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## The Dragon-Eagle Summit: What Trump's Visit to China Means for Pakistan



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As Air Force One touches down in Beijing on May 13, 2026, for Donald Trump’s first presidential visit to China in almost nine years, the world’s two largest economies once again attempt to manage one of the most consequential bilateral relationships in modern history. The summit — originally planned for April but delayed by the intensifying 2026 Iran War and the cascading closure of the Strait of Hormuz — arrives at a moment of profound global uncertainty: supply chains shattered, energy markets in shock, and the rules-based international order under unprecedented strain.



For Pakistan, a nation that straddles the fault line between these rival giants, the symbolism and substance of this Dragon-Eagle encounter will reverberate far beyond Beijing’s ceremonial halls. Islamabad will be watching with acute interest, a quiet anxiety, and, if its diplomats play their cards wisely, a window of opportunity.

### **The Summit in Context: Managing the Unmanageable**

The May 14–15 state visit is the second in-person Trump-Xi encounter since Trump’s return to the White House, following their October 2025 Busan meeting. But this Beijing summit carries far greater symbolic weight: it is the first time a sitting US president has visited China since Trump’s own 2017 state visit, and it comes against a backdrop incomparably more complex than that earlier “state visit-plus” spectacle in the Forbidden City.

The agenda is sprawling. Trade and tariffs top the list for Washington, as the administration seeks to lock in and expand Chinese purchase commitments — Boeing aircraft, American agricultural products, and a bilateral “Board of Trade” framework. Technology competition runs close behind, with US export controls on semiconductors and China’s retaliatory suspension of rare earth mineral exports having already upended global supply chains across Europe, Japan, and South Korea. The Iran War adds a combustible layer: with the US Navy blockading the Strait of Hormuz and intercepting tankers bound for China — Iran’s largest crude buyer — the two sides are



simultaneously at loggerheads and dependent on each other for any path toward energy market stabilization.

Taiwan, artificial intelligence governance, and the Russia-Ukraine conflict round out a dossier that would challenge even the most seasoned diplomatic architecture. Most analysts expect modest, incremental outcomes rather than grand reset. As Brookings analysts note, the summit is defined more by what it aims to avoid — a damaging breakdown — than by what it seeks to achieve. The CFR’s assessment is blunter still: Xi enters the talks in a position of considerable confidence, having successfully weaponized rare earth restrictions during 2025 tariff escalations, compelling Washington to blink first.

***“For Pakistan, the real test is not choosing between the Dragon and the Eagle — it is building the institutional strength to engage both effectively, simultaneously.”***

### **Pakistan’s Tightrope: The “All-Weather Friend” in a Stormy Season**

No country in the Indo-Pacific watches US-China summitry with more tactical alertness than Pakistan. Islamabad’s foreign policy rests on a foundational paradox: its deepest strategic partnership is with China, while its most consequential episodic partnership is with the United States.

The China-Pakistan relationship is structural and enduring. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the flagship of Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative, has injected over \$25 billion into Pakistan’s energy and transport infrastructure during its first phase, adding 8,000 MW to the national grid and creating more than 192,000 direct jobs. President Zardari’s January 2026 visit to China formally launched CPEC 2.0, shifting the narrative from mega-infrastructure toward technology transfer, agricultural modernization, desalination, and provincial-level industrial cooperation. For Beijing, Pakistan is the “iron brother” — a land bridge to the Indian Ocean, a strategic counterweight to India, and the proof of concept for BRI’s geopolitical logic.

The US-Pakistan relationship, by contrast, is tactical and transactional. Washington’s renewed interest in Islamabad since 2025 reflects several converging incentives: frustration with India over stalled trade talks and New Delhi’s continued purchase of Russian oil, genuine interest in Pakistan’s rare earth and critical mineral potential, regional security needs following the Iran conflict, and Pakistan’s own masterful personal diplomacy toward the Trump administration. Yet historical memory in Islamabad is long. The US has repeatedly cycled through engagement and

neglect — most recently abandoning Pakistan strategically after the Afghanistan withdrawal. As one analyst put it, the renewed US-Pakistan honeymoon is “tactical and temporary.”

This is the dual calculus Islamabad brings to the Trump-Xi moment: genuine strategic depth with China, episodic utility for the United States, and an urgent need to prevent either relationship from being sacrificed on the altar of the other.



