



## Geography: The Geopolitics of China–Pakistan Relations

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*This article argues that Pakistan's strategic location provides a strong foundation for the durability of its relations with China. In support of this claim, it assesses the impact of other key factors, including the "Indian factor," in this bilateral relationship. The article illustrates Pakistan's "advantageous" location compared to China's inherent geographical limitations. The Chinese elite realized geographical realities from the beginning and pursued a long-term partnership with Pakistan. This was evident from China's investment in megaprojects in Pakistan, which were all premised on geography. Pakistan's geographical location has served China's interests in various ways, including breaking China's encirclement, acting as a gateway to the outside world, and preventing the infiltration of militancy into the mainland during the Cold War. Pakistan can potentially act as a hub between China and other regional countries in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. The article diverts emphasis from the "Indian factor" to enduring geographical conditions as the basis for the durable Beijing–Islamabad partnership.*

**Key words:** China–Pakistan, CPEC, BRI, Geopolitics, Indian Ocean.

### Introduction

For decades, China and Pakistan have maintained a durable relationship. This durability is particularly impressive considering the lack of shared history, socio-political systems, cultures, and ideologies between the two countries. What are the key factors that support the longstanding "all-weather" friendship between China and Pakistan? While existing literature focuses on the role of the Indian factor, this article argues that Pakistan's advantageous geostrategic location and China's inherent geographical constraints provide a solid foundation for this relationship. Pakistan is situated at the crossroads of significant regions in Central, South, and West Asia, as well as the Middle East. It also has a long coastline that borders important sea lanes of communication (SLOC). Additionally, Pakistan shares a border with China's underdeveloped western region, which is

geographically distant from coastal cities and the capital, Beijing, and experiences sporadic unrest.

Since its emergence on the world map in 1949, China has faced certain geographical limitations. It is surrounded by the Eurasian landmass on three sides, and its access to maritime routes is mainly through the disputed waters of the South China Sea (SCS). China's founding leaders recognized the significance of the enduring geographical settings of their country, Pakistan, and the region. This realization influenced China's policy, under which it pursued long-term and constructive engagement with Pakistan, while overlooking temporary issues. The importance of geography was dominant to the extent that China pursued relations with Pakistan independent of its relations with other countries and regional dynamics. During the early 1950s, for instance, when China maintained cordial relations with its two major neighbors, India and the Soviet Union, and Pakistan was aligning with US-led military alliances, China simultaneously worked to strengthen its ties with Pakistan. As early as 1951, paramount leader Mao Zedong directed the foreign ministry to develop closer relationships with Pakistan.<sup>1</sup>

The centrality of geography was also evident in China's investment in mega-projects in Pakistan. Since the earliest Karakoram Highway (KKH), which China conceived in the 1950s, the Gwadar Port, Makran Coastal Highway, China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and affiliated projects have all been geographically based. Similarly, the proposed railway tracks, cross-border pipelines, and infrastructure projects that span the borders of neighboring countries continue to be influenced by geography. Beijing invested in these megaprojects to overcome some of its geographical constraints and optimize the use of geographical features within Pakistan and the region.

In this bilateral relationship, China has helped Pakistan in various areas, including technology transfer, economic assistance,<sup>2</sup> diplomatic backing, arms procurement,<sup>3</sup> and during financial hardships. Pakistan reciprocated this support primarily by leveraging its geographical location and serving China's varied geopolitical and economic interests during different periods. During the Cold War, for instance, Pakistan helped break China's encirclement and facilitated Sino–US rapprochement. In the aftermath of 9/11, which brought the US military presence to China's borders, as well as the emergence of militancy in the region, Pakistan played a role in preventing the infiltration of religious extremism into mainland China. In the future, Pakistan's geographic location could help complement China's Western Development Program (WDP) and act as a hub for connectivity

<sup>1</sup>Masood Khalid, "Pakistan-China Relations in a Changing Geopolitical Environment," *NUS ISAS [online]* 30 (2021).

<sup>2</sup>Sumita Kumar, "The China–Pakistan Strategic Relationship: Trade, Investment, Energy and Infrastructure," *Strategic Analysis* 31, no. 5 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700160701662278>.

<sup>3</sup>Ghulam Ali, "China–Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade: An Appraisal of Supplier's and Recipient's Motives," *Pacific Focus* 35, no. 3 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1111/pafo.12175>.

between China, South Asia, and Middle East to implement the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As geography is a permanent feature and is not affected by political changes, it could continuously assert its influence on the overall relationship.

Despite the centrality of Pakistan's geographical location in shaping Sino–Pakistan relations since its inception, no independent study has examined its role. This neglect led to speculative interpretations of relations that an analyst described as a “series of distorting prisms.” For instance, discussing “nefarious Sino–Pakistani activities” became a “cottage industry” within India.<sup>4</sup> Most analysts from India and the West conveniently attributed Sino–Pakistan relations to the “Indian factor,” giving limited consideration to other contributing factors.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, the literature from Pakistani and Chinese scholars used effusive rhetoric, portraying the partnership as a sanctified entity based on “trust” and values.<sup>6</sup> The caretaker Prime Minister of Pakistan, Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar, made an inflated claim, terming the relationship “made in heaven” and that Pakistan blindly followed China.<sup>7</sup> Against these speculative perspectives, this article empirically demonstrates the impact of Pakistan's geographical location on the durability of the Sino–Pakistan partnership. This finding illustrates the nexus between geography and political decision-making, shaping the geopolitics of this relationship.

By demonstrating the centrality of the geographical location behind the durability of these relations, this article addresses the neglect of this crucial factor on the one hand and contests the prevailing view of the role of the “Indian factor” behind Sino–Pakistan relations on the other hand. This alternative interpretation, which is empirically supported and theoretically grounded, encourages a re-examination of the relationship. The article comes at an opportune time when geography is reasserting its agency. The CPEC, BRI, Gwadar Port, and networks of proposed and existing roads, railway tracks, and fiber optics traversing both countries and the region are premised on geography. Finally, the article contributes to the theoretical discourse on geopolitics by presenting a case study that can be best explained through the lens of geopolitics but was mostly viewed from the popular notion of the “enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. Part 2 analyses the role of four key contributing factors: “historical legacy,” “shared commonalities,”

<sup>4</sup>Andrew Small, *The China–Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 6.

<sup>5</sup>Small, *The China–Pakistan Axis*.

<sup>6</sup>Ghulam Ali, *China–Pakistan Relations: A Historical Analysis* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2017); Chen Deming, “Chinese and Pakistanis: Faithful Pals,” in *You and Us: Stories of China and Pakistan*, ed. Lu Shulin (Beijing: China International Press, 2015); Khalid, “Pakistan–China Relations in a Changing Geopolitical Environment.”

