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Practice, Dilemmas and Prospects of China-Pakistan Joint Construction of the Belt and Road

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Abstract

75 years of acquaintance and companionship, China and Pakistan always stand by each other and forge ahead in the same boat. It is precisely through long-term mutual support that the two countries have nurtured profound traditional friendship and formed an all-weather strategic cooperative partnership. Against the backdrop of complex regional geopolitical changes and the call for high-quality upgrading of China-Pakistan Cooperation under the BRI, existing research on China-Pakistan cooperation lacks systematic analysis of multi-dimensional supporting pathways for the upgrading. Especially, prior studies have an insufficient discussion on the benefit-sharing and distribution mechanism, collaborative public opinion governance system, digital empowerment support system and diversified layout. This paper thus raises its core research question, namely what targeted systematic pathways can comprehensively boost the upgraded development of CPEC and build a closer China-Pakistan community with a shared future for the new era?

This research adopts a combined methodology of policy-text analysis and typical case study. It systematically reviews bilateral joint statements, Chinese aid policies and official CPEC planning documents. Taking policy, infrastructure, people-to-people connectivity as core research cases, it summarizes the pragmatic achievements. It further identifies development bottlenecks stemming from domestic divergent interests and artificial barriers erected by external powers that hinder bilateral cooperation.

For decades, China has extended diverse assistance to Pakistan based on the principles of equality and mutual benefit, pragmatic outcomes, respect for Pakistan's domestic demands and no political strings attached. Meanwhile, China has consistently delivered on the consensus

reached between the heads of state of the two sides, advancing pragmatic cooperation across infrastructure, energy, trade and commerce, people's livelihoods and other sectors. These efforts have driven all-round and in-depth development of the China-Pakistan all-weather strategic cooperative partnership. Looking ahead, China and Pakistan will foster an upgraded version of the CPEC, build an even closer China-Pakistan community with a shared future for the new era, and sustain the sound model of win-win bilateral cooperation.

Keywords: China; Pakistan; China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative is essentially a global development initiative guided by the principles of extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits. Relying on an all-dimensional cooperation network, it helps to facilitate connectivity, mutual benefit and shared prosperity among countries and regions along the routes. Since the 1950s, China and Pakistan have maintained robust and stable diplomatic relations. Supporting each other in both favorable and adverse times, the two nations have cultivated deep-rooted traditional friendship. China and Pakistan consistently align their national strategies and development plans, and maintain close coordination on international and regional affairs as well as each other's core interests and diplomatic stances, especially the two governments agreed to build a closer China-Pakistan community with a shared future in the new era. Against the complex geopolitical shifts across South Asia and the global trend of high-quality Belt and Road cooperation, the China-Pakistan all-weather strategic cooperative partnership is a choice by history and by the people, and plays an exemplary role in advancing the Neighborhood Community with a Shared Future. Within this framework, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has become the core landmark project of bilateral collaboration.

Existing academic research has mostly focused on single-dimensional analytical perspective to examine the bilateral cooperation between the two nations across politics, economy, agriculture, aerospace, mining, and other fields. Meanwhile, studies concerning CPEC have formed three main strands. The first one is to explore the theoretical origin and conceptual evolution of CPEC's trade re-routing effect, taking the land-sea integrated strategic layout to interpret the corridor's value as China's critical southwestern international economic

and energy channel connecting to Southeast Asian states, Indian Ocean coastal states and Middle Eastern countries. The second one conducts quantitative empirical analysis, measuring the advantages of CPEC in transport distance, logistics cost, transit time and bilateral trade potential through gravity models, GTAP simulation and other econometric tools. The third research direction systematically reviews multi-dimensional restrictive factors hindering CPEC's direct expected benefits and its spillover effects, including security threats posed by regional separatist forces and terrorist groups, geopolitical interference from external powers, fiscal pressure, institutional coordination obstacles and cultural frictions. From the above, it can be clearly observed that prior scholarship has placed less focus on interest rivalry and distorted public perceptions that derail bilateral cooperation, as well as systematic supporting paths.

On the basis of the above research gap, combining existing literature and realistic progress of CPEC, this paper relies on policy document analysis alongside representative case studies to systematically examine the tangible deliverables of China-Pakistan joint construction of the BRI, identify dilemmas constraining its sustainable advancement, and proposes multi-dimensional improvement paths accordingly and long-term prospects for bilateral cooperation. This study also intends to provide a concise retrospective overview for the 75th anniversary of China-Pakistan diplomatic relations, and put forward feasible proposals for deepening bilateral all-round cooperation in the new era.

