

## The Future of China-Pakistan Strategic Partnership: Implications for The Evolving Gulf Landscape

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### Abstract

China Pakistan relations can be classified as strategic partnership which has been molded through time and over the decade has expanded not only in the military-acquisition domain but also in the economic front and diplomatic realm. This relationship was anchored on CPEC, which is one of China's most significant BRI projects; it entails linking Gwadar Port in Pakistan to China's Xinjiang province. This partnership does not only foster and further the friendly relations between the two countries but also improve the strategic standing of both nations in the Gulf region which is very important for energy and economic factors. Therefore, the China-Pakistan alliance presents considerable consequences for the shift in the gulf area. Strengthening of Sino-Pak relationships improves the strengths in terms of bargaining for both the countries in the gulf and provides them with secure supply of energy along with other economic incentives. This partnership also affects the structures of securing the Gulf region by Chinese expanding their naval forces in the Indian Ocean and Pakistan on the other side has military bonds with Saudi Arabia and UAE exclusively. Hence such cooperation may offset other hegemonic players such as India and or US and contribute to order by eradicating terrorism and enhancing marine security in the region. However, new trends in the configuration of the Gulf region pose threats as well as possibilities for the China-Pakistan axis. Negotiating regional animosities, particularly with Saudi Arabia and Iran, is delicate work that requires soft power. Also, the ongoing efforts by some of the Gulf States to diversify their economy from over reliance on oil to other such sectors as information technology and renewable energy provides further opportunities for business partnerships. By doing so and by handling challenges arising from the regional antagonism, the China-Pakistan strategic partnership can be an important factor towards reformulating the destinies of the gulf region's stability and prosperity.

**Keywords:** China, Pakistan, Gulf Region, Hegemony, Regional Antagonism

### Introduction:

The cooperation between China and Pakistan has evolved for over six decades as the strategic partnership between the two states. However, the foundational bond that developed through shared antipodal interests and cooperation in the context of the Cold War has shifted to include economic integration, which constitutes the major aspect of the relationship (Garver, 2016). The most significant project of this emerging cooperation is the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is a part of China's Belt and Road Initiative linking Gwadar Port, Pakistan with Xinjiang China (Small, 2020). In more ways than one this corridor directly promotes bilateral

trade between these two countries and on the other hand it highlights Pakistan as a strategic member in China's trade circuit. In addition, there continues to be cooperation in the areas of defense hence military training and defense deals making both countries' security stronger (Sial, 2019). These multi-dimensional aspects can clearly indicate the fact that significance of the relation has more than one layer or can have deeper meanings known as strategic depth.

The consequences of a China Pakistan alliance can be especially felt in the context of the Gulf, an area of economic transformation, competition, and fluctuating solidarities. Saudi Arabia and the UAE along with other GCC countries are the significant producers and exporters of oil and gas in the global market; however, they are also working actively to reduce the economy's dependence on hydrocarbon (Ulrichsen, 2020). In the same respect, the Gulf is important to China for oil acquisition as well as to invest and build upon infrastructure across the region (Blanchard & Flint, 2017). Due to Pakistan's close relations with numerous Gulf States now either as a battlefield ally or supplier of military equipment, it makes it an ideal ally for China for managing this volatile area. One notable aspect is that Gwadar port which is being developed further is very advantageous for China to access the Arabian Sea and they do not have to pass through the Strait of Malacca which they fear might be blocked (Jaffrelot, 2021). Such positioning helps reinforce China's presence in the Gulf and energy security and economic stakes.

However, the geopolitical situation of the Gulf region is changing and at the same time poses challenges and opportunities for China-Pakistan cooperation. Regional contests such as Saudi Arabia and Iran especially which is a principle ally of the US entail a sensitive diplomacy to ensure that the two adversaries remain in good books of the US (Katzman, 2019). Also, the Gulf's continuous move towards the diversification of the economy provide new opportunities for the development of Sino-Pakistan relations in such fields as technology, renewable resources and energy, infrastructures (Ehteshami & Horesh, 2020). Simultaneously, these dynamics require a prudent handling of Pakistan's strategic relationship with the Gulf Cooperation Council states which factors into the gradual formality of ties with China without disturbing the regional balance of power or strategic positioning of allies in the GCC. The two countries must, therefore, help to leading the region towards the future stability and prosperity while the gulf perspective remains ever changing it is therefore important for the China Pakistan partnership to assume that there is more contestation to come as it seeks to seize new opportunities while minimizing risks.