<sup>7</sup>Adnan Aamir, “Pakistan puts ‘blind trust’ in China as Belt and Road enters new phase,” *Nikkei Asia*, 23 October 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Belt-and-Road/Pakistan-puts-blind-trust-in-China-as-Belt-and-Road-enters-new-phase#:~:text=%22We%20will%20always%20stand%20with,track%20between%20Karachi%20and%20Peshawar.>

“economics,” and the “Indian factor” on shaping the China–Pakistan relations. Part 3 engages with the theoretical debate of geopolitics, arguing that geography continues to assert its influence. To build on this, Part 4 illustrates the geographical settings of Pakistan and China. Part 5 explains how Pakistan’s geographical location has benefited China in the past and its potential role in the future, especially in the context of the BRI and CPEC. The conclusion follows.

## Key Contributing Factors

An examination of the primary determinants that contribute to the growth of bilateral relations between two countries will offer a comparative perspective in assessing the impact of geographical location. To begin with, any two countries that share history, particularly one marked by the “sacrifice of blood and treasure,” provide an important incentive for a durable partnership. The US friendship with Canada, France, and the UK was forged, in part, by shared sacrifices and conflicts.<sup>8</sup> Despite Chinese and Pakistani frequent references to centuries-old ties between their two peoples, in reality, there was little interaction between the two regions in the past. Without modern means of transportation, the Himalayas acted as a natural barrier to cross-border human migration. Arguably, China and Pakistan lacked a common historical legacy that could have influenced their current relationships. China–Pakistan relations, which turned out to be *entente cordiale*, developed after their independence, particularly during the 1960s.<sup>9</sup>

Common cultures, sociopolitical systems, or ideologies are other potential incentives that can bring countries together. Although cultural differences do not preclude countries from cooperating, they often initially seek allies with similar identities. The cultures and civilizations of China and Pakistan are strikingly different from one another. Pakistani culture is strongly influenced by Persian (Iran), Central Asian, and Middle Eastern cultures. In contrast, China has a distinct culture and civilization dating back thousands of years. China and Pakistan had no significant cultural commonalities that could be considered contributing to a durable relationship. Instead, cultural diversities created resistance to people-to-people exchanges.

Economic and trade opportunities can also drive strategic partnerships between countries. Despite several decades of concerted efforts, the economic and commercial ties between China and Pakistan have made modest progress. In the early 1960s, both countries granted each other the most favored nation status; in October 1982, they established the Joint Economic Committee (JEC), tasked

<sup>8</sup>Thomas J. Nisley, “You can’t force a friendship? An analysis of US/Argentine relations,” *International Politics* 55, no. 5 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-017-0092-2>.

<sup>9</sup>Ali, *China-Pakistan Relations*, 8–9.

with expanding cooperation in nonpolitical sectors;<sup>10</sup> during the 1980s, they set up a land connection by opening the KKH for general traffic; in 2007, they signed a Free Trade Agreement and started the Gwadar Port; and in 2015, they launched the CPEC. Neither these measures nor having a close political relationship could increase two-way trade. In 2022, China and Pakistan recorded their highest trade volumes of US\$26.75bn. This volume is heavily tilted in favor of China, which exported US\$23.5bn.<sup>11</sup> Second, this trade volume is insignificant compared with China's trade with other countries. For instance, in 2022, Sino–Indian bilateral trade reached nearly US\$136bn despite years of persistent border tension.<sup>12</sup> The China–Thailand trade reached US\$135bn in the same year.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, regardless of claims thus far, economics and trade have not played any role in the durability of this relationship.

Shared security concerns also help in forming strategic partnerships between countries. In the case of China and Pakistan, their common security concerns regarding India are considered by a vast majority of analysts to be the driving force behind their long-term partnership.<sup>14</sup> The backdrop within which the Sino–Pakistan entente cordiale materialized during the early 1960s, the character of their collaboration with a distinct focus on defense and strategic dimensions, continued unresolved territorial disputes with India, and the Sino–Indian competition for status collectively underline the role of the “Indian factor.” While the prevailing literature emphasizes the “Indian factor,” its significance is often overstated. To bridge the gap between perceptions and the actual role of the Indian factor, the following section traces the roots and magnitude of this factor in Sino–Pakistan relations.

The “Indian factor” did not assert any influence on China–Pakistan relations well over the initial decade. Instead, during the 1950s, China was closer to India than to Pakistan. The Indian factor first appeared in the early 1960s, when a flurry of events brought Pakistan and China together. Moreover, it was one of several factors, not the only factor, that brought China and Pakistan closer to each other. On the Chinese hand, the deterioration of its relations with India and

<sup>10</sup> Ali, *China–Pakistan Relations*.

<sup>11</sup> OEC, “China–Pakistan,” ed. Observatory of Economic Complexity (2022). <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/pak#:~:text=During%20the%20last%2026%20years,export%20any%20services%20to%20Pakistan>.

<sup>12</sup> PTI, “India–China trade climbs to USD 135.98 billion in 2022,” *The Economic Times*, 13 January 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/india-china-trade-climbs-to-usd-135-98-billion-in-2022-trade-deficit-crosses-usd-100-billion-for-the-first-time/articleshow/96969775.cms>.

<sup>13</sup> Chinese Embassy, “Remarks of Spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in Thailand upon Media Inquiries,” news release, 2 March, 2023, [http://th.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxw/202303/t20230302\\_11034040.htm#:~:text=In%202022%2C%20the%20trade%20volume,sum%20of%2077.381%20billion%20baht](http://th.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxw/202303/t20230302_11034040.htm#:~:text=In%202022%2C%20the%20trade%20volume,sum%20of%2077.381%20billion%20baht).

<sup>14</sup> Robert G. Wirsing, ““The Enemy of My Enemy”: Pakistan’s China Debate,” (Honolulu: Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, December 2003); Small, *The China–Pakistan Axis*.

the Soviet Union increased China's insecurity, leading it to find new allies. On the Pakistani side, the cooling of relations with the United States, the predominant arms supplier and the major source of economic assistance led it to explore alternatives. A review of China–Pakistan relations shows that the “Indian factor” remained most effective in their relations from the mid-1960s until the late 1980s. Under Deng's reforms and opening-up policy introduced during the late 1970s, China deradicalized its foreign policy, chose a pragmatic approach, and prioritized economic development. China adopted a balanced policy toward South Asia and gradually distanced itself from the Indo–Pakistani dispute. According to John Garver, an expert on China–India relations, China uncoupled its relations with Pakistan from its relations with India by the 1990s and began to address them separately.<sup>15</sup> Since then, the gap between the Chinese and the Pakistani perceptions of India has increased. The subsequent Indo–Pakistan conflict attested to Garver's assessment. Pakistan and India have had multiple clashes, including during their nuclear tests in 1998, at Kargil in 1999,<sup>16</sup> during a military standoff in 2001, during the Mumbai terrorist attacks in 2009, and during an attack on Indian paramilitary forces in Pulwama in 2019. On these occasions, China displayed a balanced policy, used diplomatic channels to de-escalate tensions, and even offered mediation.<sup>17</sup>