Practices of China-Pakistan Joint Construction of the Belt and Road

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations, China and Pakistan have carried out a full spectrum of pragmatic cooperation, generating tangible rewards that span science and

technology, people's livelihoods and other fields. The two countries stand as a model of friendly coexistence and coordinated development between sovereign states.

Strategic Coordination Boosting Policy Connectivity

Characterized by sincerity and high-level mutual trust, China and Pakistan have maintained close exchanges at the top and all other levels to promote alignment and integration of bilateral strategies. First, national strategies and development plans of the two sides are deeply aligned. In 2015, President Xi Jinping paid a historic visit to Pakistan, during which the two sides agreed to establish an all-weather strategic cooperative partnership, ushering a new era for China-Pakistan relations. In September 2025, President Xi Jinping met with Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif in Beijing. The two governments reached an agreement to build a China-Pakistan community with a shared future featuring firmer political mutual trust, closer economic and trade ties, deeper security cooperation, and stronger popular support between 2025 and 2029. Meanwhile, both sides will strengthen the alignment between the Belt and Road Initiative and Pakistan's 5Es Growth Framework, opening a new chapter for China-Pakistan relations.

Second, the two sides maintain close strategic coordination on international and regional affairs, firmly supporting each other's core interests and diplomatic stances. In February 2025, President Xi Jinping met with Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari during his state visit to China, and the two sides issued a joint statement. China reaffirms that China-Pakistan relations stand as a top priority in its foreign policy, while Pakistan underscores that developing relations with China is the cornerstone of its foreign policy.¹ On May 20, 2025, Member of the Political

¹ Xi Jinping Holds Talks with Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, Official Website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China,

Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi, held talks with Ismail Dar, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Pakistan, in Beijing. Wang Yi stated that China will unswervingly stand side by side with Pakistan to safeguard its national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Dar pledged that Pakistan firmly adheres to the one-China principle and supports China in safeguarding its national interests and dignity.²

Third, multi-tiered consultation mechanisms have been established to facilitate the implementation of bilateral agreements. China and Pakistan have established regular multi-level consultation mechanisms covering diplomacy, political parties, defense, cultural exchange and other sectors, enhancing timely information exchange and strategic or special coordination on international and regional situations, political and economic trade, culture and education, and other fields. In January 2025, Sun Weidong, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of China, and Amna Baloch, Foreign Secretary of Pakistan, co-chaired the 5th meeting of the CPEC Joint Working Group on International Cooperation Coordination in Beijing. In February 2025, President Xi Jinping held talks with Pakistani President Zardari during his state visit, and the two sides signed cooperation documents spanning trade, science and technology, people's livelihoods, media and other fields.³ In August 2025, Wang Yi co-hosted the 6th round of the China-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue with Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Dar in Islamabad. Both sides emphasized stepping up efforts to build the community with a shared future and upgrade CPEC to version 2.0.

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2757_663518/2759_663522/202502/t20250207_11550759.html last accessed: June 11, 2026.

² Wang Yi Holds Talks with Pakistani Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Mohammad Ishaq Dar, Official Website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/wjzbzd/202505/t20250520_11629202.shtml, last accessed: June 11, 2026.

³ News on Pakistan, Official Website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/yz_676205/1206_676308/xgxw_676314/, last accessed: June 11, 2026.

Pragmatic Cooperation Advancing Infrastructure Connectivity

In response to practical development demands and guided by the vision of mutual benefit and win-win results, China and Pakistan leverage the flagship projects of the Belt and Road Initiative to address infrastructure bottlenecks and substantially boost regional connectivity.

First, passenger and freight transport routes have been upgraded to strengthen regional connectivity. As a landmark project under the Belt and Road Initiative, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor provides vital support for Pakistan's economic and social development. Prior to the corridor's launch, Pakistan suffered from aging, poorly maintained and low-capacity infrastructure. According to the World Economic Forum, Pakistan's road quality score stood at 3.92, 4.04, 3.81 and 3.76 respectively during 2012–2015, below the global average road quality score of 4.07 over the same period.⁴ To date, 1,656 kilometers of expressways and national highways have been completed under CPEC, with an additional 813 kilometers under construction.⁵ Among these projects, the PKM Highway (Sukkur-Multan Section), the north-south transport artery, opened to traffic at the end of 2019 and was fully handed over to Pakistani operators by late 2020. Stretching 392 kilometers, the highway cuts travel time between Sukkur and Multan from 11 hours to less than 4 hours,⁶ lifting transport efficiency

⁴ Infrastructure and transport characteristics, <https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Pakistan/>, last accessed: June 11, 2026.

