

CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES: A BALANCING ACT FOR PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This article explores Pakistan's strategic positioning between China and the United States amid evolving geopolitical dynamics, particularly after the May 2025 Indo-Pak conflict. It argues that Pakistan's military and technological edge—bolstered by deep-rooted defence cooperation with China—redefined regional balances and enhanced its global stature. Historically, Pakistan has pursued a balancing policy between the U.S. and China, benefiting from American aid in the 1950s–60s and aligning with China post-1962. Despite cyclical downturns in U.S.-Pakistan ties—especially after nuclear sanctions and post-Afghanistan disengagement—China has consistently remained a reliable partner. The article critiques India's influence on U.S. policy toward Pakistan and rebuffs the notion of a binary choice between Washington and Beijing. It calls for leveraging renewed U.S. engagement under Trump, strengthening economic and defence ties while safeguarding strategic cooperation with China, particularly through CPEC. Ultimately, the article advocates for a confident, multipolar foreign policy vision where Pakistan asserts itself as a major power, harmonising relations with both global giants without compromising national interests.

Keywords: Pakistan Foreign Policy, China–Pakistan Relations, US–Pakistan Relations, Strategic Balancing, CPEC and BRI, Indo-Pak Conflict 2025.

Introduction

Pakistan emerged triumphant from the war India imposed on it during the night of 6 and 7 May 2025. Pakistan's final retaliatory response in pursuance of Operation Bunyan Marsoos was swift and retributive. The United States interceded to broker a ceasefire, and President Trump announced it on Truth Social, his social

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media platform, on May 10, congratulating both countries, promising trade and offering to help resolve the Jammu and Kashmir dispute. This was a defining moment for Pakistan and South Asia. Pakistan's success is being hailed by friends and foes, by defence technology experts and strategists. India is in denial, but the ceasefire is holding. The war was watched on screens across the world as a grand combat between Pakistan and India, as well as Pakistan-China and India-Western defence technologies, with the jury pronouncing that Pakistan clearly had the upper hand.

Unexpected dividends for Pakistan from the war were President Trump's repetitive statements putting India and Pakistan on the same pedestal, praising Pakistan for its economic potential and offering to facilitate bilateral diplomacy between Pakistan and India in a neutral place to resolve the Kashmir dispute. Surprisingly, in President Trump's frequent remarks, there has been a palpable tilt towards Pakistan that has incensed India. China supported Pakistan's stance on an impartial and independent inquiry of the Pahalgam incident on April 22 this year and counselled both India and Pakistan to use diplomatic channels to de-escalate the conflict. In practice, it put its full weight behind Islamabad.

Pakistan established supremacy in warfare, particularly in air and land domains, cyber readiness, political unity and narrativization. The question is how Pakistan can adopt a policy that creates equilibrium in its relations with both the US and China. Or is it a mirage? For decades, Pakistan has desired to balance its relations between the United States and China, and rightly so, because it has benefited from partnerships with both countries in different phases of its history. There's a difference, though. There have been periodic ups and downs in Pakistan's ties with the US, but since the early 1960s, Pakistan-China relations have witnessed a continuously ascending trajectory.

Immediately after its independence, the nascent state of Pakistan was fragile and vulnerable to the Indian ruling party's designs to make the Pakistan experiment a failure by denying it a fair share of arms and ammunition, as well as treasury, and by annexing the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir against the wishes of its people in violation of the Indian Independence Act 1947. Pakistan needed protection against its big, belligerent neighbour and help to lift its economy literally from scratch. That was an existential moment for Pakistan to safeguard its hard-won freedom and put its fledgling state on its feet. The new state needed powerful allies who would help it build guardrails against aggression. Pakistan had

two options – to align with the Soviet Union, the leader of the communist bloc, or with the United States, the leader of the free world. Pakistan chose the latter.