Notably, China never took practical military action against India at Pakistan's behest. Its foremost rhetoric was the so-called “ultimatum” to India during the 1965 Indo–Pakistani War. Even at that occasion, China twice extended the deadline of the “ultimatum,” meanwhile Pakistan and India accepted the ceasefire, which was China's underlying objective. This was the only occasion when China exhibited a bold tilt toward Pakistan. On no other occasion did China manifest such a level of support. China witnessed Pakistan's dismemberment at the hands of the “common enemy” during the 1971 India–Pakistan War but took few actions beyond issuing rhetoric. A few years later, in 1979, China's military intervention during the Vietnam War was far more audacious. The fact that China never fired a single bullet on behalf of Pakistan on India is a testament to the limited role of the “Indian factor.”<sup>18</sup> China's support for Pakistan's nuclear

<sup>15</sup>John W Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2001), 218–23.

<sup>16</sup>Srikanth Kondapalli, “China's response to the Kargil incident,” *Strategic Analysis* 23, no. 6 (1999), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700169908455103>.

<sup>17</sup>Atul Aneja, “China offers to play ‘constructive role’ to ease India-Pakistan tensions,” *The Hindu*, 22 August 2018, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/china-offers-to-play-constructive-role-in-india-pakistan-relations/article24752550.ece>; Hannah Haegeland, “Chinese Mediation on the Subcontinent?,” *Stimson*, 17 September 2019, <https://www.stimson.org/2019/chinese-mediation-subcontinent/>; Jingdong Yuan, “Beijing's Balancing Act: Courting New Delhi, Reassuring Islamabad,” *Journal of International Affairs* 64, no. 2 (2011), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24385533>.

<sup>18</sup>Ali, *China-Pakistan Relations*, 237.



program and supply of conventional weapons are other aspects related to the “Indian factor” and need elaboration.

Although the subject remained shrouded in controversy, China’s assistance to Pakistan’s nuclear program reportedly began in the late 1970s and continued throughout the 1980s. According to some Western reports, Pakistan had started to receive nuclear raw materials and technologies supplies from China (as well as from Niger and South Africa) in the late 1970s.<sup>19</sup> While some analysts stressed upon China’s enmity with India as the main reasons behind Beijing’s support to Islamabad’s nuclear program, an examination of the regional milieu during the 1970s and 1980s explained a broad context and a larger set of considerations behind China’s decision. Pakistan’s dismemberment by India during the 1971 India–Pakistan War and India’s nuclear test in 1974 decisively tipped the South Asian balance of power in favor of India. If these developments had threatened Pakistan, they equally posed challenges to China’s long-term regional interests. The establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the United States in July 1979, along with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December of that year, led to trilateral cooperation among the United States, Pakistan, and China. Beijing and Islamabad joined the US coalition against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Under the pretext of the Afghan War, the United States turned a blind eye to Pakistan’s nuclear program and China’s support for it. This convenient context provided China with an opportunity to assist Pakistan’s nuclear program. Arguably, without the mirage of the Afghan War, China’s assistance in Pakistan’s nuclear program would have been difficult.

Although analysts often attribute Pakistan’s nuclear program to China, it was not dependent on China. Islamabad developed nuclear weapons by assembling various components. Then Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto relied on Pakistani nuclear scientists and engineers working abroad, appealing to their “patriotism” and offering lucrative compensation packages. This “served as a magnet for Pakistani scientists [living] abroad,” many of whom returned to their homeland to contribute. Dr A. Q. Khan, the “father of Pakistan’s nuclear bomb,” was one of them. He returned from Europe with smuggled technology.<sup>20</sup> To “surmount the financial difficulties,” Pakistan received help from Saudi Arabia and Libya. While China’s help was useful, Pakistan’s nuclear program was not reliant on Chinese assistance.<sup>21</sup> Pakistan’s political and military leadership was determined to acquire technology, regardless of the cost involved. Moreover, during the 1980s China had not joined any nonproliferation treaties. Therefore, Beijing did not violate its committed norms. As China entered nonproliferation

<sup>19</sup>Malcolm M. Craig, *America, Britain and Pakistan’s Nuclear Weapons Programme, 1974–1980: A Dream of Nightmare Proportions* (Switzerland: Palgrave, 2017).

<sup>20</sup>Muhammad Ali Shaikh, “History: Bhutto’s True Legacies,” *Dawn*, 8 January 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1730558>.

<sup>21</sup>Ali, *China-Pakistan Relations*, 101.

regimes during the 1990s, its nuclear cooperation with Pakistan was governed by international guidelines.

Other considerations, such as the void left by the United States, commercial incentives, and a trade-off for access to US weapons, also influenced China's defense cooperation with Pakistan. China, for the first time, provided conventional weapons to Pakistan in the mid-1960s. The procurement started only after the United States imposed sanctions on Pakistan. In addition to the gap left by the United States, other considerations were also behind China's arms supplies and defense cooperation with Pakistan. First, China gained commercial benefits. Since the 1980s, China's arms export policy has changed from *gratis* to supplies on commercial lines. Pakistan, the largest arms importer, became a source of revenue for China's nascent arms industries. Second, China's arms industries used Pakistan as a testing ground for weapons and as a showcase for potential buyers from developing countries who could not afford expensive Western weapons. Third, China gained access to several advanced weapons Pakistan had acquired from the United States and used them for reverse engineering.<sup>22</sup>

Another way to analyze the role of the "Indian factor" is to examine whether China employs Pakistan against India in Sino-Indian conflicts. Since the 1990s, other than speculations, no concrete evidence has shown this connection. Relations between China and India have deteriorated in recent years. The Doklam standoff in 2017 and the fatal Galwan Valley confrontation in 2020 led to a gradual decline in their relationship. Despite these tensions, there was no definite proof to prove that China increased its support for Pakistan during the Sino-Indian conflict. China maintains military and economic advantages over India, enabling it to confront the country independently. Conversely, Pakistan faces numerous economic, political, and security challenges, and China is increasingly concerned about the deteriorating conditions of Pakistan.<sup>23</sup> Dragging Pakistan into the Sino-Indian conflict would not give China any strategic advantage. In such a scenario, the Pakistani military might seize an opportunity to settle its score with India. Therefore, Pakistan is the least preferred option for China in the case of a Sino-Indian confrontation.

The aforementioned findings explained that, except for the "Indian factor," the role of other factors was not significant enough to be considered a force behind the decade-long durability of the Sino-Pakistan relationship. The "Indian factor" contributed to the development of the China-Pakistan partnership; however, its role is often overemphasized. Given that this factor did not exist during the first

<sup>22</sup>Ali, "China-Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade," 543.

