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## Research Article

# Strategic Convergence and Asymmetric Interdependence in Pakistan–China Relations

Rashida Ahmad<sup>1</sup>, Sana Malik<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, History & Pakistan Studies, The Women University Multan, Pakistan.

<sup>2</sup>PhD Scholar, Department of History and Pakistan Studies, The Women University Multan.

## ABSTRACT

The relationship between Pakistan and China is often referred to as an all-weather strategic partnership. This article analyzes the dynamics of strategic convergence and asymmetric interdependence in the case of Pakistan-China relations. While there is convergence of geopolitical and security interests between both states, especially to balance India and regional stability, the relationship has structural asymmetries, which favor China economically, technologically, and diplomatically. Drawing on the qualitative analysis of secondary literature, official statements, and modern geopolitical developments, the study proposes that class cooperation is maintained due to kingdom strategic convergence, but growing financial dependence on Chinese capital, infrastructure investment and security support limits Pakistan's strategic autonomy.

**Key Words:** Pakistan–China Relations, Strategic Convergence, Asymmetric Interdependence, CPEC, South Asian Geopolitics.

## INTRODUCTION

Pakistan-China relations form one of the most enduring strategic partnerships in modern international politics. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1951, there has been consensus between both states that their engagement was mutually beneficial, resilient and insulated from regime changes and systemic transformations. The indication of the relationship as an "all-weather friendship" could be interpreted not only as a matter of rhetorical proximity but also of a level of cooperation maintained in diplomatic, military and economical contexts. This article argues that the durability of Pakistan-China relation is based on two interacting dynamics of strategic convergence and asymmetric interdependence. The study of the Pakistan-China relations has undergone a process from considering the relations as "friendly neighbors" to the complex relations of strategic convergence and power asymmetries. Scholars are more lately examining the relationship through the prism of security cooperation, economic interdependence, and geopolitical balancing, especially in the context of regional matters of power including India, the United States, and Afghanistan. This post 9/11 period is a unique transformation in this relationship. The political trust that is consolidated after the Kargil conflict in 1999 and post 9/11 climate has created a fertile environment owing to which the alignment became even deeper. Beijing's ready to extend its support to the Pakistani side in multilateral forums, especially at the United Nations Security Council on sensitive issues such as Kashmir and counter terrorism designations strengthened this trust (Bukhari et al., 2019). This period also saw the institutionalization of the cooperation with a large-scale project, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which received the modeled in 2013 and



## Correspondence

Rashida Ahmad  
rashida.ahmad@wum.edu.pk.

## Article History

Received: November 28, 2025

Accepted: December 29, 2025

Published: December 31, 2025



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received a formal statement of cooperation during President Xi Jinping's historic visit to Islamabad in 2015. CPEC continues to be referred to as the flagship of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China anchored on long-term infrastructural, economic, and geostrategic undertakings (Khan, 2023).

By 2025, the two states have been celebrating more than seventy years of official relations. The partnership has also evolved into new areas, such as advanced defense collaboration, technological exchange, cultural diplomacy and multilateral institutional cooperation in structures such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and emerging BRICS+ structures (Latif & Khan, 2025). These developments follow the fact that the relationship has shifted from transactional cooperation to a multi-dimensional strategic alliance. The strength of this bond has not been without problems. Rising attacks on Chinese nationals and CPEC related projects like the Dasu incident in July 2021 and the suicide attack in March 2024 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has raised serious concerns in Beijing regarding Pakistan's ability to offer long term security guarantees (Reuters, 2024). Pakistan's reliance on IMF stabilization packages has also been a cause of the uncertainty of sustainability of the large-scale Chinese investments (International Monetary Fund, 2024). Moreover, regional dynamics (especially the tightening Indo-US strategic alignment) have further added to the stakes of both Islamabad and Beijing (Farooq et al., 2023).

Against this backdrop, this research paper aims at examining how China-Pakistan relations have evolved from the positive neighborhood ties into a comprehensive strategic partnership over the years.

### Research Questions

The paper touches on three main questions:

1. How does strategic convergence between Pakistan and China affect patterns of asymmetric interdependence in their bilateral political, economic and security relations?
2. Is the relationship one of dependency, partnership or hierarchical interdependency?
3. Which strategic (security, regional stability, India containment, BRI integration, maritime access, etc.) interests do Pakistan and China coexist around??