## **The Potential Upsides: What a Stable Summit Offers Pakistan**

### **1. REDUCED PRESSURE TO CHOOSE SIDES**

A Goldilocks outcome — good enough to reduce conflict and tension but not so warm as to suggest a G2 condominium — is precisely what Pakistan needs. When US-China relations are managed with relative predictability, middle powers like Pakistan face less coercive pressure to publicly align. The window for multi-alignment widens. Islamabad can pursue CPEC 2.0 without Washington treating it as a hostile act, while simultaneously deepening economic ties with US-linked institutions, including the IMF, G7 debt restructuring frameworks, and American private investment in its mineral sector.

### **2. ENERGY MARKET RELIEF**

The Strait of Hormuz crisis has been devastating for Pakistan, a major oil importer with chronic energy sector fragility. Any Trump-Xi agreement — even a partial one — that contributes to reopening the strait or stabilizing oil price trajectories would deliver direct macroeconomic relief to Islamabad. China has already positioned itself as having signaled to Iran on reopening the strait, and a coordinated US-China push could offer the energy shock relief that Pakistan’s economy urgently needs. Lower imported energy costs also improve the financial viability of CPEC power projects, many of which are burdened by capacity payment obligations in a foreign currency.

### **3. CPEC 2.0 WITH LESS EXTERNAL SCRUTINY**



If Washington and Beijing achieve a working modus vivendi on trade and economic issues, US pressure on CPEC — including the long-running “debt trap” narrative — may soften. President Zardari’s visit strategically reframed CPEC as a development partnership focused on livelihood-enhancing technology, rather than Beijing’s debt-laden mega-infrastructure. A more stable US-China relationship creates diplomatic space for this rebranding to gain traction in Western capitals, potentially easing conditions on IMF programmes and improving Pakistan’s access to multilateral financing.

#### **4. AFGHANISTAN AND REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY**

A calmer US-China relationship creates more favourable conditions for multilateral engagement on Afghanistan — an issue where Pakistan’s regional influence remains uniquely significant. Washington’s interest in using the Beijing summit to secure Chinese support for a Russia-Ukraine resolution suggests both powers may be, momentarily, in the business of regional stability. Islamabad should be actively lobbying both capitals to leverage this window for renewed international engagement with Kabul, which directly affects Pakistan’s security, refugee burden, and trade corridor ambitions toward Central Asia.

### **The Risks and Fault Lines: Navigating the Darker Scenarios**

#### **1. INTENSIFIED GREAT-POWER RIVALRY**

Should the summit produce limited results or degenerate into visible antagonism — particularly on Taiwan, technology, or Iran — Pakistan could face renewed and heightened pressure from both capitals. A Washington frustrated with Beijing’s obduracy may demand that Islamabad make more visible commitments to the US technology ecosystem and curtail aspects of Sino-Pakistani defence cooperation. Beijing, simultaneously, may expect Pakistan to provide more explicit diplomatic support in multilateral forums, complicate Pakistan’s ability to engage the US on its own terms.

#### **2. TECHNOLOGY DECOUPLING AND PAKISTAN’S DIGITAL FUTURE**

US export controls on semiconductors and advanced technology — and China’s own retaliatory bans — risk placing Pakistan in an impossible position. If Washington intensifies its friend-shoring strategy in response to a contentious summit, Pakistan’s deep integration with Chinese telecommunications infrastructure (including Huawei networks and ZTE systems) could create friction in any US-led technology partnership or digital economy initiative. Pakistan cannot build



a 21st-century digital economy while being excluded from both the American and Chinese technology supply chains.

### **3. TAIWAN CONCESSIONS AND REGIONAL SECURITY**

Taiwan is the sleeper risk in these talks. If Trump makes rhetorical or substantive concessions to Xi on Taiwan's status — even ambiguous ones — it could signal a broader American willingness to accommodate Chinese assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific. For Pakistan, a more emboldened China in the region is generally a net positive in the India-focused balance of power calculus. But any US retrenchment from Indo-Pacific commitments also risks ceding strategic space in ways that are inherently unpredictable and could reduce Washington's interest in maintaining Pakistan as a geopolitical partner.