<sup>23</sup>Raj Verma, "China's new security concept: India, terrorism, China's geostrategic interests and domestic stability in Pakistan," *The Pacific Review* 33, no. 6 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2019.1663902>.



decade, it cannot be assumed that it will persist in the future. A normalization of Sino–Indian or Indo–Pakistan relations, hypothetically speaking, would not diminish the Sino–Pakistan relationship. The constant geographical determinants have an enduring influence on this relationship.

There could be four reasons for the continued overemphasis of the Indian factor. First, it is linked to the origin of the China–Pakistan friendship, which emerged in the early 1960s against the backdrop of common concern toward India. For instance, the 1963 border agreements signed within months of the China–India border confrontation, China’s abandonment of neutrality and start supporting Pakistan’s position on Kashmir, the start of conventional weapons to Pakistan, and later, during the 1970s and 1980s, clandestine assistance to Pakistan’s nuclear program. Second, the predominance of the Pakistani military in national affairs contributed to this impression. As the most powerful institution in the country, the Pakistani military used most of the potential of its relationship with China, primarily in strategic and defense realms. Therefore, major cooperation between two countries emerged in areas such as nuclear weapons, weapon procurement, and weapon development. The Pakistan military tried to shape the relationship with China, as it was centered on two countries that shared security concerns with India. Had there been strong political governance in Pakistan, the priorities of this relationship might have been different. Third, as the triangular relationship between China, India, and Pakistan is characterized by geopolitical issues such as territorial disputes, wars, and tensions, it naturally generates a geopolitical impression of mutual relationships. Fourth, for decades, there was little to offer in other areas. For instance, before the start of the CPEC, the Sino–Pakistan relationship was predominantly strategic in nature. There were limited economic and trade ties and people-to-people interactions. Even after the CPEC, the economy and trade between Pakistan and China remained limited. Trade between China and India has significantly increased over the past two decades. Moreover, rather than an increase in the Sino–Indian trade starting from the early 21st century, which became a source of reconciliation, it took a geopolitical turn. India’s China critics, who influence the national strategic outlook, began portraying the substantial trade imbalance favoring China as yet another threat to their country. This reinforced the anti-China rhetoric in India. Owing to the lack of interaction between China, India, and Pakistan, the media and commentators found geopolitical rivalries a convenient subject of analysis.

## Theoretical Debate of Geopolitics

Despite transformational changes in world politics, the role of geography, which gives shape to geoeconomics, geopolitics, and geostrategy, continues to retain its agency. The advent of nuclear weapons, though a major development

in strategic terms, did not strongly affect the role of geography.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, the “twin” ineluctable processes of digitalization and globalization did not reduce geography’s role, which continues to wield agency across several fields.<sup>25</sup> In recent decades, the discipline of geopolitics has gained momentum.<sup>26</sup> In fact, the role of geography is well established; there is no dearth of literature covering a wide range of case studies explaining how it affects a state’s foreign policy or economic and strategic choices. For instance, Noorani and Ahmadi elucidate Iran’s unique geographical position at the nexus of Africa, Europe, and Asia. They contend that this location exerts a profound influence on Iran’s geopolitical choices.<sup>27</sup> Mutluer posited that Turkey’s significance in regional geopolitics primarily emanated from its prime geographic location, acting as a conduit between Asia and Europe; it boasts crucial access points such as the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits and close proximity to oil-rich regions, including the Caspian Basin. These factors rendered Turkey an indispensable participant in facilitating oil and gas transfers to international markets.<sup>28</sup> In the same vein, Erfan argued that Afghanistan’s strategic location, being situated at the crossroads of major Asian geopolitical and geographical structures, made the country a victim of big power rivalry.<sup>29</sup> Parmanand argued that the geographical location of a country, being a permanent feature, emerges as the most crucial factor in shaping its foreign policy; influencing its war potential, defense, and alliance systems; and determining its overall geopolitical role.<sup>30</sup> Another study examined how Armenia’s geography, as a landlocked state with a small population, shaped its relations with its neighbors, the EU and Russia.<sup>31</sup> Finally, Sir Halford Mackinder, who emphasized the pivotal role of land in devising strategy, and Alfred

<sup>24</sup>John Kinnaas, “Geopolitics and the “Low Politics” Perspective,” in *On Geopolitics: Classical and Nuclear*, ed. Ciro E. Zoppo and Charles Zorgbibe (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1985).

<sup>25</sup>Kevin Morgan, “The exaggerated death of geography: learning, proximity and territorial innovation systems,” *Journal of Economic Geography* 4, no. 1 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1093/jeg/4.1.3>.

<sup>26</sup>Jakub J Grygiel, *Great powers and geopolitical change* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2006), xii.

<sup>27</sup>Hassan Noorali and Seyyed Abbas Ahmadi, “Iran’s new geopolitics: heartland of the world’s corridors,” *GeoJournal* 88, no. 2 (2023).

<sup>28</sup>Mutluer Salih Emir, “Analysis of the Effects of Geopolitical Position and Identity in the Transportation of Oil and Natural Gas to International Markets: Azerbaijan-Turkey Relations Example,” *International Journal of Social, Political and Economic Research* 7, no. 2 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.46291/IJOSPERvol7iss2pp341-358>.

<sup>29</sup>Abdul Hakim Erfan, “The Geopolitical Influential Components in the Afghan Crisis,” *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Studies* 3, no. 7 (2021), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.32996/jhss.2021.4.7.5>.

<sup>30</sup>Parmanand, “Nepal’s China Policy,” *China Report* 16, no. 6 (1980), <https://doi.org/10.1177/000944558001600602>.

<sup>31</sup>Vahram Ter-Matevosyan and Narek Mkrtychyan, “The Conduct of Armenian Foreign Policy: Limits of the Precarious Balance,” in *Small States and the New Security Environment*, ed. Anne-Marie Brady and Baldur Thorhallsson (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021).

Mahan, who stressed the critical importance of sea power, have profoundly shaped geopolitical thought and strategy on the basis of geography.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, while the significance of geography is primarily associated with geopolitics, its influence transcends various social and economic facets of a country. Research has demonstrated that a country's geography even influences its income, investment patterns, development, and policies. Having an obvious geographical location confers competitive benefits to countries.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, geography of a country is linked to its national identity and politics. Geographical factors demonstrably shape national symbols, conceptions of nationhood, subnational movements, supranational ideologies, and their impact on the process of globalization.<sup>34</sup> A nation's geography shapes its self-image and view of the world, thereby interplaying between geography and politics.<sup>35</sup> The aforementioned demonstrates the enduring significance of geography, which transcends historical and technological shifts.