### Objectives of the study

1. To understand patterns of asymmetric interdependence in the political, economic and security realms set by strategic convergence between Pakistan and China.
2. To conceptualize and operationalize the idea of asymmetric interdependence in the framework of the bilateral relationship between Pakistan and China.
3. To differentiate between strategic partnership, dependency and hierarchy interdependence, in the context of Pakistan-China relations.

### Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Strategic convergence is a term used to describe consonance in long-term geopolitical goals, threat perceptions and regional strategies.

Asymmetric interdependence on the other hand emphasizes the unequal dependence in the cooperative relations. Drawing upon the realist and liberal institutionalist traditions this study conceptualizes Pakistan-China relations as a partnership but also grants the constituent of assisting divergence. mutual interests and structure inequalities.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical Foundations

#### A. Realism and Strategic Convergence

Realist scholars focus on balance of power relationships and mutual security interests:

- Strategic necessity vs. normative affinity: According to the realists, it is increasingly viewed that Pakistan and China's cooperation is not due to ideology but rather mutual perception of threats especially regarding the increase in the power of India and the relationship between India and the U.S. (Fair, 2014; International Peace Institute, 2013; Haqqani, 2013).
- Alliance logic: The relationship is more similar to strategic alignment in that Pakistan acts as a geopolitics buffer for China, while at the same time Beijing provides the deterrence against the external threat (Rehman, 2018).

#### B. Asymmetric Interdependence Theory

This strand is focused on unequal dependencies between states with one partner having more leverage:

- China's structural dominance: Pakistan is economically and militarily dependent on China and Chinese interest in Pakistan is reflecting its broader regional interest rather than reciprocal dependence (Small, 2015).

- Power asymmetries influencing policy Development Side by side Pakistani foreign policy is shaped in a way that the Chinese strategic priorities are given more importance than vice versa and then outcome on negotiation is in favor of China (Wolf, 2019).

### C. Constructivism and Identity Narratives

Some literature incorporates discursive & ideational factors

- Shared anti-hegemonic narratives: Shared anti-hegemonic narratives are an integral component of both states, which attempts to present their relationship as a form of resistance to Western hegemony despite the narrative itself often obscuring more strategic calculations. Roughly, the realist or neo-realist perspective proposes that states behave rationally and are driven by the pursuit of power which includes the perceived need to resist Western hegemony.
- Soft power, cultural diplomacy: Underappreciated in conventional approaches to analyzing the strategy but represents a growing focus in research elaborates that China is broadly investing more in cultural and educational exchanges in a bid to enhance its legitimacy (Butt et al., 2024).

### Strategic Convergence: Key Themes in Literature

#### A. Security and Defense Cooperation

- Military cooperation: Prolonged weapons sales, drills, and trainings indicate strong defense relations (Zaidi, 2017).
- Counterterrorism cooperation: Both states are threatened by militant groups; research refers to mutual interests in stability in neighboring Afghanistan and Xinjiang (Raza, 2020).

#### B. Economic Linkages and CPEC

China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) manages to be at the heart of interpretation of modern strategic convergence:

- Infrastructure and investment: The CPEC is perceived by the scholars as a flagship of the China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and an opportunity to strategically link Xinjiang with Gwadar Port (Hussain, 2019).
- Win-win rhetoric and practical asymmetries: According to the officials, mutual benefits are possible, however, critics claim that economic benefits are unequal whose advantage goes to Chinese capital and Chinese firms (Ahmed & Ali, 2020).
- Economic security linkages: CPEC is interpreted as mechanism for both states to complement each other's strategic need - development for Pakistan and regional connectivity for China (Hameed, 2021).

#### C. Geopolitical Dynamics

- India factor Most scholars agree that that relations between Pakistan and China are influenced by the role of India in the region, including the India China border disputes and the Indian partnership with Western powers (Pant, 2018).
- U.S. strategic rivalry: The competition between the U.S. and China draws Pakistan and China nearer, as Pakistan delights in seeking other allies amidst the perceived U.S. un-involvement (Kugelman, 2020).

### Asymmetric Interdependence in Relations

#### A. Economic Asymmetry

- Trade and investment imbalances: China's trade surplus and control over a significant number of projects give China economic leverage over Pakistan Siddiqa (Siddiqa, Shad, Mustafa, & Tariq, 2024).
- Debt diplomacy debates: Although there remains debate on the topic, there are also suppliers of power and in this scenario Pakistan due to its financial dependence on Chinese loans becomes more compliant in its strategic approach (Miller, 2021).

