfer from China to Pakistan 2010-2024 in million \$

Years	Import from China	Total Export from China
2011	591	1263
2012	592	1521
2013	726	2061
2014	466	1327
2015	547	1814
2016	717	2445

2017	687	1625
2018	503	1358
2019	529	1593
2020	468	700
2021	885	1310
2022	1259	2083
2023	1819	2432
Total	9,789	21532
%	45.46%	100%

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfer Database

In sum, the figures highlight Pakistan’s great dependence on China for military equipment, which adds to the larger strategic dimension of the growing Sino-Pakistan relationship in the regional security calculus.

Counterterrorism and Extremism

During 2001–2024, in context of this history, counterterrorism and extremism were progressively elevated in Pakistan’s relations with China as part of global War on Terror and emergent security issues in wider regional environment. After 9/11, Pakistan allied itself with the US as a front line state in the war against Al-Qaeda and Taliban. China, which has been more reticent to join global counterterrorism efforts, saw instability in Pakistan as a direct threat to its western Xinjiang region, which has large Uyghur Muslim minority. China was concerned that turmoil in Pakistan embedded areas in FATA and growth of jihadist networks therein could contribute in the rise of extremism in Xinjiang (Basit, 2019). Efforts also continued on diplomatic front, where China said it was backing Pakistan in its efforts to restore the tribal areas to order. Both countries collaborated through high level security dialogues and that too at multilateral forums like SCO where Pakistan had acquired observer status in 2005 (Iqbal et al., 2024). With rise of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and related organized terrorism in Pakistan, security of Pakistan became fragile, and Pakistan moved deeper into orbit of China.

Beijing considered counterterror measures important to ensure the safety of its huge investments made through CPEC—part of BRI launched in 2015. Running through Pakistan’s bloody insurgency-hit areas, CPEC had demanded close coordination between Pakistan & China to secure Chinese workers and infrastructure. China transferred state-of-the-art security equipment & technologies, including, UAVs (drones), surveillance system and warfighting systems to Pakistan so that the latter can tackle insurgents in its border regions and secure its CPEC interests. The post-2020 period saw further consolidation of Pakistan–China counterterrorism cooperation as security threats from both domestic and regional extremist groups evolved. Fear about extremism resurface in Pakistan after Taliban’s victory and resurgence of extremist elements in Pakistan and the potential for instability to spill into Xinjiang. In response, Pakistan and China strengthened their bilateral mechanisms for security cooperation. The China has deepened its counterterrorism cooperation with Pakistan by providing cultured training for Pakistani police and military and providing the modern technology for surveillance.

Table 6 Joint Declaration for Counter Terrorism & Extremism amid Islamabad & Beijing

Year/Period	Key Initiatives	Description of Cooperation
Early 2000s	Bilateral Agreements	Initiation of several counter-terrorism agreements to combat regional terrorism post-9/11 attacks.
2003	Joint Working Group	Establishment of a Joint Working Group on counter-terrorism for information exchange and intelligence sharing.
2010s	Intelligence Sharing	Increased intelligence sharing on terrorist groups operating in Xinjiang and Pakistani territories.
2015	CPEC Security	China and Pakistan collaborate on securing the CPEC from terrorist threats.
2016	Joint Military Exercises	Both countries conduct joint military exercises like "Shaheen" and "Warrior" to enhance coordination against terrorism.
2017	Quadrilateral Cooperation	Initiation of a quadrilateral cooperation mechanism with the Afghanistan and Tajikistan focused on regional security and counter-terrorism.
2019	Joint Counter-Terrorism Drills	"Friendship Shield" joint drills aimed at improving capabilities of forces to handle terrorist threats.
2021	Anti-Terrorism Cooperation	Renewed commitment to tackle the cross-border terrorism, including through dialogue at regional forums (e.g., SCO).

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan's Embassy Beijing and <https://ecrats.org/en/>

The bilateral collaboration was extended to the quadrilateral framework in 2017 by including Afghanistan & Tajikistan. Through joint adventures and drills like "Friendship Shield" and regional forums like SCO, Islamabad & Beijing continue to strengthen their partnership to next level against terrorism (Zehra, 2024).

Cultural & Educational Exchange Programs

Mutual exchange programs of culture and education, including students and teachers, are an essential part of complex relationships between Pakistan and China that started in the early 1950s when both countries exchanged diplomatic recognition. These institutes host Chinese New Year celebrations, calligraphy workshops & film screenings, contributing to better mutual understanding of Chinese culture among the Pakistanis (Sheng et al., 2022). On the other hand, Pakistani Culture has attracted a large following in China. In this connection, it is increasingly common for joint-ventures, which includes sharing films and television shows and exhibitions in China for Pakistani music and art.