At that time, India was very close to the Soviet Union and China. Because of Pakistan's alignment with the US and its co-option into two regional security treaty organisations – SEATO and CENTO – India manoeuvred against Pakistan to create perceptions in Moscow and China that Pakistan was hostile to them. Pakistan's balancing act between the US and China started in the mid-1950s and culminated in the early 1960s. In the 1950s, Pakistan's dependence on the US and its European allies, especially the UK, was such that it helped Pakistan lay down the foundations of its armed forces, learn economic planning, and train physicists and engineers in Western universities. Widely publicised high-level visits of American and Pakistani leaders promoted people-centred diplomacy. In Pakistan, the US remained the most popular country in the 1950s and 1960s as a friend and a beacon of enlightenment. Its investment in Pakistan's agriculture, hydropower, higher education, science and technology made it a symbol of growth and progress because all these areas touched the lives of both elites and ordinary people.

Pakistan's balancing act started in full swing in the wake of the 1962 Indo-China War that propelled India to implore the US to save it from China by supplying American military equipment to guard the Himalayas and by helping it with its own defence production. President John F. Kennedy acquiesced and showed an overt tilt towards India, setting aside Pakistan's loud protestations. This shift shook and irked Pakistan. The US would not release the arms and defensive articles promised to Pakistan before 1965, a year when Pakistan and India fought a bloody war over Kashmir, during which the US remained almost neutral and did not even try to mediate.

Pakistan started exploring a strategic model of *biangular* and *triangular* relationships with Washington, Beijing and Moscow. At that time, a fissure was emerging between China and the Soviet Union. The Indo-USSR relations, however, remained strong. Islamabad did not go very far with Moscow, though there was a semblance of rapprochement that peaked after the Soviet leadership hosted Pakistan and India at Tashkent in 1966.

Pakistan's relations with China took off, especially after we signed a border agreement with it in 1963. And that's when the turbulence in Pakistan-United States relations started, though both still carried on doing business as allies. President

Nixon tried to come to Pakistan's rescue in 1971, towards the end of India's invasion and occupation of East Pakistan, but the American aid was too little too late. On the contrary, the Soviet Union gave full military and diplomatic support to India. After 1971, a *trough* in Pak-US relations emerged that kept recurring. The *peaks* returned in the 1980s when the US and Pakistan together fought against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and during the War on Terror that lasted for two decades from the early 2000s to August 2021. These two periods were also marked by misgivings and disagreements from time to time.

In the 1970s, the development of nuclear weapons and delivery vehicles by India and Pakistan dominated geo-strategic dynamics *vis-à-vis* the United States. India was only mildly censured and sanctioned after its Pokhran nuclear tests in 1974, and it, in fact, got away with its euphemism that these were 'peaceful' nuclear tests. Subsequently, all the pressure was piled up by Washington on Pakistan, demanding that it not go nuclear, even as India had already dismembered it into two parts. In fact, several sanctions were slapped on Pakistan. At that time, Islamabad decided to forge ahead with its nuclear project anyway, despite heavy restrictions and sanctions. There was some relief in this realm during the war in Afghanistan in the 1980s when the US and Pakistan were partners against the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, American sanctions against Pakistan were enforced with full ferocity and, simultaneously, bilateral relations were downgraded in all domains.

Pakistan benefited strategically, politically and economically during the American support to it in the 1980s. But because of Islamabad's embroilment in a major strategic conflict, we could not become a favoured destination for foreign direct investment. When India conducted its nuclear tests in 1998, Pakistan followed suit. India tested on May 11 and Pakistan on May 28. During this period, there was immense pressure on Pakistan not to test, but Pakistan went ahead because, again, this was an existential moment for it. Given the history of Indian animosity towards Pakistan, giving up the option of testing while having developed full capability would have exposed it to Indian aggression and risked the further disintegration of the state of Pakistan – a repeat of the East Pakistan scenario. The US did not seem to understand that logic.

