



China Pakistan Strategic Partnership: An Examination of Defense Cooperation and Security Implications

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Abstract

The China-Pakistan strategic partnership has matured into a robust and multidimensional alliance, with defense cooperation emerging as a central pillar of bilateral engagement. This study critically examines the evolving military collaboration between China and Pakistan, focusing on key dimensions such as joint defense production, arms transfers, intelligence sharing, counterterrorism coordination, and joint military exercises. Drawing on qualitative methods, including the analysis of official policy documents, defense agreements, and expert interviews, the research assesses how this partnership shapes Pakistan's defense capabilities and strategic outlook. Special attention is given to the implications for regional security dynamics in South Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region, particularly in relation to India's strategic posture and the growing involvement of the United States. The study further explores Pakistan's increasing reliance on Chinese military assistance and its consequences for national sovereignty, defense modernization, and strategic autonomy. Findings indicate that while the partnership significantly bolsters Pakistan's military preparedness and deterrence capacity, it simultaneously exacerbates geopolitical tensions, potentially undermining regional stability. The paper concludes by offering policy recommendations aimed at enhancing the strategic utility of this partnership for Pakistan, while advocating for a balanced approach that safeguards national interests amid shifting regional and global power configurations.

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1. Introduction

The China-Pakistan strategic partnership has emerged as a pivotal alliance in the geopolitical landscape of South Asia. Rooted in historical ties, mutual interests, and shared strategic objectives, this relationship has evolved into a multifaceted partnership encompassing economic, political, and military cooperation (Small, 2015) ^[40]. Among these dimensions, defense cooperation has remained a cornerstone of their bilateral ties, significantly influencing regional security dynamics. Given Pakistan's longstanding security concerns, particularly vis-à-vis India, and China's growing strategic ambitions, the partnership has led to an increasingly robust military alliance that includes arms trade, joint defense production, intelligence sharing, and joint military exercises (Garlick, 2021; Rehman, 2021) ^[8, 33].

China and Pakistan established formal diplomatic relations in 1951, and their defense cooperation dates back to the early 1960s, following Pakistan's deteriorating ties with the United States and India's growing alignment with the Soviet Union (Sial, 2020) ^[36]. Since then, Beijing has played a crucial role in modernizing Pakistan's military capabilities. The China-Pakistan defense partnership has been characterized by extensive arms transfers, with China supplying Pakistan with aircraft, tanks, naval vessels,

and missile technology (Tellis, 2020; Joshi, 2021) ^[41, 15]. The 1990s saw further consolidation of this partnership, particularly after the U.S. imposed sanctions on Pakistan in response to its nuclear program, prompting Islamabad to deepen its reliance on Beijing for military hardware and technological support (Kronstadt, 2009; Khan, 2022) ^[20, 18]. China has become Pakistan's primary arms supplier, accounting for approximately 63% of Pakistan's total arms imports between 2010 and 2020 (SIPRI, 2021; Ahmed, 2023) ^[3]. The co-production of military assets, such as the JF-17 Thunder fighter aircraft and the Al-Khalid tank, demonstrates the depth of technological collaboration between the two nations (Malik, 2021; Mustafa, 2022) ^[21, 26]. Additionally, China has provided advanced missile systems and naval frigates, bolstering Pakistan's strategic deterrence capabilities (Singh, 2022; Raza, 2023) ^[37, 31]. The two countries have engaged in extensive intelligence sharing and counterterrorism cooperation, particularly in combating separatist elements and extremist groups along their shared borders (Chaudhury, 2020; Yousaf, 2022) ^[6, 46]. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has further deepened security ties, with China investing in Pakistan's security infrastructure to safeguard its interests in the region (Wolf, 2019; Abbas, 2021) ^[43, 1]. The growing military cooperation between China and Pakistan has significant geopolitical implications, particularly concerning India and the United States. India perceives the China-Pakistan nexus as a direct challenge to its security, leading to increased military modernization and strategic partnerships with the U.S. (Pant, 2021; Sharma, 2022) ^[27, 34]. Furthermore, China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean through Gwadar Port and its military cooperation with Pakistan has raised concerns about a shift in the regional balance of power (Rajagopalan, 2021; Hussain, 2023) ^[29, 9].