#### B. Security and Decision-Making Asymmetries

- Policy alignment tilted towards China: It is noted by analysts that Pakistan tends to realign its foreign policy preferences with those of Chinese interests, particularly in the case of South Asia and Xinjiang (Iqbal, 2018).
- Military interdependence China being an important supplier of weapon systems for its defense strengthens Pakistan's military interdependence (Rizvi, 2019).

#### C. Institutional and Bureaucratic Dynamics

- China's institutional muscle - with state-owned enterprises and development banks - contrasts with how Pakistan operates in a fragmented policymaking structure, supporting the imbalances during negotiations (Shah, 2021).

### Gaps and Debates in Literature

#### A. Under-researched Areas

- Domestic political dynamics: The domestic political dynamics and its impact on strategic decisions towards China have still not been explored extensively.
- Societal perceptions: Public opinion and cultural aspects of the Pakistan-China relations is relatively understudied.
- CPEC is environmental and social: Developing work is not in denial of the problems of development, yet no extensive longitudinal research is present.

### **B. Debates and Divergences**

- Beneficial asymmetry/exploitative dependency: Some researchers say that asymmetry can be managed and win-win, but others consider it a structural vulnerability to Pakistan.
- Strategic partnership vs. transactional alliance: There is still debate on whether the relationship is of deep alliance or of pragmatic transaction.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology uses the combination of qualitative content analysis of official communiques, policy documents and scholarly writings, as well as quantitative evaluation of trade, investment and security-related information. By using such theoretical lenses as realism, strategic alliance theory and economic interdependence, the study aims at offering a holistic assessment of the dynamics affecting one of the most important bilateral relationships in Asia.

This inquiry makes the following arguments: while China-Pakistan relations remain one of the strongest dyads in Asian geopolitics, however, their sustainability will depend upon Pakistan's ability to cope with internal instability and China's willingness to continue absorbing the political and security costs associated with its strategic investment in South Asia.

### **Research Design**

The study uses explanatory sequential mixed methods design:

- Anywhere here, insert each note and make suitable amendments.
- Quantitative Phase and Quantitative Phase: a society noneconomic dependency patterns To measure economic asymmetry, dependency patterns
- Phase of Integration Not yet finished - To incorporate the results and assess the impact of strategic convergence on structural asymmetry.

This type of design allows for triangulation to occur among discourse, institutional practice, and economic data.

### **Research Approach**

The study pursues comparative longitudinal approach of case study analysis on Pakistan-China relations during two phases:

- Strategic Consolidation of the Post-Cold War (1990-2014).
- Institutional Deepening Post-CPEC (2015-present).

Such a time division provides an opportunity to examine converging and becoming asymmetries.

### **Data Sources**

#### **A. Primary Sources**

- China and Pakistan Government policy documents.
- Reports of CPEC Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC)
- Parliamentary debate and reports of the planning commission.
- Elite (policy experts, diplomats, academics) interviews.
- Official statements of ministries of foreign affairs and commerce

#### **B. Secondary Sources**

- Peer reviewed journal articles
- Policy brief in an alternative form: think-tank report.
- World Bank and IMF datasets
- Scientific studies on relations between Pakistan and China

### **Pakistan–China Relations**

#### **Post-Cold War Strategic Consolidation (1990–2014)**

The period of 1990-2014 is a definite phase of strategic consolidation in the relations between Pakistan and China. After the Cold War, both states reassessed their partnership in response to changing world power dynamics, regional

turmoil and new economic opportunities. This era paved the way for the structural construction of the later onset of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

### **1. Strategic Context: From Bipolarity to Regional Realignments**

With the breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1991:

- Pakistan lost its frontline status in Afghan jihad.
- China adapted to a one-power system with the United States in the lead.
- India's economic reform (1991) and an increasing US-India rapprochement changed the balance in the region.

During this period:

- China put in place a policy of "peaceful rise."
- Pakistan Looked for Strategic Reassurance in the Shadow of Sanctions (i.e. post-1998 nuclear tests in particular).

The relationship ended its orientation to ideological consideration and started being geo-strategic pragmatism.