⁵ China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Assessment and Outlook, China.org.cn, https://www.toutiao.com/article/7637795814684787242/?app=news_article&module_name=Android_tt_others&share_did=MS4wLjACAAAUJD_RDOPaMfxH1ouVgcm2xIeoUSNqwdmjITSUsavs4lYVS8cgLAF3-j9AsI2io_p&share_uid=MS4wLjABAAAAPXCiSETrvtxthOr7Ihdj8nCdwuIxOpF5vIxbt4TihE9h3iW9la5gLYJfldozcLR×tamp=1781163626&tt_from=wechat&upstream_biz=Android_wechat&use_new_style=1&utm_campaign=client_share&utm_medium=toutiao_android&utm_source=wechat&share_token=0d74b30a-1671-4264-94ee-5015d244c6d3&source=m_redirect, last accessed June 11, 2026.

⁶ Global Look | Visiting the Sukkur Section Expressway under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, Xinhua News Agency, http://www.news.cn/world/2023-07/06/c_1129735425.htm?f_link_type=f_linkinlinenote&flow_extra=eyJpbm9pbmVfZGlzcGxheV9wb3NpdGlvbil6MCwiZG9jX3Bvc2l0aW9uIjowLCJkb2NfaWQiOiJkOGI2ZmJjZmU2MzhLOWI2LTE0NDg3ZGU4N2EzZTZjYkI%3D%3D&use_xbridge3=true&loader_name=forest&need_sec_link=1&sec_link_scene=im&theme=light, last accessed June 11, 2026.

by over 175% and slashing logistics costs by at least 20%. It has greatly boosted commodity circulation and cross-regional people-to-people exchanges. Within the CPEC framework, the Orange Line Metro in Lahore entered commercial operation in 2020. Adopting Chinese technical standards and equipment in full, the project ushered Pakistan into the metro era. By the end of 2025, the Orange Line had carried more than 280 million passengers.⁷ As another flagship CPEC project, Gwadar Deep-Water Port has transformed Gwadar from a remote fishing village into a modern port city with full operational capabilities.

Second, energy infrastructure development has revitalized regional economic vitality. Before CPEC's launch, Pakistan was repeatedly plagued by power outages, with unstable electricity supply in remote and rural areas. Power shortages had long been a core constraint on economic growth and residents' livelihoods. CPEC incorporates 19 energy projects, 14 of which have entered commercial operation, adding over 8,000 MW of capacity to Pakistan's national power grid and accounting for 19.4% of the country's total installed power capacity, significantly easing power shortages. Sahiwal and Port Qasim coal-fired power plants supply critical base-load electricity; the ± 660 kV Matiari-Lahore High-Voltage Direct Current (HVDC) transmission line, Pakistan's first HVDC power line, delivers stable power to 9 to 10 million households.⁸ The Thar Coal Power Project utilizes domestic lignite to replace imported fuel,

⁷ Metro Line Built by Chinese Enterprises in Lahore Serves Over 280 Million Riders in More Than 5 Years—Driving Sustainable Development of the Ancient City of Lahore, People's Daily Central Kitchen-Zero Time Difference Studio, <https://m.163.com/dy/article/KJBVBSEO0530MKMJ.html?clickfrom=subscribe>, last accessed June 11, 2026.

⁸ China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Assessment and Outlook, China.org.cn, https://www.toutiao.com/article/7637795814684787242/?app=news_article&module_name=Android_tt_others&share_id=MS4wLjACAAAUJD_RDOPaMfxH1ouVgcm2xIeoUSNqwdmjITSUsavs4lYVS8cgLAF3-j9AsI2io_p&share_uid=MS4wLjABAAAAPXCiSETrvtxthOr7lhdj8nCdwulxOpF5vLxht4TihE9h3iW9la5gLYJfldozcjLR×tamp=1781163626&tt_from=wechat&upstream_biz=Android_wechat&use_new_style=1&utm_campaign=client_share&utm_medium=toutiao_android&utm_source=wechat&share_token=0d74b30a-1671-4264-94ee-5015d244c6d3&source=m_redirect, last accessed: June 11, 2026.

alleviating power shortages, saving foreign exchange and optimizing Pakistan's energy mix. Clean energy projects including the Karot Hydropower Project, Suki Kinari Hydropower Station, Jhimpir Wind Farm and Dawood Wind Farm have effectively facilitated the transition of Pakistan's energy structure toward green and low-carbon green development.