### **4. DEBT AND DOLLAR DEPENDENCY**

Pakistan owes over 72% of its external bilateral debt to China — a structural vulnerability that constrains its diplomatic manoeuvre room regardless of any summit outcome. If great-power competition intensifies, Beijing may use debt leverage more overtly, while Washington's IMF influence could be deployed to extract compliance on politically sensitive issues. Pakistan's fundamental problem is that it has borrowed its way into dependence on both capitals, and the Dragon-Eagle dynamic threatens to make that dependence a geopolitical weapon rather than merely a financial burden.

### **The Path Forward: Proactive Statecraft Over Reactive Diplomacy**

Pakistan's long-standing policy of "strategic autonomy" has served it reasonably well through decades of great-power turbulence. But the Trump-Xi era demands something more sophisticated than neutrality — it demands proactive economic statecraft grounded in institutional strength and genuine economic value creation.

Several priority imperatives stand out:

- Accelerate CPEC 2.0 governance reforms. The primary obstacle to CPEC progress is not external — it is internal. Political instability, security failures protecting Chinese workers, and poor regulatory transparency continue to erode Beijing's confidence. Pakistan must establish a dedicated CPEC Implementation Cell with parliamentary oversight and quarterly public reporting. Chinese confidence in CPEC is Pakistan's single most important diplomatic currency with Beijing.



- ▶ Monetise critical mineral assets strategically. Pakistan’s rare earth and critical mineral potential is one of the few genuine leverage points it holds with Washington. But the current USD \$1.25 million US commitment pales against China’s \$8.5 billion CPEC 2.0 tranche. Pakistan should launch an international competitive tender for mineral development rights, ensuring neither China nor the US secures monopoly access, thus preserving bargaining leverage with both.
- ▶ Build institutional depth in US-Pakistan relations. Pakistan’s history of episodic US engagement suggests that diplomatic relationships built on personal rapport — rather than institutional frameworks — are fragile. Islamabad should push for durable sectoral agreements in counterterrorism, climate adaptation, and digital economy — areas where interests genuinely converge and where congressional support is achievable regardless of White House turnover.
- ▶ Invest in technology sovereignty. Pakistan cannot be perpetually caught between American and Chinese technology ecosystems. A national digital sovereignty strategy — diversifying vendors, building domestic capability in cybersecurity and AI, and developing clear technology governance frameworks — will reduce the cost of navigating tech decoupling in any post-summit environment.
- ▶ Activate regional connectivity diplomacy. The Strait of Hormuz crisis and the Afghanistan vacuum both underscore the strategic value of Pakistan as a connectivity hub. Islamabad should be championing a regional energy and trade corridor framework — linking Central Asia to the Arabian Sea — with both Chinese and potentially US-aligned financing. This positions Pakistan as a solution provider rather than a passive recipient in great-power competition.

## **Conclusion: Between Dragons and Eagles, Build Your Own Wings**

The Trump-Xi summit will not resolve the fundamental tensions that define the US-China relationship. Analysts across the spectrum, from CSIS to Brookings to the CFR, concur: the most realistic outcome is a modest stabilisation, a temporary truce on a handful of negotiable issues, and a managed equilibrium that suits both leaders’ domestic political needs. The deeper competition — over technology, Taiwan, Indo-Pacific influence, and the future architecture of global trade — will endure long after the state banquet at the Great Hall of the People concludes.

For Pakistan, the lesson of the Dragon-Eagle era is clear and urgent: middle powers that define themselves entirely through the prism of great-power competition become instruments of others’



strategies, not authors of their own. The country that emerged as a nuclear state against the wishes of both superpowers, that survived decades of coercive pressure from every direction, and that has endured economic crises that would have collapsed lesser states — that country has the strategic resilience to carve a more autonomous path.

What it requires is not neutrality, but clarity. Clarity about national interests that transcend the next IMF tranche or the next arms deal. Clarity about the economic foundations — in education, technology, industry, and governance — that make a country genuinely valuable to the world rather than merely geographically convenient. And clarity about the kind of Pakistan its citizens deserve, regardless of what the Dragon and the Eagle decide to do in Beijing.

The summit opens a window. How wide that window opens, and how skillfully Islamabad climbs through it, will define Pakistan's geopolitical trajectory for the decade ahead.