Literature Review

Scholarly research on the strategic alliance between China and Pakistan has been thorough, with a particular emphasis on defense cooperation as a key component of their bilateral relationship. According to scholars, this alliance is based on shared geopolitical goals, specifically combating Western dominance in South Asia and striking a balance against regional rivals like India (Small, 2015; Garver, 2006) ^[40]. Over the years, defense cooperation has expanded to include intelligence sharing, arms transfers, joint military exercises, and defense technology cooperation (Tellis, 2013) ^[49]. According to research, Pakistan has become more and more dependent on Chinese military assistance for modernizing its defenses, including the joint manufacturing of cutting-edge weapons such as navy frigates and the JF-17 Thunder fighter jet (Cordesman & Lin, 2011) ^[50].

Additionally, academics point out that this collaboration has geopolitical implications since it both contributes to regional security challenges and arms races and strengthens strategic stability in South Asia (Pant, 2012) ^[51]. In the context of the U.S.-China rivalry, where Pakistan is viewed as a crucial node in China's Belt and Road Initiative and its military outreach plan, the literature also highlights the alliance's wider ramifications (Scobell *et al.*, 2015) ^[52].

The China-Pakistan strategic partnership has been extensively studied from multiple perspectives, including military cooperation, economic engagement, and regional security implications. Scholars have explored the historical evolution of the partnership, its defense collaborations, and

the broader geopolitical shifts arising from this alliance. One of the primary areas of research has focused on the historical context of China-Pakistan relations. According to Khalid (2020) ^[16], the foundation of this relationship was laid in the early 1950s and strengthened following the 1962 Sino-Indian War, as both nations found a common adversary in India. Similarly, Hussain (2019) ^[10] argues that the geopolitical realignment during the Cold War prompted China and Pakistan to develop strong defense ties, which were further solidified through arms transfers and military cooperation.

Another major theme in the literature is the military collaboration between China and Pakistan. Bashir (2021) ^[5] highlights that China has played a critical role in modernizing Pakistan's defense industry, particularly through the transfer of technology and joint military projects such as the JF-17 fighter aircraft and the Al-Khalid tank. Likewise, Zhao (2022) ^[47] discusses China's assistance in developing Pakistan's missile program, which has significantly enhanced Pakistan's strategic deterrence capabilities. Alam and Hanif (2023) ^[4] further note the increasing role of joint military exercises in strengthening interoperability between the two armed forces, fostering deeper strategic ties.

Additionally, security cooperation has been analyzed in relation to counterterrorism efforts. According to Ahmed and Saleem (2021) ^[2], intelligence sharing and joint operations against militant groups have strengthened the security apparatus in both countries. The role of CPEC in enhancing security ties is also widely discussed. Khan (2022) ^[18] argues that China's investment in Pakistan's infrastructure is closely linked to its strategic security interests, as Beijing seeks to secure its trade routes and counter separatist movements in Xinjiang. Iqbal (2023) ^[12] highlights the presence of Chinese security personnel in Pakistan, underscoring China's growing role in Pakistan's internal security affairs. Furthermore, the geopolitical implications of China-Pakistan defense cooperation have been widely debated. Javaid (2023) ^[14] contends that the strengthening of this alliance has led to strategic anxieties in India, prompting New Delhi to enhance its military capabilities and deepen defense cooperation with the United States. Likewise, Mehta (2022) ^[24] highlights the concerns of Western policymakers regarding China's growing military footprint in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, which has potential implications for U.S. strategic interests in the region.

In general, the scholarly discourse currently in existence confirms that the defense relationship between China and Pakistan is a strategic response to the dynamics of regional security, influenced by realpolitik and mutual strategic necessity.

Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, utilizing a combination of historical analysis, case studies, and content analysis of primary and secondary sources. Historical analysis helps trace the evolution of China-Pakistan defense cooperation, while case studies of key military agreements and joint ventures provide empirical insights. Content analysis of official statements, policy documents, and expert analyses strengthens the study's findings (Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2021) ^[7, 45].

The theoretical framework is grounded in the Structural Realist (Neorealist) theory of international relations, which emphasizes power dynamics, strategic interests, and security imperatives in state behavior (Mearsheimer, 2001) ^[23].

Specifically, Offensive Realism provides the best lens for analyzing China-Pakistan defense cooperation, as it posits that states seek to maximize their power to ensure security and deter potential threats (Mearsheimer, 2001) ^[23]. The Balance of Power theory further contextualizes China-Pakistan defense collaboration as a counterweight to India's growing military capabilities and U.S. influence in South Asia (Waltz, 1979) ^[42].