Third, digital infrastructure upgrades narrow the regional digital divide. The CPEC Digital Information Corridor, the core digital infrastructure project under CPEC, is the first cross-border terrestrial optical fiber cable project jointly built by China and Pakistan. The project laid roughly 3,000 kilometers of cross-border optical cables extending from the Khunjerab Pass to Rawalpindi. Within Pakistan, 820 kilometers underground OFC were laid, complemented by 172 kilometers aerial OFC and 26 high-capacity microwave links as backup to OFC network to eliminate single-point communication failures.⁹ The corridor went into commercial service in August 2018, extending modern 3G/4G/5G communication networks to remote northern regions such as Gilgit-Baltistan and deeply integrating local communities into the digital economy. Building on the dividends of Phase I, Phase II of the CPEC OFC Project was launched in 2021, expanding the fiber-optic network from Rawalpindi to Karachi and Gwadar to fully support Pakistan's digital transformation and digital economic growth.

Fourth, industrial cooperation platforms have expanded space for trade and economic collaboration. Leveraging increasingly sound interconnectivity networks, China and Pakistan jointly built industrial capacity cooperation zones, creating more jobs, advancing technological upgrading, narrowing regional development gaps and improving industrial supporting systems. By the end of 2024, the two sides had identified 77 cooperation projects under CPEC, 54 of

⁹ Telecommunication, CPEC, <https://cpecinfo.com/telecommunication/>, last accessed: June 11, 2026.

which had been launched or been completed. Nine special economic zones are included in the framework, among which Rashakai Special Economic Zone and Allama Iqbal Industrial City have made substantial progress, hosting numerous Chinese enterprises. Up to now, CPEC projects have attracted more than USD 25.9 billion in direct investment and created over 260,000 jobs across construction, engineering, logistics, manufacturing and other sectors, around 80% of which are filled by Pakistani employees.¹⁰ Further development dividends will be unlocked with the steady advancement of the projects.

Exchanges and Mutual Learning Promoting People-to-People Connectivity

United through shared hardships and mutual respect, China and Pakistan deepen exchanges and mutual learning through joint research, technical training, special cooperation and other multi-channel initiatives.

First, cultural exchanges consolidate popular emotional foundations. China and Pakistan carry out talent training, art exhibitions, study tours and other activities to advance all-dimensional cultural cooperation and solidify popular support for bilateral ties. In 2017, the two sides established the CPEC University Alliance exchange mechanism, which has yielded tangible outcomes in faculty and student training, joint research, talent cultivation and integration of industry and education. By the first half of 2022, the alliance had expanded from 18 to 83 universities, signing nearly 100 memorandums of understanding and hosting close to 80 training sessions.¹¹ In September 2021, the China-Pakistan Calligraphy and Painting

¹⁰ Ambassador's Essay: Carrying Forward Ironclad China-Pakistan Friendship and Writing a New Chapter of Win-Win Cooperation, Belt and Road Portal, <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/02D9JO4J.html>, last accessed: June 11, 2026.

¹¹ Sichuan-Pakistan University Online Dialogue on Science, Technology and Education Cooperation, China News Service, 2026. https://www.toutiao.com/article/7096374571745411617/?app=news_article&module_name=Android_tt_others&share_id=MS4wLjACAAAuJD_RDOPaMfxH1ouVgcm2xleoUSNqwdmjiTSUsavs4lYVS8cgLAF3-j9Asl2io_p&share_uid=MS4wLjABAAAAPXCISETrvtxtthOr7Ihdj8nCdwulxOpF5vixbt4TihE9h3iW9la5gLYJfldozcjLR×tamp=1781340053&tt_from=wechat&upstream_biz=Android_wechat&use_new_style=1&utm_campaign=client_share&utm_me

Exhibition was held to mark the 70th anniversary of bilateral diplomatic ties. In 2023, the Gandhara Heritage along the Silk Road: A Pakistan-China Joint Exhibition was co-hosted at the Palace Museum. In short, exchange and mutual learning deepen cultural ties between China and Pakistan, injecting positive momentum into the building of an ever closer China-Pakistan community with a shared future in the new era.