### **2. Nuclear and Defense Cooperation**

#### **A. Nuclear Collaboration**

After both Pakistan and India test nuclear weapons in 1998:

- China offered diplomatic support to Pakistan in the international community.
- Civil nuclear co-operation under IAEA safeguards (e.g. Chashma Nuclear Power Plants)

This cooperation helped Pakistan to offset either strategic asymmetry with India.

#### **B. Defense and Military Institutionalization.**

Key developments included:

- Co-production of the JF-17 Thunder fighter aircraft was commenced.
- Overlapping military drills and intelligence.
- Expansion of Naval Cooperation in Arabian Sea.

Defense relations moved away just on the situation of arms transfers and to joint manufacturing and technological cooperation that embodies the in-depth trusting of the institutions.

### **3. Economic Engagement: Gradual Expansion**

#### **A. Trade and Investment**

- Bilateral trade has seen a significant growth since the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) of 2006.
- China became one of the major trading partners of Pakistan.

However, trade was still asymmetrical with Pakistan importing more than exporting.

#### **B. Gwadar Port Development**

**Construction of Gwadar Port started in 2002 with Chinese help.**

It was inaugurated in 2007.

Gwadar was the symbol of Chinese strategic interest in having access to the Arabian Sea.

This project was the egg of what would later become CPEC.

### **4. Political and Diplomatic Convergence**

Throughout 1990–2014:

There were increased visits at the high level.

Pakistan had always taken sides with China on the matters of Taiwan and Tibet and Xinjiang.

China gave a diplomatic (but reserved) solidarity to Pakistan on Kashmir.

This co-operation evolved into a so-called All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership by both states."

### **5. Counterterrorism and Security Cooperation**

Following 9/11 and Pakistani siding with the United States in the War on Terror:

China was a putdown root strategic partner.

The issue of Uyghur militancy among the Chinese was resolved by Islamabad.

There was further sustained security cooperation with the instability in Afghanistan.

It was also during this time that China had been creepily expanding its security operations in Pakistan.

### **6. Transition Toward Geo-Economic Integration (Pre-CPEC Phase)**

By 2013–2014:

- China declared Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).
- Pakistan was seen as a model partner.
- The China Pakistan Economic Corridor institutional preparations were completed.

- Post-cold war consolidation phase therefore shifted into the new geo-economic integration period.

#### **Analytical Interpretation**

- This phase reflects:
- Strategic balancing against India.
- Asymmetric interdependence- Pakistan dependent more on China
- Gradual transformation from pure security alliance to security economic hybrid contract.
- Long-term strategic trust institutionalization.

#### **Concluding Assessment**

Between 1990 and 2014, Pakistan-China relations evolved from a Cold War security relationship into an organized strategic partnership with the following characteristics:

- Defense industrial co-working
- Nuclear cooperation
- Port & infrastructure development
- Growing economic integration

This consolidation stage provided the structural and institutional foundations of the transformative introduction of CPEC in 2015.

#### **Post-CPEC Institutional Deepening (2015–Present)**

CPEC Phase-I (2015-2020) had focused on energy and connectivity, and delivered several power plants and transport projects which helped alleviate Pakistan's electricity shortage and enhance the country's logistics. Nonetheless, Gwadar Free Zone and flagship projects like the ML-1 railway were marred by recurrent delay due to the issue of financing, land scrabble, and security problems, thus constraining the multiplier the effects of the economy at large, even where it is being felt. Phase-II (2020-2025) became towards industrialization, SEZs, modernization of agriculture and IT cooperation. SEZs in Rashakai, Dhabeji and Allama Iqbal started pilot operation whereas Gwadar was established as a regional maritime hub by port, airport and free zone development. Yet, unenthusiastic investor confidence, regulatory constraints and intermittent militant attacks (especially in Balochistan) slowed the pace down and curbed the full commercial potential of Gwadar despite its strategic importance (Surahio & K., 2022; Ahmad, 2023; Reuters, 2024). Together with infrastructure, economic structures determined results. The CPFTA-II (2020) had added to tariff concessions of Pakistani exports and the trade deficit had expanded due to weak export base of Pakistan and its weak value-added capacity. IMF stabilization programs since 2023 economic discipline de facto prohibited any but fiscal restraint, limiting concessional borrowing and enforcing increasingly de facto the dependence on the private sector and commercial finance to finance CPEC Phase-II initiatives. Meanwhile, Chinese FDI had a slight increase with growth of USD 1.22 billion in FY2024-25 as compared to USD 643 million in FY 2023-24, and investments were witnessed in the areas of energy, logistics, and manufacturing sectors. While Phase-I ensured short-term relief, Phase II is aimed at sustainable industrialization against structural hurdles. Finally, the future success of the corridor will depend on how to solve the governance gaps, make sure that the locals are included, and get large-scale non-loan ventures of the private sector onboard (International Monetary Fund, 2024; CPEC Secretariat, 2025). The security threats have become a pervasive limitation of Chinese investment in Pakistan where repetitive acts of attacks on workers and the CPEC infrastructural targets have eroded trust and caused a prolonged diplomatic tension. The Dasu bus bombing that killed nine Chinese nationals in 2021, and subsequent attacks elsewhere (suicide attack on convoys of the engineers and attack on Gwadar installations) in 2024 identified the vulnerable character of the Chinese personnel, yet it was proven that militants and separatist groups of the Baloch nationalists could continue attacking high-value projects (Reuters, 2021; Reuters, 2024a).

