China's New Balancing Act: India-Pakistan

28 JUNE 2025

Frans Kress and Alexander Zell



Introduction

Sino-Pakistan relations form one of the most enduring and strategic alignments in indo-pacific politics, often characterized by their all-weather friendship, enduring trust-worthiness and non-interference. Having gained independence concurrently, and strengthened through mutual distrust toward India, the relationship now encompasses partnerships in defense, infrastructure, intelligence and energy. The relationship between Islamabad and Beijing has become ever-increasingly important due to China's rising

great power status and Pakistan's growing regional significance becoming a center point for South Asian politics.

Historical foundations

The foundations of Sino-Pakistan relations date back to China's independence, when Pakistan became the first Muslim-majority country to recognize China, having steadily deepened in subsequent decades. The relationship is further shaped and strengthened by shared distrust of Indian power in the region; an early example includes the 1963 Sino-Pakistan Karakoram boundary agreement condemned by India and a continued point of contention. The relations were intensified by the Indo-Pakistan wars in 1965 and 1971, reinforcing shared perceptions and alignment against India. Subsequent decades would see this alignment flourish into a healthy multi-faceted relationship expanding into military, economic and strategic realms.

Strategic and Military cooperations

Sino-Pakistan relationships from the 1980's onwards then largely became defined by Defense collaboration, with China emerging as Pakistan's largest arms supplier. The co-development of the JF-17 Thunder fighter jet in particularly, represented an unusually rare deep military-industrial cooperation in Chinese foreign policy (xx).

Furthermore, China is widely believed to have played a large role in the development of Pakistan's nuclear weapons program in the late 1980s to early 1990s, as a response to growing Indian capabilities. This is further evidenced by relatively mild condemnations from China in comparison to Western criticisms. Contemporaneously, military cooperation has expanded into areas of cybersecurity, counterterrorism and intelligence, such as the 2019 Balakot Airstrike crisis where Chinese analysts used the skirmish to evaluate Indian capabilities and own equipment performance.

Economic Engagement

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) represents the most transformative shift in the Sino-Pakistan relations, as a part of China's Belt and Road Initiaitve (BRI). CPEC represents a 60 billion dollar's worth of Chinese investments in Pakistani roads, railways, pipelines and energy projects granting China access to the Gwadar port on the Arabian sea.

The large infrastructural projects serve dual strategic purposes with China allowing it to mitigate the Malacca dilemma, by creating direct trade routes to the middle east, bypassing US-dominated sea routes. For Pakistan, the promise of economic rejuvenation through energy security improves connectivity. However, it is pertinent to note that the corridor runs through Gilgit-Baltistan, a contended region between India and Pakistan, making CPEC another major point of contention in these relations.

Strategic Logic

The Sino-Pakistani alliance is therefore shaped by the continued shared desire to balance India's regional power and influence. For China, Pakistan acts as a strategic buffer and a proxy for indirect global power competition. Furthermore, the persistent collaboration has allowed Beijing to perceive Pakistan as a reliable vassal for projecting its influence into South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Pakistan, in return benefits in Chinese military, economic and diplomatic support, particularly as relations with the US fluctuate.

The regular border skirmishes and rising regional power of India therefore makes Sino-Pakistani cooperation self-evident as the relationship is an example of power balancing. Power balancing motivations are evidenced by nuclear tests and collaboration in the aftermath of India's nuclear capacity building and co-development of military technology.

EPIS