Second, public welfare cooperation consolidates consensus on shared development. China and Pakistan have united various public welfare organizations to carry out diverse assistance initiatives, consolidate consensus on development through public welfare collaboration, and jointly forge a China-Pakistan community of shared interests. The China Red Cross Foundation, together with international Red Cross organizations and Pakistan Red Crescent Society, mobilizes cross-party resources to build first-aid facilities, set up emergency rescue teams, train medical emergency personnel and develop emergency command systems. A emergency first-aid unit consisting of stations, ambulances, professional staff and information systems has been deployed in villages and transport hubs along CPEC, establishing a comprehensive emergency rescue and public health service network, and markedly improving public health capacity along the corridor.¹² In May 2017, the first first-aid unit, the China-Pakistan Fraternity Emergency Care Center, opened in Gwadar Port. The Red Cross Society of China and the National Health Commission of China have dispatched four groups of Chinese medical teams to the CPEC Fraternity center, consisting of specialists from the China Red Cross Foundation, Huashan Hospital and Beijing Red Cross Emergency Rescue Center. The teams have delivered medical

dium=toutiao_android&utm_source=wechat&share_token=1290ece0-0f11-4f0a-92e5-835d84f3c910&source=m_redirect, last accessed: June 11, 2026.

¹² China-Pakistan Emergency Medical Corridor, Official Website of China Red Cross Foundation, https://www.crcf.org.cn/web/article.shtml?classFlag=jjzy_project&cid=108, last accessed: June 11, 2026.

and emergency care to Pakistani residents and staff of Chinese-funded institutions, serving a total of 5,956 patients, including 4,207 Pakistani locals.¹³ The Project of China-Pakistan Youth Concentric Circle Home, jointly initiated by Beijing Concentric Circle Charity Foundation, China-Pakistan Youth Exchange Group and Pakistani public welfare organizations, targets orphans, sick children and impoverished youth in Pakistan through targeted poverty alleviation programs including living subsidies and educational aid. Various public welfare projects operated by Chinese and Pakistani civil society organizations bring concrete benefits to general public, making people-to-people connectivity visible and tangible.

Third, drawing on “small yet beautiful” livelihoods projects, both sides jointly pursue people's well-being. Livelihoods initiatives including school construction, street lighting upgrades and drinking water projects have greatly improved local infrastructure and living standards across Pakistan. From May 2024 to October 2025, 50 Chinese-aided schools were completed and handed over to Pakistan in Bara Town, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province. It includes 35 primary schools, 7 junior high schools and 8 senior high schools, all equipped with modern teaching facilities, solar power systems, clean drinking water, air conditioning and sanitary amenities.¹⁴ The China-Pakistan Friendship Hospital, built with Chinese assistance in Gwadar, Balochistan Province, opened in May 2024. It receives around 900 patients daily, providing medical care to more than 60,000 general practice patients, 30,000 pediatric patients and 18,000 emergency patients, totaling 150,000 medical consultations for local residents.¹⁵

¹³ Red Cross Marching Forward with the Belt and Road — Overview of China Red Cross Foundation's Participation in Belt and Road Construction, Official Website of China Red Cross Foundation, https://www.crcf.org.cn/web/article.shtml?classFlag=rdjs_xinwenzhongxin&cid=1072, last accessed: June 11, 2026.

¹⁴ All 50 Chinese-Aided Schools in Pakistan Completed and Handed Over, People's Daily Online, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1856883621199742520&wfr=spider&for=pc>, last accessed: June 11, 2026.

¹⁵ China-Aided China-Pakistan Friendship Hospital Project Brings Benefits to Local People, Official Website of the Chinese

In Balochistan, Chinese-donated health kits have benefited female students and teachers at 766 schools, empowering Pakistani women and advancing sustainable development. Solar street light projects supported by China put an end to unlit rural roads in remote areas of Sindh Province. China has also supplied 5 sets of intelligent ground meteorological monitoring stations, 1 integrated cloud-based disaster risk early warning system and 5,000 household photovoltaic power systems to help Pakistan build an efficient disaster prevention and mitigation network.¹⁶ Additional “small yet beautiful” livelihoods projects include hospital aid programs, hybrid rice seed donations, agricultural technical assistance, the Silk Road Scholarship Program, joint laboratory construction, smart agriculture initiatives, disaster early warning systems and smart city development. These projects serve as emotional bonds linking the two peoples and vivid testimony to enduring China-Pakistan friendship.