### Historical Context and Strategic Depth:

The strategic China-Pakistan partnership goes beyond a mere bilateral relationship; in fact, the two governments have often referred to it as 'higher than mountains, deeper than oceans'. This interaction can be of military, economic, and political tolerance and assistance in times of need and crisis (Small, 2020). The CPEC is therefore a testimony to the economic facet of the China-Pakistan relations but also a component of the BRI grand scheme. CPEC intends to establish link between Gwadar Port in Pakistan and China's Xinjiang region to ensure the escalations of trade/investment and other commercial activities (Garlick, 2018). In addition to being an important trade route for China and Pakistan this corridor holds significance of how the two countries are gradually becoming more intertwined economically. In addition, CPEC involves investments in the construction of new roads, railways and energy pipelines whose main objective is to foster development in Pakistan while at the same time, offer China's better connectivity to Arabian Sea (Wolf, 2019).

In fact the China-Pakistan relationship involve much more than bilateral relations and they radically affect the balance in the gulf region. The Gulf region due to energy resources, economic diversification and the geopolitical competitions provide both the prospects and the constraints for C-P axis (Calabrese, 2018). At the same time, increasing energy demands as well as investment projects in Gulf countries provide China with a solid ground for presence in the region, which corresponds with Pakistan's interests in keeping a stable and friendly relations with the Gulf States. Gwadar Port is especially more important to China as it improves China's naval access and provides an opportune point in securing its energy sources as well as in increasing its sphere of influence in the region (Leverett & Bingbing, 2016). On the other hand, Pakistan's historical and military relations with the Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE using which China has influence in the region and can effectively deal with the complex structures of the Gulf (Ulrichsen, 2020). The three-way diplomacy that is evident here is all about power equations as the China-Pakistan relations act like a balancing factor for strategic stability and economic cooperation.

However, new obstacles arise from the changing nature of the Gulf landscape for the China-Pakistan relationship. They by compromise reflect the change of alliances, the progression in economies, and the constant animosities of the region especially Saudi Arabia and Iran

(Katzman, 2019). For example, China, while has invested a large amount of resources on the development of Iran energy sector and Iranian infrastructure, has to weigh its relation with KSA and UAE at the same time. Likewise, for Pakistan, it has to navigate very carefully the strategic relationships with the Gulf States since the country is caught up in regional conflicts that could cost the nation its economic gains and security (Ehteshami & Horesh, 2020). Therefore, depending on economic factors like the Vision 2030 of the Gulf States, the China-Pakistan partnership in the region depends on the recognition of and management of geopolitical risks. Overall, the current afforded dynamic environment in the Gulf poses a threat to the endurance and flexibility of the China-Pakistan strategic cooperative relationship in both regional and global power systems architecture (Blanchard & Flint, 2017).

#### **Strategic and Economic Dimensions in the Gulf:**

##### **Energy, Security, and Economic Interests:**

Gulf region is important for both China and Pakistan because of its large oil reserves and it makes them a key node in their bilateral relations. China is the world's largest consumer of energy and hence, depends greatly on imports of oil and gas from the gulf region (Xu et al. , 2017). More than 50 percent of China's crude oil imports come from the Middle Eastern oil and among the key supplier is Saudi Arabia (Zhang & Alon, 2019). This makes the gulf region very essential in China's energy security and its economic stability more so during the global drip. Pakistan's perception of the Gulf States is important for economic support in the form of grants and loans, investments, and working remittances from its migrating workforce contribute immensely to its foreign exchange earnings (Nasir & Mahmood, 2018). Pakistani expatriate workers in the gulf countries send home remittance which is a major source of income for many of the Pakistan households and the overall national gross domestic product Amjad (2019). Besides, the Chinese presence in Pakistan through the BRI improves both governments' leverage in the Gulf by providing dependable energy deliveries and economic advantages (Garlick, 2018).