## Geographic Settings of Pakistan and China

### *Pakistan's Geographic Advantages*

At the time of its creation in August 1947, Pakistan consisted of two parts: East Pakistan and West Pakistan. East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, is adjacent to Southeast Asia and has an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the Bay of Bengal. It shares a 4,096-km-long border with India, the fifth longest land mass in the world, and 271 km with Myanmar.<sup>36</sup> West Pakistan, or contemporary Pakistan, borders West Asia and has a long coastline on the Arabian Sea, making it a maritime neighbor to the Gulf States. Pakistan's unique location attracted great powers at the beginning of the Cold War. While the breakaway of the eastern part (Bangladesh) in 1971 reduced geographical reach, the remaining country (West Pakistan or contemporary Pakistan) still held some significance due to its

<sup>32</sup>Halford J Mackinder, "The geographical pivot of history," in *The Structure of Political Geography* (Routledge, 2017); Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The influence of sea power upon history*, 1,660–1783 (Read Books Ltd, 2011).

<sup>33</sup>Maarten Bosker and Harry Garretsen, "Economic development and the geography of institutions," *Journal of Economic Geography* 9, no. 3 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1093/jeg/lbn047>; John Luke Gallup, Jeffrey D. Sachs, and Andrew D. Mellinger, "Geography and Economic Development," *International Regional Science Review* 22, no. 2 (1999), <https://doi.org/10.1177/016001799761012334>.

<sup>34</sup>Baroness J. Young, "Geography and Politics," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 12, no. 4 (1987), <https://doi.org/10.2307/622791>, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/622791>.

<sup>35</sup>Young, "Geography and Politics."

<sup>36</sup>Rashed Uz Zaman, "Can Bangladesh turn its burdensome geography into a blessing?," *East Asia Forum*, 1 September 2017, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/09/01/can-bangladesh-turn-its-burdensome-geography-into-a-blessing/>.

proximity to three important countries and energy-rich regions. This is the focus of this article.

Contemporary Pakistan has land borders with India to the east, China to the north, and Afghanistan and Iran to the west. Pakistan is in an Indian Ocean littoral state with a maritime boundary in the Arabian Sea measuring 1,046 km. Along its coastline, Pakistan is a maritime neighbor of Iran, Oman, the UAE, and India. Its coastline is close to the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, and the Hormuz Strait. The Pakistani Gwadar port is near a region that acts as a crucial commercial and energy trade hub.<sup>37</sup> The maritime distance from Gwadar to the Port of Duqm (Oman) is 436 nm; the distance from Port Khalifa (UAE) is 477 nm; the distance from the Port of Ras Laffan (Qatar), which has the world's largest LNG exporting facility and the capacity to accommodate the largest carrier ships, is 654 nm; the distance from the Port of Khalifa Bin Salman (Bahrain), which is 704 nm; the length of the King Abdul Aziz Port in Dammam (Saudi Arabia), which is 769 nm; and the length of the Port of Shuaiba (Kuwait), which is 916 nm.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, Pakistan's strategic location relative to major countries, energy-rich regions, long coastline in the world's important SLOCs, and proximity to key regional ports attracted other powers, including China.

### *China's Geographic Constraints*

Unlike Pakistan, China did not have an advantageous geographical location at the time of its independence in 1949. It has emerged on a world map surrounded by the Eurasian landmass on three sides, with a maritime coastline only to the east. The majority of its land borders with neighboring countries were unmarked, creating the possibility of dispute. By the late 1950s, China's relations with the Soviet Union and India, two largest neighbors, had become hostile, putting considerable strategic pressure on its borders. Over a period of time, China marked its borders with other countries. However, China's borders with India and Bhutan have remained unmarked today and have often been a source of confrontation, especially the Sino-Indian border.<sup>39</sup>

The Chinese maritime border lies in the East China Sea (ECS) and the SCS. In the ECS, China has contested claims with Japan and Taiwan over the ownership of the five small but uninhabited islands of Diaoyu/Senkaku. The ownership

<sup>37</sup>For a general discussion on how a strategically important port can play a role in connecting two geographical realms of land and sea in the dual capacity of "economic gateways and nodes of geo-strategic projection," see a comprehensive study Hassan Noorali, Colin Flint, and Seyyed Abbas Ahmadi, "Port power: Toward a new geopolitical world order," *Journal of Transport Geography* 105 (2022), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jtrangeo.2022.103483>.

<sup>38</sup>"Ports.com." <http://ports.com/>.

<sup>39</sup>Ghulam Ali, "Territorial disputes, the role of leaders and the impact of Quad: a triangular explanation of China-India border escalations," *The Pacific Review* 37, no. 3 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2023.2185662>.

of these islands, which are rich in natural resources, will expand the EEZs of their owners. The five major islands of Japan, stretching from the Sea of Japan to the ECS, form a chain of rings around China. Moreover, Brunei, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam contest China's maritime borders in the SCS. These islands, coupled with the contesting maritime neighbors of China, create the "first island chain" around China's maritime border. A second island chain centered on Guam creates the second island chain. These chains present geostrategic challenges restricting China's access to open seas in its immediate maritime neighborhood and in the Indo-Pacific region. According to an analyst, the "island chain dilemma" resonates deeply with analysts on the mainland, thereby stimulating "China's fears of strategic encirclement," underscoring the geostrategic value of Taiwan, framing Chinese military options at sea, and engaging important economic interests.<sup>40</sup> China's inherited land and maritime constraints, coupled with its historical, territorial, and maritime disputes with neighboring countries, exposed its acute vulnerabilities after 1949. As its export-driven economy expanded, China became a net oil importer in 1993, and its dependence on global SLOCs intensified, making the supply chain critically important for economic growth and domestic stability.<sup>41</sup>

## Geography at Play

The onset of the Cold War precipitated a global struggle for allies between the United States and the USSR, with both sides aiming to target countries possessing strategic locations. Pakistan, which then consisted of two parts, drew the attention of both sides. For the United States, Pakistan was crucial for two reasons. First, Pakistan directly bordered China's southwestern region and was not far from the USSR. Second, after India refused to become part of the East–West rivalry, Pakistan's role gained even greater attention in the US Southeast Asian strategy. Through its strategic locations, Pakistan could serve as a crucial link in the US network of alliances to prevent communist expansion to other parts of Asia, especially toward the Indian Ocean. The successful Soviet thermonuclear test in August 1953, which broke the US monopoly on the hydrogen bomb, accelerated the US quest for allies.<sup>42</sup> Pakistan's ruling elite seized this

<sup>40</sup>Toshi Yoshihara, "China's Vision of Its Seascape: The First Island Chain and Chinese Seapower," *Asian Politics & Policy* 4, no. 3 (2012): 293–94, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1943-0787.2012.01349.x>.