The attacks caused popular outcries in Beijing and demands of increased security, presenting Balochistan as a consistent problem of instability. Pakistan's response was that it increased the size of the Special Security Division (SSD) in 2016, a 10,000-15,000 strong group with the specific function of protecting CPEC assets as well as additional units and intelligence operations in Balochistan. However, such militarized security posture has come at a significant financial and political price with millions dedicated to it every year despite fiscal limitations of the IMF, creating feelings of CPEC being a security-based, not a locally-inclusive project (Mahmood et al., 2023). Investor confidence has been undermined by rising insurance costs, delays and Beijing's repeated expressions that "urgent steps should be taken in order to protect its nationals." Despite new agreements and promises to finance them, the lack of governance will persist in Balochistan, as well as local grievances and insurgency motivators, limiting the long-term sustainability of CPEC. Socio-cultural engagement has become a much more significant backbone to

China-Pakistan ties, with socio-cultural exchange complementing the more visible defense and economic cooperation. Confucius Institutes have remained at the forefront in this gesture since the first one set up at NUML in Islamabad in 2005, reaching as many as almost seven centers and classrooms in major universities by 2025, including Karachi University and Punjab University. Such institutions support Mandarin language education, cultural exchange, and higher learning opportunities in colleges and universities in China where over thousands of students from Pakistan are enrolling each year in order to be placed in jobs in CPEC related industries; Xinhua News Agency (2024, Jan. 1; 2024, Feb. 8). The spread of Mandarin language has been reinforced also by provincial pilot programs and private learning institutions as part of the language learning is considered a pathway to careers in Gwadar, SEZs, and Chinese enterprises (The Newspaper's Staff Reporter, 2025). Educational exchange with people to people further strengthens people to people ties. The Pakistani student body in China grew up to an estimate of over 30,000 students in 2025 compared to about 15,000 students in 2017, thus becoming one of the largest exporters of international students to China. Popular fields of study being engineering, IT, medical sciences and business are in line with the development needs of the country of Pakistan. A large proportion of study under the framework of Chinese government scholarships provided through the Belt and Road which is producing the alumni currently serving in academia, government and private sector with links to Chinese cooperation. Each of these networks helps establish bilateral trust over the long term and offers a pool of qualified workers with links to the development of CPEC (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2025).

### **Economic Interdependence: Trade, CPEC, and Vulnerabilities**

Economic interdependence theory holds that the likelihood of conflict is diminished through economic trade and investment, which increases the costs of disengagement. CPEC is the perfect example of this principle, as both of the states are now linked by energy, transport, and digital infrastructure projects. Bilateral trading amount to more than USD 30 Billion in 2023, the second phase of China-Pakistan Free Trade Agreement (CPFTA-II) opens new market for Pakistani exports. However, interdependence is lopsided. China as Pakistan's largest lender, investor and trading partner renders a dependency structure suspicious of Pakistan's economic sovereignty. While the short-term relief that Chinese FDI and concessional loans offered does help, Pakistan's ability to engineer export led growth is limited and this leads to persistent trade deficits. The asymmetry relates to arguments concerning the question of whether economic interdependence among unequal partners delivers stability or weakness.