Applying Structural Realism to the China-Pakistan Strategic Partnership: Defense Cooperation and Security Implications

Structural Realism (Neorealism), which emphasizes the anarchic character of the international system and the importance of power in influencing state behavior, can be used to analyze the China-Pakistan strategic partnership, especially in the area of defense cooperation (Mearsheimer, 2001) ^[23]. According to this viewpoint, China and Pakistan pursue their military cooperation because of their common strategic interests in balancing against perceived threats, particularly from the US and India, rather than because they share the same ideology or set of principles. Pakistan uses cooperative production, intelligence sharing, and its reliance on Chinese military equipment to strengthen its security and ward off regional enemies. For China, bolstering Pakistan's defense capabilities meshes with its broader goal of restraining Indian influence in South Asia and defending its western front under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Thus, the China-Pakistan defense nexus embodies structural realist logic, where power balancing and security maximization drive geopolitical alignments in a competitive and uncertain international environment.

Analyzing China-Pakistan Defense Cooperation through the Lens of Offensive Realism

Offensive realism provides a convincing foundation for comprehending the changing strategic collaboration between China and Pakistan, especially when it comes to defense cooperation. Offensive Realism, which has its roots in the idea that states must rely on self-help to survive in anarchic international systems, contends that great powers are compelled to use their relative strength to protect their interests as a nation and ward off possible enemies (Mearsheimer, 2001) ^[23]. Using this perspective, China's growing military cooperation with Pakistan, which includes frequent military drills, technology transfers, intelligence sharing, and cooperative arms production, might be interpreted as a calculated attempt to offset India's regional domination and project strength in South Asia. By increasing its defense capabilities and lowering its reliance on Western nations, Pakistan can improve its deterrence stance against India by forging closer connections with China. This collaboration reflects a larger realist calculation of regional power balancing and strategic hedging in addition to improving both states' military capabilities. In the conclusion, Offensive Realism offers a convincing justification for the strengthening of defense relations between China and Pakistan as a logical reaction to changing power structures and persistent security issues in the Indo-Pacific area.

Applying Balance of Power Theory to the China-Pakistan Strategic Partnership: Defense Cooperation and Security Implications

In the larger framework of South Asian security dynamics,

the Balance of Power theory provides an essential analytical foundation for comprehending the strategic depth of China-Pakistan defense cooperation. This idea, which has its roots in neorealist philosophy, holds that states should bolster their military capabilities and build alliances in order to keep any one power from gaining regional or global domination (Waltz, 1979) ^[42]. India's growing military might and the US strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific are purposefully offset by the China-Pakistan defense relationship, which includes cooperative arms development, military training, intelligence sharing, and counterterrorism cooperation. China improves Pakistan's security stance against a traditionally superior India by acting as an essential external balancer. China has strategic leverage against India, a major Asian rival, thanks to its close defense relations with Pakistan. The China-Pakistan military partnership reflects a balance of power strategy aimed at countering regional threats and shifting geopolitical dynamics.

Discussion

Historical Evolution of China-Pakistan Defense Cooperation

The China-Pakistan defense relationship has evolved over decades, rooted in shared geopolitical interests and security concerns. Following the 1962 Sino-Indian War, China and Pakistan strengthened military ties to counterbalance India's growing influence in the region (Small, 2015) ^[40]. During the Cold War, both nations found common ground in resisting Soviet influence in South Asia, further cementing their alliance (Hussain, 2019) ^[10]. The U.S. imposed military sanctions on Pakistan in the 1990s, forcing Islamabad to seek alternative defense suppliers, with China stepping in to fill the gap (Kronstadt, 2009) ^[20]. Since then, China has become Pakistan's largest defense supplier, providing critical military technology and weaponry (SIPRI, 2021).

Military and Technological Collaboration

China's role in modernizing Pakistan's military capabilities has been a cornerstone of their strategic partnership. This cooperation includes joint ventures in defense production, such as the development of the JF-17 Thunder fighter aircraft, co-produced by the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex and China's Chengdu Aircraft Industry Group (Malik, 2021) ^[21]. Additionally, China has played a key role in Pakistan's missile development program, supplying advanced ballistic and cruise missile technology (Singh, 2022) ^[37].

Pakistan's naval capabilities have also benefited significantly from Chinese assistance. The acquisition of Type 054A/P frigates and Hangor-class submarines has enhanced Pakistan's maritime security and deterrence posture in the Indian Ocean (Raza, 2023) ^[31]. These advancements serve to counterbalance India's naval expansion and assert Pakistan's role in regional security (Mehta, 2022) ^[24].