Fortuitously, the Bush Administration in 2001 removed all nuclear sanctions against India and Pakistan and strived in the following year to develop a strategic restraint regime between the two countries, with a modicum of success,

but it proved to be transient. The War on Terror ensued, and while the US and Pakistan became partners again, culminating in Pakistan becoming a Major Non-NATO Ally, the United States and India started crafting an all-time high, robust formal alliance. During that period, though, Pakistan was not a net beneficiary of its ties with the US. The lowest point was when President Trump, on January 1, 2018, cut off all military and economic assistance to Pakistan. After August 2021, during the Biden administration, Pakistan was trying to recalibrate its relations and find space in Washington in a landscape dominated by Indophiles in America and India. It is only after India's duplicitous policy during the Ukraine war that it started dawning on official and non-official circles in the US that India would not side with them in Europe, and it would not be much of a counterweight to China.

Pakistan has regained its lost ground during the second Trump administration. In fact, this year, there has been a dramatic shift in Pakistan's ties with the United States. The thaw in their relations started in February with the release of US\$397 million for the sustainment of F-16 aircraft. On March 3, while addressing a joint session of the US Congress, President Trump credited and thanked Pakistan for arresting the mastermind of the Abbey Gate terrorist attack in Kabul in August 2021, killing 13 American soldiers. Uncharacteristically, and without a precedent, on June 19, President Trump hosted Field Marshall Asim Munir at the White House and discussed the full spectrum of Pak-US relations, including strategic recalibration, counterterrorism, extraction of critical minerals, especially of rare earths, lithium, copper and cobalt, cryptocurrency, emerging technologies, agriculture, trade and economic ties. This sent shockwaves in India. But this tryst was not merely symbolic. Concrete decisions were taken on this agenda during a formal dialogue in Washington in July between Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar and Secretary of State Marco Rubio to take concrete action on the agenda emanating from the White House meeting. Shortly thereafter, the US announced that its tariffs on Pakistan would be only 19%, the lowest in the region. President Trump also announced on his Truth Social that the US would help Pakistan explore its proven oil reserves. What's more, Secretary Rubio publicly acknowledged Pakistan's contribution to regional security and diplomatic mediation on Iran. This is a new pinnacle in Pakistan's relations with the US.

Media reports have surfaced indicating that Indian officials made diplomatic protests to Washington following President Trump's meeting with Field Marshal Asim Munir, warning that Washington's growing ties with Pakistan might damage long-standing strategic Indo-US relations.¹ What about Pakistan-China

relations? Since 1962, each decade has brought steady growth in defence cooperation, economic support, and educational linkages. During the 1960s and 1970s, Pak-China relations scaled new heights, and since then, we have been using hyperbolic phrases to describe Sino-Pak friendship – higher than mountains, deeper than oceans, stronger than steel, sweeter than honey – to reflect the depth of the two countries' strategic cooperative partnership. China and Pakistan proudly call each other 'Iron brothers' and 'all-weather friends'.

It has never been one-way traffic. During the Cold War, Pakistan was among the few friends China had. We provided an air corridor to China during that time, introduced them to Western technology, and supported them in international organisations. In 1971, and even before that, Pakistan advocated for China's entry into the United Nations as a full member instead of Taiwan. In 1971-72, Pakistan's facilitated the United States' rapprochement with China. For years, Pakistan has been supporting China at the Human Rights Council and the World Health Organisation on human rights issues and the status of the People's Republic of China as the sole representative in the UN system, respectively. Significantly, Pakistan has consistently supported China's position on Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang. Again, Pakistan is one of the few countries that sided with China on the 1989 Tiananmen Square events.