<sup>41</sup>David Brewster, "An Indian Ocean dilemma: Sino-Indian rivalry and China's strategic vulnerability in the Indian Ocean," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 11, no. 1 (2015/01/022015): 50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2014.994822>, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2014.994822>.

<sup>42</sup>Syed Adil Husain, "Politics of Alliance and Aid: A Case Study of Pakistan (1954–1966)," *Pakistan Horizon* 32, no. 1/2 (1979): 16–17, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41394703>.

opportunity and allied with the United States. In 1954, Pakistan formally joined the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). By the late 1950s, Pakistan was part of four defense-related agreements initiated by the United States.

In the same vein, Pakistan's location in the region and its proximity to China's southwestern border garnered China's interest. China's foreign policy priorities for long-term interests, inherent geographical and strategic limitations, and the enduring nature of geography together shaped its policy toward Pakistan. Under these imperatives, China engaged with Pakistan on a long-term basis independent of the "Indian factor," the Cold War geopolitics, including Pakistan's seemingly anti-communist policies of alignment with the United States. In 1955, Zhou Enlai met with his Pakistani counterpart, Muhammad Ali Bogra, at the Asian–African Conference in Bandung and accepted Pakistan's explanations about its participation in Western military agreements.<sup>43</sup> China also remained neutral in the Indo–Pakistani dispute. On the Kashmir issue, the most serious issue among South Asian rivals, Zhou Enlai stated that his country was still studying the nature of this conflict.<sup>44</sup> Amidst the geopolitical maneuvering of the Cold War, Mao transferred General Geng Biao, a Long March veteran and comrade, as China's ambassador from Sweden to Pakistan in early 1956. While instructing him about his new post, Mao said:

It was my idea to transfer you. Get you out of an ice cave and put you in a furnace! The furnace is our southwestern gate [Pakistan], and you must protect it well. It is important for us to stabilize the neighborhood. A good neighborhood is very important for construction in our country. The communications between Pakistan and China have a history of more than a thousand years, and they are very friendly to China. When you take the post in Pakistan, you should adopt the guideline of stabilizing the neighborhood and clarify the boundary between China and Pakistan, as even brothers must keep careful accounts. The southwestern gate holds a significant strategic position.<sup>45</sup>

In the late 1950s, the deterioration of China's relations with its two giant neighbors, India and the Soviet Union, further increased Pakistan's strategic location. China increased efforts to open its "southwestern gate" and proposed the establishment of roads and air links with Pakistan. Anticipating potential challenges arising from unresolved borders, China accelerated border negotiations with Pakistan, and in March 1963, both sides signed a border agreement. This agreement removed a potential source of conflict and laid the foundation for their long-term relations.<sup>46</sup> This was the emergence of the Sino–Pakistan entente

<sup>43</sup>Ravindra K Jain, ed., *China-South Asian Relations, 1947–80*, vol. 2 (Harvester Press, 1981), 8–9.

<sup>44</sup>Anwar Syed, *China & Pakistan: Diplomacy of an Entente Cordiale* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1974), 69.

<sup>45</sup>Geng Ying, "Forefathers Plant Trees for Descendants to Rest in the Shade," in *You and Us: Stories of China and Pakistan*, ed. Lu Shulin (Beijing: China International Press 2015), 30.

<sup>46</sup>W. M. Dobell, "Ramifications of the China-Pakistan Border Treaty," *Pacific Affairs* 37, no. 3 (1964), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2754976>.



cordiale, which endured in the following decades. On the basis of its geographical location, Pakistan served some of China's key geopolitical interests. It prevented China from breaking out of the US-led encirclement and served as a gateway to the outside world. During the Cold War, Middle Eastern countries either lacked diplomatic ties or had limited interaction with China. Beijing took advantage of Pakistan's standing in the Islamic world to expand its interests. Prior to 1990, when diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and China were established, Chinese Muslim pilgrims traveling to Saudi Arabia would pass through Pakistan. In April 1964, Pakistan International Airlines launched flights to Shanghai, becoming the first airline from a noncommunist country to operate flights in China.<sup>47</sup>

China also utilized the “southwestern gate” as a diplomatic conduit. Pakistan was crucial to one of the most significant postwar rapprochements between the United States and China. As the United States intended to normalize relations with China during the 1960s, it took advantage of Pakistan's close ties with China to establish a secret channel. In 1971, Pakistan facilitated Henry Kissinger's secret visit to China.<sup>48</sup> This resulted in the formation of a “strategic” triangle of the United States, Pakistan, and China that coordinated their policies during the 1980s against the backdrop of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and in the post-9/11 period.<sup>49</sup> Pakistan also played a role in addressing differences between China and the Islamic regime of Imam Khomeini in Iran and in establishing some contacts between Riyadh and Beijing during the 1980s.<sup>50</sup>

The Afghan War of the 1980s had profound repercussions for the region. Thousands of Jihadis trained in the 1980s soon became liabilities. Afghanistan descended into an unending civil war, leading to the rise of the Taliban. The aftermath of the Afghan War was one of the factors behind the September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. For China, the rise of religious extremism in the region added to separatist tendencies in the restive Xinjiang region. Although China never opened its short border with Afghanistan, the potential infiltration of extremists into China via Pakistan and Central Asia necessitated the implementation of stringent security measures. While the Pakistani military was responsible for promoting militancy in some ways, it worked closely with China to combat the entry of religious extremists, illegal immigrants, and narcotics into Chinese territory. To safeguard Chinese interests, the Pakistani military took steps against threats to religious extremists, with potential impacts on

<sup>47</sup>Shaheen Akhtar, “Pak-China Economic Relations: Forging Strategic Partnership in the 21st Century,” *Regional Studies* 19, no. 3 (2001): 47–48.

<sup>48</sup>F. S. Aijazuddin, *From a Head, through a Head, to a Head: The Secret Channel between the US and China through Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>49</sup>Paul J. Smith, “The China–Pakistan–United States Strategic Triangle: From Cold War to the “War on Terrorism,”” *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 38, no. 4 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00927678.2011.604291>, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00927678.2011.604291>.

<sup>50</sup>Ali, *China-Pakistan Relations*, 114–15.

Xinjiang from within its territory or emanating from Afghanistan. At Beijing's urging, Islamabad conducted crackdowns on Uyghurs who had fled to Pakistan. It also eliminated, arrested, and extradited members of the banned East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM).<sup>51</sup> Additionally, on certain occasions, Beijing and Islamabad jointly enforced the closure of the KKH as a preventative measure to protect Chinese borders.

