



中國傳媒大學
COMMUNICATION UNIVERSITY OF CHINA



Institute for a Community
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人類命運共同體研究院



Iron Brothers, Shared Horizons

How 75 Years of China-Pakistan Friendship Is Quietly Reshaping the World

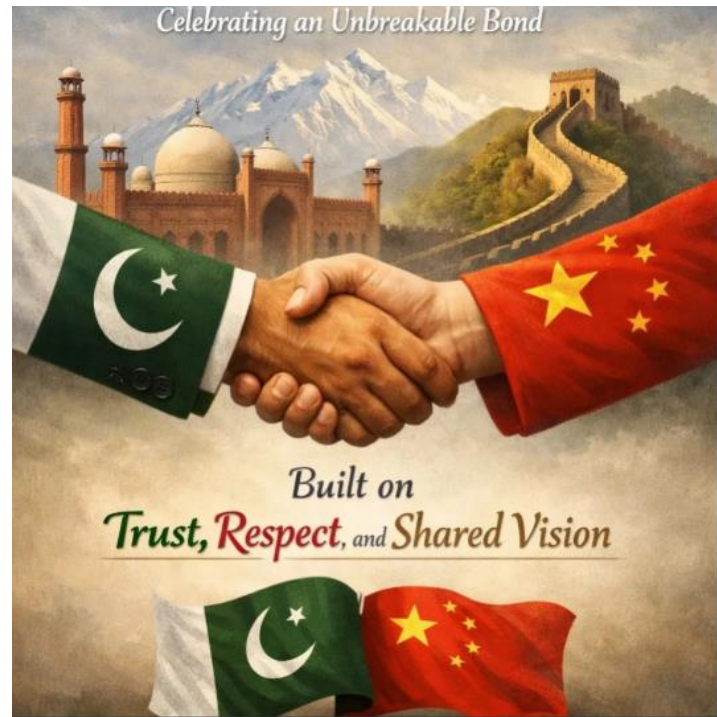


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There is a road that most people will never drive, and a friendship that most diplomats will never fully understand. It winds through some of the world's most violent terrain—past glaciers, sheer cliff-faces, and river gorges deep enough to swallow entire villages—and it has been quietly carrying the weight of a remarkable partnership for over half a century.

The Karakoram Highway. Built by Chinese and Pakistani workers, side by side, at the cost of hundreds of lives, it remains one of the most extraordinary feats of human cooperation in modern history. And it is, in many ways, the perfect metaphor for what China and Pakistan have built together: something improbable, something hard-won, and something that endures.



As the two nations mark 75 years of formal diplomatic relations in 2026, the story being told is not simply one of state visits and signed agreements. It is a story of two countries that have, again and again, chosen each other—in moments of crisis, in the halls of the United Nations, and in the mountains at the edge of the world.

A Friendship Forged in the Fire of the Possible

It is worth pausing on what this friendship actually looked like in its earliest days. In 1951, when Pakistan extended formal recognition to the People's Republic of China, the Cold War was hardening into something permanent and dangerous. To align with Beijing was not a neutral act—it was a statement, and a costly one.

Yet Pakistan made it. And China remembered.

Twenty years later, in 1971, when the question of China's seat at the United Nations came before the General Assembly, Pakistan was among those who pushed hardest for Beijing's



restoration. China, in turn, has consistently backed Pakistan on questions of territorial integrity and sovereignty—a reciprocity that has formed the bedrock of what both sides now call an “all-weather” relationship.

“Higher than the Himalayas, deeper than the ocean, sweeter than honey.” — A refrain repeated by leaders of both nations, and one that, against all odds, still rings true.

What makes this friendship unusual is not its warmth—plenty of nations claim warm ties—but its consistency. When Pakistan was struck by the devastating earthquake of 2005, China was among the first to respond with aid. When COVID-19 swept the world and vaccines became a geopolitical currency, China delivered doses to Pakistan long before many wealthier nations had secured their own supplies. When Pakistan needed someone in its corner at the UN, China was there.