For its part, China has stood by Pakistan in difficult times – during the 1965 and 1971 wars. It has watched Pakistan's interests in the UN Security Council. It backed US-Pakistan collaboration against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. More importantly, China has become a lodestone of Pakistan's defence capability – not just by supplying advanced fighter aircraft like J-10C, submarines, tanks and missiles but by enabling us to develop indigenous capability to manufacture JF-17, frigates, missiles and drones. Pakistan's owe the development of its nuclear energy programme to China. The \$62 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has proved to be a game changer in rebuilding Pakistan's infrastructure, including ports, airports, roads, railways, transportation, renewables and traditional power generation projects, industrial zones, agriculture, and higher education. This is a massive multi-sector project as part of China's transcontinental Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). CPEC was not superimposed on Pakistan. It was an outgrowth of years of Chinese investment in Pakistan's critical infrastructure, including, for instance, the Karakoram Highway, several thermal power plants, Pakistan's Heavy Mechanical Complex, Pakistan Aeronautical Complex, Pakistan Ordnance Factories, and Heavy Industries Taxila. There were many more.

Initially, when President Xi Jinping formally launched \$46 billion CPEC in 2015, the US did not seem to be overly concerned about it. The opposition in Washington to the megaproject surfaced later. The most visceral and alarmist reaction came from India, which also leaked information that it was allocating resources to sabotage CPEC. Evidently, an economically stronger Pakistan was not in the interest of India. This was also a time when a divisive debate on the equity of the project amongst all federating units within Pakistan was raging. Under the influence of the Indian lobbies within and outside the US Administration and Congress, opposition to CPEC, as a subset of the BRI, spiralled in America. As the BRI gradually expanded to nearly 140 countries, the US and Western countries' concerns regarding CPEC started becoming sharper and louder when they realised the overall political dividends of the BRI. Over time, these concerns became didactic warnings that Pakistan was stepping into a debt trap and that its strong alignment with China left little space for Washington and Islamabad. This line of argument was a bit disingenuous because there were no matching or counterbalancing offers on the table from the West in the defence, trade or education sectors, because in all the Western capitals, India's unquestioned writ was deep and wide. India had touted itself as a counterweight to China, and nobody was ready to cross-check the veracity of India's will and capability to do the West's bidding. Some Indian Americans² in prestigious think tanks in the US are peddling stories that Pakistan will turn Gwadar into a Chinese military naval base. And one senior US official has publicly objected to the range of Pakistan's ballistic missiles, asserting, incredibly, that they may even threaten America itself.³

The close collaboration between Pakistan and China during the May 2025 India-Pakistan war was witnessed by important capitals, diplomats and military experts. During Field Marshal Asim Munir's visit to China in July, ties between the two countries were further cemented by declarations from both sides of an iron-clad strategic partnership. In his meetings with Vice President Han Zheng, Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, both sides resolved to promote security cooperation and strategic coordination covering counterterrorism, joint training, defence modernisation and combating hybrid and transnational threats.

The five-day war between India and Pakistan, from 7 to 10 May, unilaterally and aggressively imposed on Pakistan, has established many *new norms*. *One*, in the kinetic warfare, Pakistan is not only India's equal but even superior in conventional and strategic realms. *Two*, in technology, the Pakistan-China dyad has proven to be

more effective than the India-Western combine. *Three*, in the wake of Indian aggression, Pakistan would give a swift, punitive and disproportionate response, penetrating deep into its territory. *Fourth*, in future, hybrid warfare will dominate and define the outcome of wars. *Five*, communication and narrative building, during the ongoing revolution in new technology-driven media, will be an inextricable component of wars. *Six*, because of the risk of use of nuclear weapons, the major powers will quickly move to de-escalate a severe flare-up, without taking sides. *Seven*, there will be no peace and tranquillity in the region until a just and durable solution of the Jammu and Kashmir dispute is crafted in accordance with international law.

The US-India dynamic is currently under severe stress, with the Indian ruling party demonising President Trump and castigating the US for its claim of brokering a ceasefire between Pakistan and India. In fact, the much-vaunted US-India strategic partnership has nose-dived as President Trump has imposed 50% tariffs on India, the most punitive on any country so far. He has also threatened prohibitive costs for it if it persists in buying Russian oil and gas and selling it in the international market, earning exorbitant profits. In a state of strategic wilderness, Delhi is exploring options for a full-fledged rapprochement with China and stronger ties with Russia.