In the 21st century, the significance of Pakistan's geographic location to China not only persisted but garnered additional significance due to China's WDP and historic outward expansion, which manifested in the form of BRI. For background, China's reforms and opening-up policy started in the late 1970s and primarily focused on the development of eastern coastal cities. The western region, far from the coastal cities and landlocked with neighboring countries, remained underdeveloped. The gap between the two regions widened over a period of time, leading to discontentment among the people. The rise of religious extremism, as mentioned above, fueled this discontentment. To address the economic grievances of the Western region, China launched the WDP in 1999 to create economic opportunities as well as to fight the "three evils" of separatism, terrorism, and religious fundamentalism.<sup>52</sup> The development of the western region was linked to its opening to the outside world. It was against this backdrop that Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji visited Pakistan in 2001 and provided assistance for the development of the first phase of the Gwadar Port, the 653-km-long Makran Coastal Highway, and the modernization of the KKH. These projects, coupled with initiatives under the CPEC and the BRI, could connect China's western regions with the Indian Ocean, the Middle East, and beyond.

By the 2010s, China had achieved comprehensive economic and geopolitical clout. For instance, in 2010, China surpassed Japan to become the second-largest economy. Chinese milestones on the global stage led it to embark on historic outward expansion in the form of the BRI. China's launch of the CPEC was a testament to Pakistan's "elevated" role in its regional stratification.<sup>53</sup> To connect the BRI with South and West Asia, the Middle East and beyond necessitated a robust partnership with Pakistan, that was located between China on the one side and these regions on the other. This also initiated maritime cooperation between the two countries with China's growing interest in Pakistani seaports, especially

<sup>51</sup>Zia Ur Rehman, *ETIM's presence in Pakistan and China's growing pressure*, The Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (Oslo, August 2014).

<sup>52</sup>Siegfried O Wolf, "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC): Regional Cooperation in the Wider South Asian Region," in *China's Global Rebalancing and the New Silk Road* (Springer, 2018), 80.

<sup>53</sup>Pascal Abb, "All geopolitics is local: the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor amidst overlapping centre-periphery relations," *Third World Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2128329>.

at Gwadar.<sup>54</sup> Likewise, the CPEC, the flagship project of the BRI, is premised on geography. A look into the nature of investment shows that most of the projects launched under CPEC are intended to leverage geography to build infrastructure within Pakistan and link it with the region at a later stage.

Pakistan has completed nearly two dozen projects, with a total value of more than US\$30bn by 2022. Pakistan upgraded the 118-km-long part of the KKH, a 392-km-long Multan-Sukkur Section of the Peshawar-Karachi Motorway, and an 820-km-long fiber optic cable across the China–Pakistan border. Pakistan began the construction of the next phase of the Gwadar Port, Gwadar East Bay Expressway, Gwadar Port Free Zone, New Gwadar International Airport (the largest in Pakistan), and Zhob-DI Khan Motorway to connect Islamabad–Quetta via motorways and completed or approved rail-based Mass Transit Projects for Lahore, Peshawar, Quetta, and Karachi. The modernization and expansion of the 1,872-km-long Peshawar–Karachi railway track at an estimated cost of US\$10bn is one of the most significant projects in terms of budget and impact.<sup>55</sup> Both countries have also proposed a 1,059-km-long line connecting Havelian and Kashgar and a 1,328-km-long line connecting Jacobabad, Quetta, and Gwadar. In addition, Pakistan Railways proposed a 560-km-long track from Quetta to Kotla Jam via the Baluchistan cities of Zhob and DI Khan. Tunnels and link roads were upgraded, and new bridges were constructed. This infrastructure connects China's borders with major Pakistani cities and the ports of Karachi, Qasim, Ormara, Pasni, and Gwadar on the Makran coast. In 2016, China tested the viability of the road by dispatching a convoy of trucks from Xinjiang to Gwadar Port, where its cargo was transferred to ships awaiting departure.<sup>56</sup>

Pakistan's location, with improved domestic infrastructure, could facilitate China's connectivity with Afghanistan, Iran, the Indian Ocean, and the Middle East. China's engagement with the Taliban after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 indicates Beijing's greater role in the war-torn country. Since China kept its 76-km-long border closed, it can access Afghanistan via Central Asia and Pakistan.<sup>57</sup> The route via Pakistan is cost-effective because of the short distance with access to different ports in the Arabian Sea. Therefore, a considerable focus is placed on Afghanistan under the CPEC. For instance,

<sup>54</sup>It is worth noting that the primary emphasis of China–Pakistan defense cooperation, which started in the mid-1960s and became the bedrock of their overall relationship, was on the army and air force. Cooperation in the naval and maritime sectors was somewhat scant. Maritime cooperation gained prominence in the 21st century competing with other areas. China's heavy investments in Pakistani ports and supplies of corvettes and submarines were some examples.

<sup>55</sup>PTI, "India-China trade climbs to USD 135.98 billion in 2022."

<sup>56</sup>Muhammad Zafar, "First Chinese trade convoy arrives in Gwadar through CPEC," *The News*, 12 November 2016, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1228780/first-chinese-trade-convoy-arrives-gwadar-cpec/>.

<sup>57</sup>Ghulam Ali, "China-Pakistan cooperation on Afghanistan: assessing key interests and implementing strategies," *The Pacific Review* 35, no. 3 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2020.1845228>.

Pakistan is developing Peshawar–Kabul Road and Quetta–Kandahar Road. The western route of the CPEC runs parallel to the Pakistan–Afghanistan border.<sup>58</sup> Pakistan also proposed three cross-border railway lines with Afghanistan. In 2020, China was reportedly behind Afghanistan's decision to use the Gwadar Port for imports. Afghanistan is already connected to Central Asia. In 2021, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan signed an agreement to develop a transnational railway system. Sino–Pakistan cooperation in Afghanistan has taken a tangible shape in recent years.<sup>59</sup>

Furthermore, China has fostered a deepening relationship with Iran, as evidenced by recent developments. China played an active role in the finalization of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015; in April 2021, it signed a 25-year strategic partnership agreement entailing US\$400bn in Chinese investments in Iran; played an active role in the normalization of Iran–Saudi Arabia diplomatic relations as surfaced in 2023; and was admitted to the SCO as a full member in July 2023. As Iran–Pakistan tension surfaced in January 2024 over reciprocal airstrikes, China was among the first countries to urge both sides to keep restraint. China has undertaken various projects in Iran, including developing the Iranian coast adjacent to the Strait of Hormuz, phase II of the supergiant South Pars natural gas project, the West Karoun oil field, and electrifying the Tehran–Mashhad railway line, among other projects.<sup>60</sup>

Iran also showed an interest in joining the CPEC from the beginning, suggesting that the Chabahar and Gwadar ports could complement one another. Iran also proposed the construction of a pipeline parallel to the CPEC to transport liquefied natural gas (LNG) to China.<sup>61</sup> There have been efforts to expand these connections further, up to Turkey. In 2009, these countries held a trial run of the Istanbul–Tehran–Islamabad train, which was intended to resume regular service operations on this route. This service can be expanded from Istanbul to Europe through the Marmara undersea railway tunnel.<sup>62</sup> A study by Chinese academics

<sup>58</sup>Ghulam Ali, "CPEC: A Gateway to Regional Connectivity," in *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry*, ed. Nian Peng, Ghulam Ali, and Yi Zhang (Singapore: Springer, 2022).