Educational Exchange Programs

On the educational side scholarships, student exchange and academic linkages constitute basis of partnership between Pakistan and China. Over the last few years, thousands of Pakistani students have benefitted from these scholarships for higher studies, mostly in China, in disciplines such as engineering, medicine and technology. HEC in coordination with respective Chinese organizations has already rolled out series of program to promote academic cooperation. These are collaborative research program, faculty exchange and signing of MoUs amid universities. These partnerships have led to publication with the Pakistani and the international researchers and human capacity development in Pakistani universities (Jun, 2023). Chinese universities have been broadening their

curricula in the field of Urdu language in an effort to train Chinese scholars in South Asian studies, and promoting better understanding of Pakistani history, politics and culture. This has generated strong academic ties, where Pakistani universities have initiated from their side Chinese language programs” (Noor, 2022).

Political Cooperation in Early 21st Century

At the dawn of the 21st century, the political landscape in Asia was shifting due to the global War on Terror, the rise of China as a major global power and the growing Indo-US strategic alignment. Against this backdrop, Pakistan and China’s relationship strengthened. Following terrorist attacks of 9/11, Pakistan became a crucial ally of the United States in its fight against terrorism, but it also maintained strong relations with China. China, for its part, saw Pakistan as an important partner in its vision of countering regional rival India and securing stability in its western regions, especially Xinjiang, where Muslim separatist sentiments were a concern. Pakistan’s influence in the Muslim world and its proximity to Afghanistan made it a valuable partner for China’s broader regional interests. Diplomatically, relationship amid the two countries was marked by a series of high-level visits and exchanges. Chinese President Hu Jintao visited Pakistan in 2006, strengthening bilateral cooperation. During this period, two nations signed several defense agreements, cementing security partnership and highlighting China role as Pakistan primary defense supplier. The two countries expanded collaboration in infrastructure development, signaling deepening of their diplomatic ties (Allauddin et al., 2020).

Table 7 Pak-China Political and Diplomatic Cooperation in 21st Century

Year	Event	Details
2001	Pakistan’s Support in War on Terror	Pakistan’s strategic cooperation with China strengthened as both nations faced security concerns post-9/11. China supported Pakistan’s efforts in counterterrorism.
2003	Signing of the Joint Declaration	Pakistan and China signed a Joint Declaration on Direction of Bilateral Cooperation, emphasizing security, defense and regional stability.
2005	Strategic Partnership Agreement	Both countries agreed on a Strategic Partnership during Premier Wen Jiabao’s visit to Pakistan. This agreement underlined comprehensive cooperation in political, economic and defense sectors as well as future possibilities.
2008	Civil Cooperation	China and Pakistan signed an agreement for the construction of nuclear power plants in Pakistan, enhancing Pakistan’s energy capacity.
2013	CPEC	The CPEC was the part of BRI and this project aimed at enhancing Pakistan’s infrastructure and deepening economic ties between the two nations.
2015	Xi Jinping’s Visit to Pakistan	Chinese President Xi Jinping’s visit solidified the CPEC project. \$46 billion worth of infrastructure and energy projects were agreed upon during this historic visit.
2016	Diplomatic Support for Pakistan	PRC supported IRP in days of tensions with India, especially in international forums like the United Nations. China backed Pakistan in blocking India’s entry to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).

2018	Imran Khan's Government and CPEC	After Imran Khan became Prime Minister, there was an emphasis on re-evaluating and restructuring certain CPEC projects to better serve Pakistan's economic interests.
2020	COVID-19 Pandemic Cooperation	China provided significant medical aid and support to Pakistan during the pandemic, which included vaccines and medical equipment.
2021	70th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations	Pakistan and China marked 70 years of diplomatic relations, celebrating their "all-weather" friendship with new pledges of cooperation in defense, economy and international affairs.
2022	Diplomatic Support for China's Stance on Taiwan and Xinjiang	Pakistan publicly supported China's position on issues like Taiwan and Xinjiang, reaffirming its commitment to the "One China" policy.

Source: Compiled by Author

Rise of the CPEC

A milestone in Pakistan-China relationship in 21st century is CPEC started in 2015. CPEC, part of Chinese President Xi Jinping's BRI, that aims to tie the economies of all the countries of the region with China, is a massive connectivity and economic development initiative that seeks to connect China to Pakistan. CPEC's political and diplomatic repercussions have been significant. It has also enhanced Pak-China ties, by entangling their economic futures and converging their geo-political aspirations. Pakistan considers CPEC solution to its long-term infrastructure and energy shortages, while China views it as a way to increase its access to the Arabian Sea and the Middle East. India opposes the CPEC as parts of it pass through the Kashmir, part of which is administered by India and claimed by China, and which India claims region is an integral part of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. The diplomatic fallout from India's objections has driven Pakistan and China closer together. Beijing has consistently supported Pakistan in international forums, particularly at UNSC, where China has blocked resolutions targeting Pakistan on the issues related towards the terrorism and militancy.

In turn, Pakistan has maintained the pro-China stance in various international organizations and consistently supported China on issues related to Xinjiang, Taiwan and Hong Kong, aligning with Beijing's key political interests (Boon & Ong, 2021). Despite the overall strength of the Pakistan-China relations, there have been some challenges. The security situation in Pakistan, particularly regarding terrorist attacks on the Chinese nationals working on CPEC projects, has occasionally strained the relationship. China has expressed concerns about the safety of its citizens in Pakistan, leading to increased pressure on Islamabad to ensure better security for CPEC-related personnel and infrastructure. While Pakistan has remained a staunch ally of China, the relationship has required delicate balancing, especially in light of Pakistan's relationships with other global powers such as the United States and Saudi Arabia. In this linking, Pakistan has skillfully navigated these complex alliances, ensuring that its partnership with the China remains strong while maintaining cordial and significant relations with other significant players in the international arena (Hussain & Hussain, 2023).