Strategic Implications for South Asia

The growing defense cooperation between China and Pakistan has significantly altered the strategic landscape of South Asia. India views this partnership as a direct security threat, leading to increased military modernization and strategic alliances with the United States and other regional powers (Pant, 2021) ^[27]. The China-Pakistan nexus has prompted India to invest heavily in missile defense systems, naval expansion, and space-based surveillance to counter the perceived threat (Rajagopalan, 2021) ^[29].

On the other hand, the United States has strengthened its strategic partnership with India as a counterbalance to the China-Pakistan axis. This has led to increased arms sales, intelligence-sharing agreements, and joint military exercises between India and Western allies (Mehta, 2022) ^[24]. The triangular security competition between China, Pakistan, and India continues to shape regional geopolitics, raising concerns about stability and potential military confrontations (Sharma, 2022) ^[34].

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Security Cooperation

Port cities have been growing faster than inland towns in recent years, which has led nations to give priority to developing their coastal regions for trade. Hong and Ahmad (2017). With more than 1000 miles of coastline, Pakistan is ideally situated both economically and strategically in South Asia. One of the main projects of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the Gwadar port, represents the growing economic relationship between the two countries. With its location at the end of the Silk Belt, Gwadar is essential to CPEC's goal of acting as an energy corridor. Given China's participation in similar ports in Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, this strategic stance also causes anxiety in neighboring India (Khan, Ullah, & Kamran, 2024) ^[17]. CPEC, a flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has not only deepened economic ties but also expanded security collaboration between China and Pakistan. Given the strategic importance of infrastructure projects like Gwadar Port, both countries have increased efforts to secure CPEC routes from terrorist threats and separatist movements (Wolf, 2019) ^[43].

China has deployed private security contractors and intelligence assets to protect its interests in Pakistan, reflecting Beijing's growing role in Pakistan's internal security (Iqbal, 2023) ^[12]. Joint counterterrorism operations and intelligence-sharing initiatives have been strengthened to mitigate threats from militant groups operating along the China-Pakistan border (Ahmed & Saleem, 2021) ^[2]. The long-term sustainability of CPEC remains contingent on security stability, making defense cooperation an essential component of bilateral relations (Hussain, 2023) ^[9].

Geopolitical and Theoretical Analysis

The China-Pakistan defense partnership can be best understood through the lens of Structural Realism (Neorealism), which posits that states act based on security imperatives and power distribution within the international system (Mearsheimer, 2001) ^[23]. Within this framework, Offensive Realism provides insight into how China and Pakistan seek to maximize their power to deter adversaries like India and the United States (Mearsheimer, 2001) ^[23].

The Balance of Power theory further contextualizes this alliance as a strategic maneuver to counter India's military expansion and regional dominance (Waltz, 1979) ^[42]. Given India's deepening security ties with the U.S. and other Indo-Pacific powers, China and Pakistan perceive their partnership as an essential counterweight to maintain regional equilibrium (Sharma, 2022) ^[34]. The evolving strategic

calculus in South Asia underscores the continued importance of this defense cooperation in shaping the future of regional security.

Findings

Deepening of Asymmetric Dependence

While China is Pakistan's largest defense partner, the relationship is asymmetric, with Pakistan increasingly dependent on Chinese military aid and technology. Unlike past decades, China now exerts more strategic influence over Pakistan's defense policies, particularly in missile development and naval security (Small, 2015; Malik, 2021) ^[40, 21].

Strategic Encirclement and Counterbalance in South Asia

The China-Pakistan defense partnership is not merely about bilateral security but serves a larger strategy to counterbalance India's rising influence. This aligns with China's broader regional strategy to limit India's role in South Asia and the Indian Ocean (Pant, 2021; Mehta, 2022) ^[27, 24].

Shift from Conventional to Hybrid Security Cooperation

Unlike the past, when military cooperation focused on arms sales and joint production, contemporary collaboration includes cybersecurity, intelligence sharing, and counterterrorism operations. Chinese private security firms and intelligence networks in Pakistan are growing under the pretext of securing CPEC (Iqbal, 2023; Ahmed & Saleem, 2021) ^[12, 2].