And it has gone both ways. Pakistan has offered logistical corridors and diplomatic solidarity at moments when China needed them most. This is not the transactional friendship of strategic convenience. It is something rarer: a partnership built on a shared belief that smaller and developing nations deserve a seat at the table—and that two countries can do more together than either can alone.

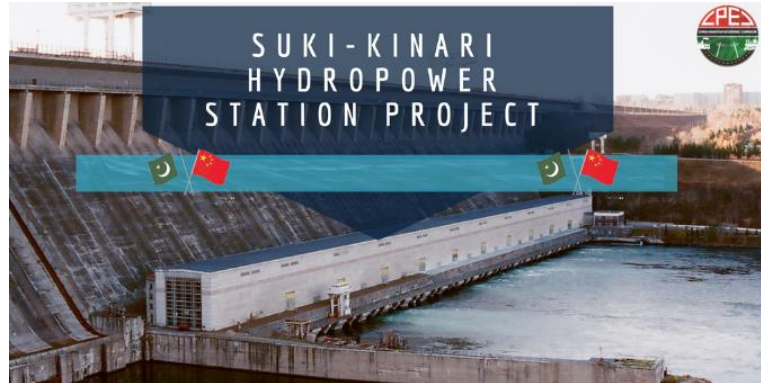
The Corridor That Changed Everything

In 2013, China and Pakistan announced a project so ambitious it strained credulity: the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, or CPEC. A network of roads, railways, pipelines, and power plants stretching from China’s western Xinjiang province all the way down to Gwadar, a small port town on Pakistan’s Arabian Sea coast. The initial price tag? Around \$46 billion. The ambition? To rewrite the economic geography of an entire region.

More than a decade on, the results are real and, in places, remarkable.

Pakistan was, for years, a country strangled by its own energy crisis. Factories ran on erratic schedules. Hospitals operated under the constant threat of blackouts. Ordinary families learned to build their lives around load-shedding timetables. CPEC’s energy projects—coal, hydro, solar, wind—added thousands of megawatts to a grid that desperately needed them. The lights, in much of Pakistan, came back on.

Infrastructure followed. Hundreds of kilometres of new highways. The Orange Line Metro in Lahore—Pakistan’s first mass transit rail project. Upgrades to Gwadar Port, once a sleepy fishing harbour, now being developed into a regional trade hub with a desalination plant, a hospital, and power facilities that are beginning to transform daily life for local communities. Projects like the **Suki Kinari Hydropower Plant** signal a genuine pivot towards sustainable energy as CPEC matures.



Hundreds of thousands of jobs have been created. GDP contributions have grown. Pakistan’s integration into regional supply chains, once a distant aspiration, is becoming a reality.

Gwadar is not just a port. It is a bet on the future—a small city being asked to carry very large dreams.

None of this has been without friction. Critics—some of them Pakistani—have raised legitimate concerns about the structure of CPEC’s debt arrangements, about the uneven distribution of benefits across Pakistan’s provinces, and about security threats, particularly in Balochistan, where militant groups have targeted both Pakistani workers and Chinese personnel. These concerns deserve honest engagement, and the two governments have invested significantly in enhanced security protocols and greater transparency.

But the picture that emerges from a clear-eyed accounting is one of a project that has delivered tangible, life-changing improvements for millions of people—and that is now evolving. CPEC 2.0, as it is being called, shifts the emphasis from concrete and steel to technology, agriculture modernisation, and green industry. It is less about building the road and more about what travels along it.



Standing Together in the Global Arena

If CPEC is the economic heartbeat of this partnership, then China and Pakistan's work in global institutions is its voice.

In September 2025, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the Global Governance Initiative (GGI) at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Plus Summit in Tianjin. The GGI builds on three earlier frameworks—the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative—into a single coherent vision: sovereign equality, adherence to international law, genuine multilateralism, and a people-centred approach to global challenges.