DISCUSSION

The primary concern of both nations is maintaining peace and security in their regions, which has

laid a solid groundwork for the Pakistan-China strategic cooperation. Thus, with India gradually moving closer to western countries including US, China still sees Pakistan as counter force to India's growing influence in South Asia. Pakistan is also viewed by China as a reliable counterweight to the balance of power in region in favor of supporting its own geostrategic direction. But because of deep-seated animosity with India, Pakistan views China as an indispensable friend to help meet its defense needs. Their military-to-military ties, involving exchange of state-of-the-art defense technology, joint production of high-tech weapons and modernization of their armed forces, is a mirror of their relationship. The JF-17 Thunder and other advanced fighter jets and missile systems are a key component to a broader push to strengthen the Pakistani military and the military relations between China and Islamabad is a part of a wider strategic cooperation to ensure that China-Pakistan security objectives are being met? China-Pakistan Economic Corridor CPEC demonstrates growing economic integration of two countries and is integral part of their economic cooperation. CPEC, or the CPEC, is a massive infrastructure project fueled by billions of dollars in Chinese investment.

CONCLUSION

In the twenty-first century, the strategic relationship between China and Pakistan has become an essential feature of regional geopolitics, inspired by common goals in global governance, economic growth, and regional security. Significant advantages have resulted from the collaboration for both nations, including the increased global influence, better regional security, and stronger economic cooperation. Pakistan and China must strengthen their economic ties, improve their cooperation in regional security, foster cross-cultural interchange, and tackle global governance issues as their connection develops. In doing so, the alliance may strengthen Pakistan-China relations as a pillar of regional and international politics while advancing economic growth, regional stability and 21st-century global governance. 21st century has observed substantial transition in global geopolitics categorized by the emergence of new alliances and power shift that are influencing the future. Strategic partnership amid Pakistan and China is important player in regional and international politics of South Asia.

This friendship, developed over several decades of collaboration and mutual interests, has had a profound influence in shaping the geopolitical dynamics of region, and Pakistan's relations with China. It can be looked at from several directions economic and strategic, military and regional stability. All of which are hugely important in the grand theatre of world politics and South Asia. Pakistan China relations started on 21 May 1951, when Pakistan was one of the first countries to end official diplomatic relations with the Republic of China on Taiwan and recognize the PRC. Soon after its proclamation and the mission arranged by Chinese foreign minister and leadership during the first war with India on 19 Nov 1962 to visit Beijing. Pakistan became the first Muslim country to recognize the People Republic of China (PRC) rather than Republic of China which was considered as the legitimate China, something that was itself seen as a significant gain both politically and militarily. Over the years, the relationship became a cross-sector partnership. Increased economic cooperation, as depicted by the CPEC, has become the most crucial aspect of Pakistan-China ties in the 21st century.

A multibillion-dollar investment in Pakistan's infrastructure, such as highways, railways, and energy projects and the enhancement of Gwadar Port in Balochistan, the CPEC was launched in 2013 under Chinese BRI. A more integrated, industrialized and energy-surged Pakistan is the legacy of the CPEC that has contributed immensely toward the uplift of Pakistan's economy. The CPEC, which is part of China's BRI, is important as it places China in a much stronger position in the Indian Ocean and enhances China's access to critical sea lanes. The Pakistan-China strategic partnership in the 21st century is a cornerstone of regional geopolitics. While it has empowered Pakistan economically and militarily, it has also introduced new strategic rivalries, dependencies, and diplomatic complexities. Much has been written about the progress of the Gwadar Port as it may provide China with an alternative to the Strait of Malacca, which is not only bustling with the traffic but one of the world's most strategically important chokepoints, connecting the Arabian Sea to South China Sea.

Recommendations

1. CPEC should include other areas such as technology, energy and agriculture. Increasing the role of Chinese private sector can help expand economic engagement. Concentrate on teaching technology and how-to skills to Pakistanis, so that projects will promote ongoing local development.
2. The regular high-level visiting level exchanges, covering diplomatic, military & political dialogue, must be sustained in order to maintain close coordination on regional queries like Afghanistan and India. Persuade civil society, think tanks and universities to conduct Track-II dialogues that can help build greater and stronger people-to-people and cultural connection.
3. Enhance military-to-military partnership, like joint exercises, intelligence cooperation, and counter-terrorism, to safeguard regional security and stability. Work for common border's security and fight gains smuggling, facilitate terrorism, cross border insurgencies in places like Xinjiang to Afghan border.
4. Pakistan and China should increase educational exchanges, cultural events, and tourism in order to foster the people-to-people diplomacy and cultural interaction. The two nations should work together to combat pandemics, non-proliferation, and climate change while advancing a more just and equitable international system in order to address the issues of global governance.

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