Thus, both China and Pakistan have aligned their economic interests with their bilateral strategic relationship toward the provision of energy and realization of economic goals in the Gulf. The investment by China in Pakistan through instruments such as the CPEC has enhanced the infrastructural and energy part of Pakistan, which has further enhanced gulf investments (Wolf, 2019). Furthermore, the economic power of China in the Gulf, particularly the implementation of

BRI empowers Pakistan's Strategy as it creates improved trade access and economic connectivity (Blanchard & Flint, 2017). For Pakistan, the economic aid and investments from the Gulf States have been crucial in resolving fiscal issues of Pakistan and development projects, respectively (Khan & Ahmed, 2020). In addition, the expatriate employees in the Gulf also provide remittance to their families as well as new social and cultural assets to bilateral relations (Mughal & Padilla, 2020). The strategic partnership with Pakistan is therefore, vital to decipher the strategic configuration of the gulf, encourage development linkages and provide energy security for both China and Pakistan.

#### **Geopolitical and Military Cooperation:**

One of the major concerns pertaining to this strategic military partnership is their latent impact on the Gulf stability. That is why China's increasing presence at sea through the development of Gwadar Port is a strategic attempt to gain direct control of the important maritime arteries as well as extending its influence in the Gulf (Swaine, 2015). This port as part of CPEC is a strategic trade and military center that puts China in a commanding strategic position in the region (Small, 2020). China through its military support, technology, organs and equipment tremendously strengthens the Pakistan's coastal defense and its modern navy and thus strengthens the co-operation in the security domain (Pantucci, 2017). It shown the Strategic alignment allow China to keep presence in the Gulf, which security of oil supply and stability of region is essential (Holslag, 2019).

Past military cooperation between Pakistan and the Gulf States such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates make Pakistan even more instrumental in Chinese strategic plan in the region. Pakistan has trained, equipped and, at times, deployed troops for these Gulf countries, meaning that the defense ties are very strong (Aneja, 2018). It is a strategy to oppose other regional hegemonic countries, particularly India which has started expanding its maritime capability on sea and is developing closer relation with gulf countries (Pant & Joshi, 2017). Furthermore, the place of the United States as a military power in the region mainly for its energy needs, is in a different context with China-Pakistan partnership probably altering the power equations and security relations (Kaplan, 2016). China and Pakistan's strategies military ties mean that together their power could alter the strategic balance of the Gulf in ways that increasingly make it a more multipolar region for security (Rashid, 2020).

### Challenges and Opportunities:

#### Regional Rivalries and Alignments:

Gulf region is strongly bipolarized between two major actors; Saudi Arabia and Iran, making the strategic gamut for other states such as China and Pakistan conditioned by this bipolarity. Sectarian and political conflict arise from Saudi Arabia's domination in the affairs of Sunni Muslim nations, while Iran has authority among the Shia majority. Each of these countries is significant to the other in different ways; but the tenet of non-interference in other countries' internal affairs is essential to China's diplomatic relations. In this regard, China wants to stay neutral in regional conflicts, thus securing its business interests and access to natural resources, especially oil (Sun, 2018). In the case of Pakistan, the problem is slightly different because this country has very heavy reliance on Saudi Arabia going back to a military cooperation and to some extent an economic support (Riedel, 2015). Each of these relationships must be managed while dealing with Iran, a bordering country with which it has a lot in common.