Pakistan was an early and enthusiastic supporter, joining the Group of Friends of Global Governance alongside dozens of other nations. And this is not merely symbolic. In the United Nations and across multilateral forums, China and Pakistan coordinate regularly on issues ranging from counter-terrorism and peacekeeping to climate change and public health.

Both countries are consistent advocates for reforming global financial institutions, arguing—correctly—that the Global South is dramatically under-represented in the bodies that make decisions affecting billions of people. Their joint position is not a radical one: it is a call for the international system to catch up with the world as it actually exists, rather than as it was arranged in 1945.

In an era of rising protectionism and resurgent nationalism, China and Pakistan's diplomacy offers something quietly radical: a model of cooperation that does not require anyone to lose.

CPEC itself is a practical expression of GGI ideals. It extends connectivity and development without ideological conditions—a contrast, its proponents argue, with Western-led development frameworks that have sometimes come with strings attached. Whether one agrees with that framing or not, the underlying point is serious: there is a genuine appetite, across much of the developing world, for models of cooperation that respect sovereignty and deliver results.

Eyes Open: The Challenges Ahead

Any honest accounting of this partnership must sit with its difficulties.

Security remains the most immediate concern. Attacks on Chinese workers and CPEC infrastructure—predominantly in Balochistan—have been a recurring feature of the corridor’s history. Pakistan has deployed significant military resources to protect these projects, but the threat is real and the human cost has been borne, disproportionately, by local Pakistani security forces.



The debt question is more complex than it is often portrayed. Pakistan’s overall debt situation is the product of many factors, only some of which relate to CPEC financing. But the structure of some arrangements has drawn scrutiny, and both governments have acknowledged the need for greater transparency and more equitable terms as the corridor moves into its next phase.

Geopolitical pressures—particularly from the United States and India—add layers of complexity that neither Beijing nor Islamabad can simply ignore. The region is not a vacuum, and the choices China and Pakistan make together are watched carefully, and sometimes contested, by powerful actors with their own interests.

These are real challenges. But 75 years of history suggest they are navigable. The relationship has survived military coups, economic crises, regional wars, a global pandemic, and sustained external pressure. Mutual trust, built slowly and tested repeatedly, is not nothing.

What Comes Next

The next chapter of this partnership is being written in laboratories and agricultural research stations as much as on construction sites. CPEC’s expansion into technology transfer, precision agriculture, and high-value manufacturing is beginning to offer



Pakistan a pathway that earlier phases of development—heavy on infrastructure, light on industrial capacity—could not.

The GGI, if it gains traction, could provide a multilateral framework for extending this model beyond the bilateral. The appetite for alternatives to existing development paradigms is growing, particularly in Africa and Latin America, and China and Pakistan have something genuine to offer: a tested partnership with a track record of delivery.

For Pakistan, the stakes are existential in a way that is easy to understate. Energy security, industrial development, connectivity, and integration into regional value chains are not aspirational goals—they are preconditions for the stability of a nation of 250 million people. CPEC is not the only answer to those needs, but it has become a significant part of the answer.

For China, Pakistan represents something that cannot be replaced: a reliable, strategic partner at the western end of an arc that matters enormously to China's own development and security. The relationship is not purely altruistic—no great-power relationship ever is—but it is genuinely mutual in ways that matter.

The Road Keeps Going

Somewhere in the Karakoram, on a day when the weather permits, you can drive for hours without seeing another vehicle. The mountains on either side are so enormous that they seem to belong to a different scale of reality. And running through them, cut by hand and dynamite over decades, is this road—this unlikely, improbable road—connecting two countries that decided, a long time ago, to bet on each other.

75 years is a long time in international relations. Alliances that looked permanent have collapsed. Friendships that seemed transactional have deepened. The China-Pakistan relationship has done something relatively rare: it has grown more robust with time, more layered, more capable of absorbing shocks and generating value.

The road keeps going. And so, it seems, does this partnership.