We should make maximum use of the window President Trump has opened for Pakistan on trade and a diplomatic solution to the longstanding Kashmir dispute. On the bilateral plane, the areas mature for coordinated actions are boosting trade ties, establishing an overarching economic coordination group that would promote investment and corporate partnerships, modernising Pakistan's agriculture, upgrading defence dialogue for enhanced military-to-military and intelligence-to-intelligence cooperation to counter terrorism and building Pakistan's military capabilities to stave off new and emerging threats in the region. At the people's level, we must revive and reinforce mutual goodwill through the projection of respective soft powers. Pakistan's destiny is closely linked with China, and Pakistan's collaboration with it at all levels is imperative. In fact, as we move towards the completion of CPEC, we need to plan its successor economic cooperation plan, taking us to 2047, when Pakistan will turn 100. The defence technologies and platforms, interoperable with and originating from Chinese platforms, are paving the way for further indigenisation of Pakistan's production capacities.

China has never put pressure on Pakistan to distance itself from the US. In fact, during strains in Pak-US relations, they would advise its leadership to resolve the differences with Washington with ingenuity. At times, Beijing would reach out to the US with similar messages. From Beijing as Ambassador, I recall such intercessions by China after the 2008 Mumbai attack and volatility in the US-Pak relations and in 2011, following the Raymond Davis incident, the Osama bin Laden episode and the killing of Pakistani soldiers by US troops at the Salala post. China would only approach Pakistan for support when its vital national interests are imperilled in international forums, for instance, the participation of Taiwan in the America-led Democracy Summit in 2022.

Official Washington - the Administration or Congress - have not asked Pakistan pointedly and formally to decrease the level of friendship or cooperation with China. Some archconservative lawmakers are blunter on the subject. Still, most understand that China is Pakistan's largest neighbour with deep and multilayered ties, and it is only natural for Islamabad to have strong bonds with it. Some analysts, including a few from Pakistan, overwhelmed by India's narratives, advise, counterintuitively, that Pakistan may reposition itself away from China and accept India's hegemony. And that this would work as a panacea in Washington. This is not going to happen, but it establishes the fact that India has been a big spanner in Pak-US relations, and it drums this theme into the American strategic community that dislodging Pakistan from China would be a dividend for the US. This strategy worked during the Biden administration, but with the drastic turnaround in Washington now, that line of argumentation has lost validity even for its proponents. There are no binary or bipolar compulsions for Pakistan vis-à-vis China and the US. After all, Pakistan has been practising and managing a balance between the US and China for decades of the Cold War and post-Cold War periods.

Pakistan as a nation should resize and reset its self-image while interacting with big powers and other states of the international community. Pakistan is a significant power in its own right. It has been an active member of the United Nations and its affiliated bodies and is recognised as one of the top peacekeeping contributing countries. Nobody in the United Kingdom would ask whether it should join China or the US, obviously because the latter is a US ally, but it will still have strong business and trade partnerships with both nations. Countries that are comparable to us, let's say Indonesia and Brazil, would not agonise over this question because they know the answer: they will have strong ties with both these powers. China has deeply penetrated the heart of Europe, including Southern and

Central Europe. The US-China investment and trade volumes are astronomical. They confront each other but get to the negotiating table to resolve their problems.

Pakistan's compulsion to choose between China and the US is a self-imposed construct and an intellectual pastime for analysts and even officials, which is not supported by *realpolitik* that overrides liberalism and drives national-interest-based politics. The binary choice harks back to the era of the Cold War. That era is gone. The emerging multipolar global order provides an opportunity for Pakistan to graduate to the upper echelon of regional and global power structures, which are in flu currently. This can help Pakistan redefine itself and gain a proportionate heft to its potential.

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