<sup>59</sup>Ali, "China-Pakistan cooperation on Afghanistan."

<sup>60</sup>Bernard Orr and Aziz El Yaakoubi, "Top Iranian, Saudi envoys meet in China in restoration of diplomatic ties," *Reuters*, 7 April 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/foreign-ministers-iran-saudi-meet-china-2023-04-06/>.

<sup>61</sup>Andrew Korybko, "Iran's interest in CPEC strengthens regional integration," *CGTN*, 16 September 2019, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2019-09-16/Iran-s-interest-in-CPEC-strengthens-regional-integration-K2ybECc94A/index.html>.

<sup>62</sup>Majorie van Leijen, "Istanbul–Tehran–Islamabad container train may finally run," *Rail Freight*, 31 January 2020, <https://www.railfreight.com/railfreight/2020/01/31/istanbul-tehran-islamabad-container-train-may-finally-run/?gdpr=accept>.

recommended the establishment of the China–Pakistan–Iran–Turkey energy corridor.<sup>63</sup>

Like Iran, China's interest in the Middle East has markedly increased in recent years. The publication of the China–Arab Policy Paper in 2016 was a pivotal document that outlined the priorities of China's policies toward the region.<sup>64</sup> As the relationship deepened, China supplanted the European Union in 2020 as the GCC's largest trading partner and started FTA negotiations. In 2021, China ascended to become Saudi Arabia's largest trading partner, with estimated bilateral trade reaching US\$87.3bn.<sup>65</sup> China is also the second-largest trading partner of the UAE. The year 2022 witnessed the inaugural China–Arab States and China–GCC Summit. In mediating the restoration of Saudi Arabia–Iran diplomatic ties, the Gulf States engaged in currency swaps with China, Riyadh participated in the SCO as an observer member, and the membership of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in BRICS in early 2024 all underscore China's burgeoning ties with the greater Middle East.<sup>66</sup> Pakistan with close ties with the Middle Eastern countries and located between the Middle East and China, could play a strategic role in this regard.

Finally, Pakistan's strategic location is significant to China for its trade and energy shipments in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Shipments to and from China cover tens of thousands of miles and pass through chokepoints, disputed waters, and regions controlled by rival navies. Since China is not an Indian Ocean nation, its vulnerabilities are well exposed. To address its maritime challenges, China has adopted various strategies, including maritime cooperation with Pakistan. In 2015, Pakistan leased the Gwadar Port to China for 40 years. Islamabad welcomed Chinese submarines and warships to its ports, invited the People's Liberation Army Navy to participate in different exercises, and invited China to construct a naval base.<sup>67</sup> These activities provided the PLAN with first-hand experience in familiarizing itself with the Indian Ocean and interacting with its counterparts. There is an uninterrupted road connection between Kashgar in China and Pakistani ports. Additionally, proposals for constructing a rail line, fiber optics, and an energy pipeline from Gwadar to the Chinese border are

<sup>63</sup>Fei-fei Guo, Cheng-feng Huang, and Xiao-ling Wu, "Strategic analysis on the construction of new energy corridor China–Pakistan–Iran–Turkey," *Energy Reports* 5 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.egy.2019.06.007>, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352484719300034>.

<sup>64</sup>Xinhua, Full text of China's Arab Policy Paper, (2016).

<sup>65</sup>Reuters, "Factbox: Saudi-China energy, trade and investment ties," *Reuters*, 6 December 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/saudi-china-energy-trade-investment-ties-2022-12-06/>.

<sup>66</sup>Zakiyeh Yazdanshenas and Alam Saleh, "Iranian-Saudi detente and "Asianization" of the Persian Gulf: China fills the gap," *Middle East Institute*, 5 April 2023, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iranian-saudi-detente-and-asianization-persian-gulf-china-fills-gap>.

<sup>67</sup>Liu Xuanzun, "China joins multinational naval drills in Pakistan, contributing to safeguarding sea lines, CPEC," *Global Times*, 10 February 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202302/1285226.shtml>.

discussed in policy circles. In light of these circumstances, analysts view the CPEC as a “gateway” between Eurasia and the Indian Ocean, granting China exclusive access to warm waters.<sup>68</sup>

## Conclusion

This article has examined various factors, including the “Indian factor,” to evaluate their role in the durability of China–Pakistan relations. Among all the factors discussed, Pakistan’s geographic location has proven to be the most enduring. Other factors were either secondary or subordinate to geography. The article has explained Pakistan’s strategic location in the region and China’s inherited geographical constraints in terms of being surrounded by the Eurasian landmass and having maritime disputes in the ECS and SCS. Chinese leaders recognized the enduring geographical realities of their own country, Pakistan, and the wider region from the very beginning. This realization constantly guided China’s Pakistan policy, under which Beijing pursued a long-term and stable relationship by overlooking short-term irritants along the way. Geographical considerations drove China’s investment pattern in Pakistan. Megaprojects such as KKH, Gwadar Port, the Makran Coastal Highway, the CPEC, and most projects affiliated with the CPEC were all premised on geography. China’s decision to pursue long-term interests with Pakistan proved to be a pragmatic choice as Pakistan served, based on its advantageous geographical location, some of China’s key geopolitical interests during different periods of time. For instance, Pakistan helped break China’s Western encirclement policy during the Cold War. Pakistan worked as a multifaceted bridge, facilitating land, air, and diplomatic connections between China and the rest of the world, particularly the Islamic countries. Pakistan took measures to prevent the infiltration of militants into mainland China. Pakistan’s location has taken on even greater significance in light of China’s unprecedented outward expansion in the 21st century. The launch of the CPEC and the BRI has brought Pakistan to the forefront of China’s regional connectivity strategies. Pakistan represents a potential gateway for land, air, and cultural connections between China, neighboring countries, the Middle East, the Indian Ocean, and beyond. As geographical location is a permanent feature, it will continuously shape China–Pakistan relations in the future. It can be concluded, based on the enduring impact of geography, that shifts in regional and international politics will not have much effect on China–Pakistan relations. For instance, hypothetically speaking, a normalization in China–India or India–Pakistan relations would hardly alter the Beijing–Islamabad partnership.

<sup>68</sup>David Brewster, “Silk Roads and Strings of Pearls: The Strategic Geography of China’s New Pathways in the Indian Ocean,” *Geopolitics* 22, no. 2 (2017): 274–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2016.1223631>, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2016.1223631>.



This also leads to reevaluating the commonly held perception that the “Indian factor” is behind the durability of this relationship.

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