CPEC as a Military-Strategic Corridor

Though initially projected as an economic initiative, CPEC is evolving into a military-strategic corridor. The dual-use infrastructure, such as Gwadar Port, could enable future Chinese naval deployments, strengthening China's maritime position in the Indian Ocean (Wolf, 2019; Raza, 2023) ^[31, 43].

Pakistan's Role in China's Indo-Pacific Strategy

Pakistan is emerging as a crucial partner in China's Indo-Pacific strategy by acting as a regional outpost for Chinese influence. China's growing military footprint in Pakistan enhances its ability to monitor U.S. and Indian naval movements in the Arabian Sea (Rajagopalan, 2021; Sharma, 2022) ^[29, 34].

Risk of Over-Reliance on Chinese Weaponry

Pakistan's over-dependence on Chinese defense technology, including fighter jets, submarines, and missile systems, may reduce its military diversification options. Unlike previous decades when Pakistan balanced its imports between China and the West, current Western restrictions have made Pakistan almost entirely reliant on China (Singh, 2022; SIPRI, 2021) ^[37].

Potential for Regional Arms Race and Destabilization

The deepening China-Pakistan defense relationship is accelerating India's military modernization, leading to a potential arms race in South Asia. The region risks destabilization as increasing military alliances create heightened strategic competition (Pant, 2021; Mehta, 2022) ^[27, 24].

Evolution of Nuclear Cooperation in Strategic Deterrence

China's indirect support for Pakistan's nuclear deterrence, particularly through missile technology assistance, remains a key but underreported aspect of their defense relationship. This silent cooperation ensures Pakistan maintains strategic parity with India (Sharma, 2022; Singh, 2022) ^[37, 34].

Pakistan as a Testing Ground for Chinese Defense Technology

Many of China's military exports to Pakistan, including advanced drones, fighter jets, and naval vessels, are relatively new. Pakistan serves as a testing ground for these technologies before China markets them globally (Raza, 2023; SIPRI, 2021) ^[31].

Growing Autonomy of Chinese Military Presence in Pakistan

Unlike previous decades when Pakistan had more control over joint military projects, China is gradually asserting greater autonomy over its military footprint in Pakistan. This includes Chinese-controlled security zones near CPEC sites, which operate with limited Pakistani oversight (Iqbal, 2023; Ahmed & Saleem, 2021) ^[12, 2].

Conclusion

The China-Pakistan strategic partnership in defense and security cooperation has evolved into one of the most significant alliances in South Asia, with profound regional and global implications. This research highlights how the partnership has shifted from conventional military assistance to a broader strategic alliance encompassing hybrid security measures, economic-military integration through CPEC, and a significant geopolitical counterbalance against India's rising influence. One of the key findings is the deepening of asymmetric dependence, with Pakistan becoming increasingly reliant on China for military technology, intelligence-sharing, and strategic security. While this cooperation has strengthened Pakistan's defense capabilities, it also raises concerns about the autonomy of its national security policies. Furthermore, the dual-use infrastructure of CPEC underscores the growing militarization of economic projects, positioning Gwadar as a potential strategic outpost for Chinese naval operations. The research also finds that this alliance contributes to the evolving security dynamics of South Asia. India perceives the strengthening China-Pakistan military collaboration as a threat, prompting a regional arms race and increased military alliances with the United States and other Western powers. The strategic encirclement approach, where China and Pakistan counterbalance India's regional ambitions, has fueled an environment of competition and deterrence. Moreover, China's indirect support for Pakistan's nuclear deterrence through missile technology assistance remains a crucial, yet often understated, element of the partnership. Despite these advancements, the research also reveals risks associated with over-reliance on Chinese weaponry, the emergence of Chinese-controlled security zones within Pakistan, and the evolving role of Pakistan as a testing ground for Chinese military technology. These aspects raise questions about the long-term sustainability and potential consequences of Pakistan's security posture being closely aligned with China's strategic objectives.

In conclusion, the China-Pakistan defense cooperation remains a cornerstone of South Asia's security architecture, influencing military strategies, diplomatic alignments, and

regional stability. However, while the partnership offers Pakistan advanced military capabilities and strategic leverage, it also brings challenges related to sovereignty, economic security, and regional military escalation. Moving forward, a more balanced approach in Pakistan's defense strategy—ensuring diversification of military suppliers and maintaining strategic autonomy—will be crucial to navigating the complexities of this evolving alliance. The continued evolution of this partnership will undoubtedly shape South Asia's security landscape for years to come.

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