III. Dilemmas of China-Pakistan Joint Construction of the Belt and Road Initiative

China and Pakistan share profound cultural affinity and friendship spanning generations, accumulating unique strengths across numerous sectors with a solid foundation and fruitful cooperation results. This year marks the 75th anniversary of the establishment of bilateral diplomatic ties. Taking this milestone as an opportunity, both sides will continuously advance win-win cooperation spanning politics, economy and trade, connectivity, people-to-people exchanges, and other fields. Nevertheless, opportunities coexist with challenges. As bilateral cooperation deepens, China and Pakistan are constrained by multiple factors, including volatile

Embassy in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, https://pk.china-embassy.gov.cn/zbqx/202502/t20250225_11562023.htm, last accessed: June 11, 2026.

¹⁶ Handover Ceremony Held for China-Pakistan South-South Cooperation Material Assistance on Addressing Climate Change, Official Website of Foreign Cooperation Center of Ministry of Ecology and Environment, http://www.fecomee.org.cn/dtxx/xwdt/202604/t20260402_1148184.html, last accessed: June 11, 2026.

domestic political landscapes, inter-provincial interest rivalry, interference from separatist forces, deficiencies in regional governance, intertwined ethnic contradictions, and meddling by external powers. Some of these factors are as follows:

Divergent Interests Disrupting Cooperation

Within Pakistan, divergent interests exist between the federal government and its four provincial administrations, as well as among provinces, urban and rural groups, government and private enterprises, and grassroots residents regarding the distribution of infrastructure projects, budget allocation, and water resource regulation & allocation. For instance, long-running interest rivalry persist between the federal government and the four provinces over annual actual water quota allocation.

As reported by the Friday Times on June 13, 2026, a massive wave of protests has swept across Sindh Province, uniting everyone from the Chief Minister to ordinary farmers struggling in parched fields against a suffocating injustice. Yet, the federal government and its water management institutions remain profoundly indifferent, stubbornly insisting that Sindh has already consumed more than its fair share of water. In this second week of June 2026, both Sindh and Balochistan are grappling with catastrophic water shortages. The deepest tragedy of this crisis is that it does not stem from a natural drought. Instead, this scarcity is entirely artificial, manufactured by the administrative decisions and flawed accounting practices of the Indus River System Authority.¹⁷ Such long-standing water supply disputes between upstream and downstream provinces trace back to the water allocation framework established by the

¹⁷ Thirsty Fields, Deaf Ears: Understanding The Water Crisis In Southern Pakistan, Friday Times, <https://www.thefridaytimes.com/13-Jun-2026/thirsty-fields-deaf-ears-understanding-water-crisis-southern-pakistan>, last accessed: June 11, 2026.

1991 Water Apportionment Accord (WAA). Although the accord provides a formal allocation framework, insufficient water storage facilities and scattered cultivated land across Pakistan prompt all four provinces to insist on retaining their baseline quotas stipulated under the Accord. They oppose excessive water extraction by upstream provinces during dry seasons and reject any cuts to their own quotas. The tug-of-war over interests fuels persistent contention between the federal government and provincial authorities.

In 1991, a conference on water apportionment was convened under the auspices of Pakistan's then Prime Minister. The Chief Ministers of the four provinces reached an inter-provincial consensus and signed the 1991 Pakistan Inter-Provincial Water Apportionment Accord (WAA). The Council of Common Interests (CCI) reviewed and ratified the accord, approving the establishment of the Indus River System Authority (IRSA) as the implementing agency. The accord set the annual baseline water quotas as follows:

Punjab: 55.94 MAF (37.07 MAF in Kharif season, 18.87 MAF in Rabi season)

Sindh: 48.76 MAF (33.94 MAF in Kharif season, 14.82 MAF in Rabi season)

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP): 5.78 MAF (3.48 MAF in Kharif season, 2.30 MAF in Rabi season)

Balochistan: 3.87 MAF (2.85 MAF in Kharif season, 1.02 MAF in Rabi season)

Data released by IRSA show the actual water extraction volumes and quota compliance rates for 2024 and 2025:

Province	Year	Actual Water Withdrawal (MAF)	Quota Compliance Rate	QCR in Kharif Season	QCR in Rabi Season
Punjab	2024	47.33	84.5%	85.7%	82.5%
	2025	44.81	80.1%	76.5%	87.2%
Sindh	2024	38.31	78.6%	77.1%	82.0%

	2025	42.17	86.5%	85.3%	89.2%
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	2024	1.62	28.02%	27.2%	29.1%
	2025	1.62	28.02%	30.7%	23.9%
Balochistan	2024	2.63	68.0%	55.8%	102.0%
	2025	3.30	85.3%	76.5%	109.8%

According to the table, while falling short of the full baseline quota, Punjab's total annual water withdrawal remained largely stable across the two years. Sindh's water withdrawal rose notably in 2025, sharply narrowing the volume gap in water withdrawal with Punjab and intensifying inter-provincial conflicts. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province's annual water withdrawal saw no meaningful improvement across the two years, falling below one-third of its legal baseline quota specified in the accord. Severe interest imbalance has sparked fierce public discontent in the province. Balochistan Province drastically boosted Rabi-season water withdrawal by diverting quotas originally reserved for Kharif season, severely encroaching on the water entitlements of other provinces.

This unbalanced inter-provincial water allocation exacerbates regional frictions and impedes the progress of China-Pakistan cooperation. As reported by The News International on March 13, 2025, the Sindh Provincial Assembly passed a resolution against the construction of six new canals, deeming them violations of the 1991 Water Apportionment Accord. It demanded the federal government conduct full consultations with all provinces to safeguard Sindh's water rights, or immediately halt to any plans, activities or work related to the controversial canal projects.

As report by Dawn on April 26, 2025, it took months of protests across Sindh against the Cholistan canal, the complete blockade of industrial and other supply chains to and from Punjab for the last week and a half. China and Pakistan have issued joint statements committing to

deepening alignment between the Belt and Road Initiative and Pakistan's 5Es Growth Framework, and jointly building corridors for growth, livelihoods, innovation, green development, and openness. The six canal projects are core water infrastructure for Pakistan to deliver on the environmental targets outlined in the 5Es framework. Unavoidably, the inter-provincial water gamesmanship triggered by these projects spill over into China-Pakistan collaborative initiatives. Provinces may leverage water disputes as bargaining chips to delay or refuse coordination on joint projects, potentially slowing down the progress of overall bilateral cooperation.

Artificial Barriers to China-Pakistan Cross-Border Cooperation Erected by External Powers

Certain external powers erect artificial barriers to China-Pakistan cross-border cooperation through multiple tools including diplomatic checks and balances, financial coercion, and security intervention. Among these tools, public opinion manipulation constitutes the most pervasive and far-reaching form of meddling. By disseminating negative or disinformation to distort public perceptions and foster biased prejudices, external actors seek to drive a wedge between China and Pakistan and derail bilateral cooperation.

These external forces frequently hype narratives surrounding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) via media tools, such as news outlets, search engines, and social media, deliberately fabricating six categories of negative discourse centering on sovereignty, economic exploitation, human rights violations, ecological damage, resource plunder, and military expansion.

Attaullah Tarar, Pakistan's Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting, underscored that the arrival of the digital age has transformed the way information disseminated, and disinformation and narrative warfare have become global challenges. Senator Mushahid Hussain, Chairman of Pakistan-China Institute believes that disinformation is one of the biggest challenges for Pakistan, and Pakistan is facing disinformation from India.¹⁸

Cass R. Sunstein introduced the concept of information cascades in his book “On Rumors”. He argued that most people lack direct firsthand experience with the subjects of rumors; once a critical mass accepts a false claim, mass adoption follows.¹⁹

Foreign media outlets manipulate narratives about CPEC by omitting key contextual details to downplay positive facts, and amplifying negative tropes to distort public perceptions in order to manufacture false and negative narratives and enable their viral cross-border spread. This creates a starkly asymmetric and inequitable information ecosystem. Limited access to diverse perspectives undermines the public's capacity for rational judgment.

As early as 2017, India's NDTV reported that Chinese military troops would be positioned in Pakistan to guard CPEC, stoking security anxieties in India.²⁰ Subsequently, Asian News International (ANI) and the Times of India repeatedly promoted false narratives framing Gwadar Port as a permanent Chinese naval and submarine anchorage. As recently as May 2026, disinformation alleged that Pakistan had secretly sought Chinese support to develop sea-based

¹⁸ “India labeled main source of disinformation targeting CPEC” , Daily Times, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/1424686/india-labeled-main-source-of-disinformation-targeting-cpec/>, last accessed: June 15, 2026.