These regional dynamics affect the relations between China and Pakistan, which is the vital strategic partners of both sides. China's investments in Iran mainly in infrastructure and energy sectors within the context of the BRI acknowledged the fact that China has stakes on a stable and economically inter-connected Gulf region (Garver, 2016). Nevertheless, these investments could pose conflict of interest with the house of Saud, an important strategic partner and supplier of oil. Likewise, Pakistan needs to balance the relations with Saudi Arabia which is been a major supplier of funds and weaponry to Pakistan without offending Iran (Fair, 2018). These acts of Islamabad play the role of mediator between Riyadh and Tehran reflect the fact that the continuation of stability in the region is a necessity for Pakistan. Therefore, the dilemma in which China and Pakistan find themselves underlines the challenges of pursuing the interests of respective states in the context of competition and shifting alliances (Ahmad, 2020).

#### Economic Diversification in the Gulf:

This can be seen as some of the Gulf States gradually begin to diversify their economy and move away from the dependency on the sale of oil there will be more opportunities to increase the economic cooperation with China and Pakistan. Kuwait and other gulf neighbors like the UAE and KSA are diversifying their economies through shifting from the traditional reliance on the hydrocarbons by investing in technology and tourism as well as renewable resources (Hertog,

2017). This change corresponds with China's economic strategies under the BRI that involves infrastructure enhancement and technological integration (Rolland, 2019). The situation means that China can increase its technological and financial cooperation with Gulf countries and create joint ventures, in this way enhancing the relations and beneficial interaction.

Pakistan also falls under the Belt and Road Initiative partners and therefore, it is set to reap from these changes economically as well. The CPEC can facilitate the access of new markets in the gulf for Pakistani businesses especially across the non-traditional field (Wolf, 2019). Areas of cooperation in the renewable energy can benefit the energy security of Pakistan and meet the Gulf States' diversification objectives. Additionally, Pakistan's growing IT industry, which has been developed with investment help from China, can present options and breakthroughs for the Gulf economies that are in the process of shifting to post oil knowledge based economy (Singh, 2020). The diversification of economy of the Gulf thus offers multiple prospects of cooperation with China and Pakistan for the development of new and quite diverse spheres of the interaction.

#### **Security Concerns and Counterterrorism:**

The nature of security threats in the gulf region has been defined as extreme thus requiring the enhancement of countermeasures such as combating terrorism and protecting assets from maritime piracy. Thus, China and Pakistan's strategic relations can be beneficial in managing these security issues. Development of Gwadar Port, backed by China to secure its owning and interests, is a clear sign of China's active involvement to control the Indian ocean especially on major sea lanes (Kaplan, 2016). More naval cooperation and strengthening of patrols can lessen piracy and safeguard the sea ways needed for oil and other products transportation (Chung, 2018). Geographically located and the naval strength of Pakistan is that supports china's maritime concept to address security issue in the required manner.

In counter-terrorism sphere, China and Pakistan can play a positive role in the maintenance of the regional security by cooperation in the areas of intelligence exchange and training programs (Pantucci, 2017). Since the Gulf States are threatened internally and externally with terrorist acts, they receive help from these reliable partners. Counter terrorism operations involving multiple forces are special military exercises that exercise the operational readiness and strengthen the Fords of the military in question as well as the other forces involved (Tellis, 2016). In addition, one of China's strengths in the Gulf States is in the area of technology, particularly in

surveillance and cybersecurity, which when leveraged in the fight against terrorism would present a holistic solution to the menace thus enhancing the security of the region (Scobell, 2019). This means that today's relationship is not only economic but also security-driven as this pillar is crucial to the security of the whole Gulf region.

#### **Implications for Regional Stability:**

The ever-changing nature of China-Pakistan relations extends its importance significantly to the stability of the Gulf region mainly through infusing trade and diplomatic cooperation. The CPEC is one of the significant BRI projects that intends to develop a connectivity framework of trade and infrastructure to boost China's access to Pakistan and the GGC. This task is not only rich in opportunities for economic development through the enhancement of trade roads, but also contributes to the region's predictability due to economic interconnectedness (Wolf, 2019). This vision is anchored on development of Gwadar Port that gives China direct access to Arabian Sea and Pakistan expanded economic base (Small, 2015). Due to the development of economic benefits, China and Pakistan can make potential conflicts overshadowed by mutual economic interests in a stable regional framework.