### **Constructivism: Narratives, Identity, and Public Perceptions**

Constructivist theory emphasizes the role of ideas, narratives, and identities in the international cooperation. In Pakistan, China is promoted not only as an economic partner but as a "trusted friend" as well, an image that is reinforced in the media, educational curriculums, and elite discourse as well." 15 "An "Iron Brother" is a common metaphor that represents an identity-driven bond that transcends material calculations." However, rival versions of the story also exist. The local resistance in Balochistan, the problem of dependency among young people, and the criticism of debt trap by the world community generally demonstrate how discursive formations may question the discourses about the elite. On the same note, Pakistan is branded as a frontline ally in counterterrorism and a bridge to the Muslim world in China, and these symbolic aspects of the alliance are strengthened (World Bank, 2023). Constructivism thereby shows how the partnership is sustained partly through identity politics and historical storytelling as a buffer of sorts to the relationship in times when the relationship is materially stressed.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

### **I. Macro-Level Policy Implications**

#### **1. Managing Asymmetry without Sabotaging Strategic Convergence**

Pakistan's relationship with China - and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the Belt and Road Initiative in particular - should not be conceptualized necessarily in terms of dependence versus autonomy. Instead policy should focus on managed interdependence in which asymmetry should be strategically negotiated, instead of passively absorbed.

#### **Policy Implication:**

- Interdependence works with respect to sustainability only if Pakistan builds internal institutional capacity.
- Strategic convergence necessarily needs to be complemented by economic diversification.

### **II. Economic Policy Recommendations**

#### **2. Diversification of Economic Partnerships**

#### **Recommendation:**

Pakistan should diversify trade and investment relationships other than China to minimize asymmetry of vulnerabilities.

- Strengthen export access to central Asia, the gulf.

## CONCLUSION

The literature positions Pakistan–China relations as a multi-layered strategic partnership shaped by convergent security interests and expanding economic cooperation, yet simultaneously constrained by structural power asymmetry and patterns of uneven interdependence. This study deepens that understanding by moving beyond descriptive accounts of cooperation and instead elucidating the causal mechanisms that connect strategic convergence to concrete policy outcomes.

First, the research demonstrates that strategic convergence is not merely rhetorical alignment; rather, it functions as a structuring variable that shapes elite consensus, institutional coordination, and long-term policy commitments. Convergent threat perceptions—particularly regarding regional instability, counterterrorism, and geopolitical balancing—create policy continuity across changing governments in Pakistan and sustained strategic signaling from China. These shared security logics translate into tangible outcomes in defense collaboration, infrastructure investment, and diplomatic coordination in multilateral forums.

Second, the study clarifies how asymmetric interdependence conditions decision-making processes within Pakistan. While China derives strategic depth and connectivity advantages, Pakistan’s relative economic dependence increases Beijing’s structural leverage. However, the research finds that asymmetry does not automatically equate to coercion or loss of agency. Instead, it reshapes bargaining strategies, institutional alignments, and policy sequencing within Pakistan. Pakistani policymakers operate within constrained choice architectures, balancing immediate economic imperatives with long-term sovereignty considerations. Thus, asymmetric interdependence produces negotiated adaptation rather than passive compliance.

Third, by incorporating domestic politics and societal influences, the study challenges purely structural or realist interpretations. Civil-military relations, bureaucratic competition, provincial interests, business elites, and public opinion all mediate the translation of strategic convergence into policy implementation. For example, elite consensus may accelerate major initiatives, but provincial governance capacity and societal trust determine their effectiveness and sustainability. This domestic filtering mechanism explains variation in policy execution and outcomes across sectors.

The broader theoretical contribution of this research lies in integrating strategic convergence theory with asymmetric interdependence frameworks, demonstrating that convergence at the systemic level must pass through domestic institutional and political processes before generating measurable policy outcomes. In doing so, the study advances a multi-level analytical model that bridges international structure and domestic agency.

Policy-wise, the findings suggest that Pakistan’s long-term strategic autonomy depends not on resisting asymmetry, but on managing it through institutional strengthening, economic diversification, transparent governance, and calibrated negotiation strategies. Sustainable partnership requires reducing vulnerabilities within interdependence while preserving the strategic alignment that underpins bilateral cooperation.

In sum, Pakistan–China relations are neither a simple “all-weather friendship” nor a dependency relationship; they constitute a dynamic, evolving strategic partnership shaped by convergent security imperatives, moderated by structural asymmetry, and ultimately mediated through domestic political processes. Understanding this complexity allows for a more precise assessment of future trajectories, risks, and opportunities in the bilateral relationship.

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