Control of regional animosities is a necessity in order for this partnership to play a crucial role in the contribution to the stability of the Persian Gulf region. The Gulf region strategically entails high competition involving various countries especially Saudi Arabia and Iran. China can ill afford to open confrontation with Riyadh while, at the same time, not wanting to lose face and influence in Tehran, which is why its policy of non-interference is important here, as well as its geopolitical neutrality that is necessary for preserving its interests in both countries (Sun, 2018). The situation of Pakistan where it is traditionally an ally of Saudi Arabia is more complicated. It has to establish a good relationship with Riyadh while not straining its relations with Iran, which is very important as a neighbor and keeps a significant influence in the region (Fair, 2018). Healthy relationships between China and Pakistan in such cases can help in avoiding tensions in the region and result in a favorable atmosphere in the Gulf.

The role of the China-Pakistan strategic partnership involves not only the active participation but positive involvement with the sponsorship factor in Gulf economic diversification policy and a highly effective security partnership. As the Gulf States move more a good distance from an oil-based economic system in direction of extra growth-oriented industries



comparable to expertise, tourism, and renewables, each China and Pakistan have the chance to extra strengthen their relations with the region. Going beyond the silo-centric energy cooperation, the new opportunities include joint investment in infrastructure projects, technology exchange, and cooperation in renewable energy are win-win strategies for sustainable development (Hertog, 2017). In this way, both nations can achieve the economic stimuli, which will contribute to the development of the Gulf's economy and, therefore, peace and stability within the region.

Similarly, security cooperation shapes one of the most vital aspects of the China-Pakistan relationship in the GCC's stability. Multilateral cooperation in interaction with terrorism, exchange of intelligence and military operations are crucial to deal with common challenges for instance, terrorism and piracy (Chung, 2018). Therefore, active participation in promoting security for the regions contributes not only to enhancing the relationship between China and Pakistan but also with a great effort in the Gulf area. This strategic approach evinces their determination for working for an improved balance of power in the region from the economic growth aspect and the security dilemma as well. Thus, as strategic partners China and Pakistan are capable of positing themselves as a cornerstone for the Gulf States' future prosperity and security, solidifying themselves as major stakeholders in the region's evolution.

#### **Conclusion:**

Consequently, the future dynamics of the China-Pakistan strategic partnership seem imbued with considerable potential in the ongoing process of redefining the contour of the gulf region in the years to come. Based on the factors of common interest in geostrategic security and supported by their intense economic partnership relations, this alignment is prepared to serve as one of the major stabilizing factors in the context of the complex geopolitical landscape of the Gulf. Positive synergy effects and additional strategic cooperation can enhance the two countries' power considerably while providing a valuable contribution to stabilizing, developing, and prospering the Gulf States. The subject of this paper, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and Pakistan are well-suited politically and economically since both nations' goals maintain a complex interdependence that goes beyond the diplomatic level, affecting the surroundings of the Gulf region as well. Infrastructure development, trade liberalization and technology integration, which are provided by the BRI, remain instrumental in fortifying the Gulf's connectivity and economy.

This cooperation combination does not only indicate the tempting material incentives but also sets up the Chinese and Pakistani strategic partnership roles in promoting sustainable development goals in the gulf region, which enhance the mutual opportunity economy circle. Furthermore, China also aligns with Pakistan to make a deviation from the hegemonic power structure in the gulf, and advocating for a new multipolar diplomacy. Therefore, through the propagation of policy of respecting other nations, avoiding entanglement with their internal affairs and the policy of reciprocity in business and economic relations, both nations can assist in reducing past conflicts and encourage interchange amongst the Persian Gulf states. At the same time, it enhances diplomatic relations and reiterates their determination to pursue peace, security, and stability in the region of the Gulf. Consequently, the development of the China-Pakistan strategic partnership contains the potential, in the future, for transforming the geopolitical dynamics of the Gulf by sustainably incorporating development cooperation and top-notch collaboration, along with a prosperous vision.

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