¹⁹ Cass R. Sunstein. On Rumours[M].Trstranslated by Zhang Nandiyang.China CITIC Press,2010.

²⁰ “Chinese Troops Will Be Positioned In Pakistan, Security Agencies Tell Government” , NDTV, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/chinese-troops-will-be-positioned-in-pakistan-security-agencies-to-government-1286550>, last accessed: June 15, 2026.

nuclear second-strike capability in exchange for exclusive operational rights to Gwadar Port.²¹

Recognized as authoritative mainstream sources by domestic and global audiences, these reports are widely republished by cross-border media outlets, forming transnational coordinated negative agenda-setting. Indian official narratives deliberately link CPEC with fabricated claims of Chinese military deployment overseas. Contrary to these allegations, the Chinese government has repeatedly clarified that CPEC is an economic cooperation initiative focused on infrastructure, energy, agriculture, industrial development, and livelihoods improvement, with no military components embedded within its framework. The government has introduced “The WAPDA Security Force Bill, 2026” in the National Assembly and decided to create a new “Wapda Security Force” to create a standalone force to provide dedicated security to major water sector infrastructure projects across the country and associated workers, particularly those from China.²² Claims linking Gwadar Port to nuclear proliferation lack any factual basis. China maintains a consistent, unwavering commitment to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Pakistani officials have publicly confirmed the country's sea-based second-strike deterrent relies on domestically developed Babur-3 submarine-launched cruise missiles.²³

External media further reframe public discourse through stigmatizing vocabulary to erase the tangible benefits of cooperation, and obfuscating accountability to inflame polarization, conditioning audiences into passively adopting prefabricated biased narratives. A so-called

²¹ “China Reportedly Rejected Pakistan’s Bid for Sea-Based Nuclear Second-Strike Capability — Gwadar Talks Expose Hidden Limits of Beijing’s “All-Weather” Alliance” , Defence Security Asia, <https://defencesecurityasia.com/en/pakistan-china-sea-based-nuclear-second-strike-gwadar-nuclear-submarine-deterrence/>, last accessed: June 15, 2026.

²² “Govt plans Wapda security force for water projects” , DAWN, <https://www.dawn.com/news/2002882>, last accessed: June 15, 2026.

²³ “Pakistan 'launches first cruise missile from submarine'” , BBC news, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-38563330>, last accessed: June 15, 2026.

German lawyer and human right activist Claudia Waeldich asserted that the USD 51.5 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor would have a huge impact on the Baloch people, She said the people of Balochistan already have no access to the Gwadar port as has been to China for 40 years, and the demography of the region would change as China would bring its own workers to work in Balochistan. She also alleged that the Baloch would be expelled from their villages and homes, and the Pakistan Army had already began its operation to achieve there aim of expelling the Baloch people.²⁴

Valtich's commentary diverts public attention away from CPEC's development achievements and livelihoods dividends toward polarizing talking points, including false claims that Chinese workers monopolize local employment and indigenous populations are displaced by corridor construction, thereby diluting the positive influence of bilateral collaborative achievements. In elaborating on the concept of the marketplace of ideas, Sunstein notes that rumors automatically lose credibility under balanced information environments. However, inherent cognitive bias leads audiences to selectively consume information that reinforces their preexisting preconceptions.²⁵

Social media platforms and search engines are systematically weaponized to smear China-Pakistan cooperation, hype up sporadic local conflicts to divert public attention, and stoke unnecessary misunderstandings and public panic via inflammatory rhetoric. Audiences' inherent cognitive biases facilitate biased assimilation, entrenching stereotypes within niche communities and enabling negative discourse to circulate widely among these groups. Misled

²⁴ "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to have huge impact on Baloch people: German lawyer", ZNews, <https://zeenews.india.com/world/china-pakistan-economic-corridor-to-have-huge-impact-on-baloch-people-german-lawyer-2005451.html>, last accessed: June 15, 2026.

²⁵ Cass R. Sunstein. On Rumours[M]. Translated by Zhang Nandiyang. China CITIC Press, 2010.

by disinformation, segments of the Pakistani public fail to recognize that multi-sectoral China-Pakistan cooperation is not a short-term benefit arrangement, but a long-term strategic choice rooted in the fundamental national interests of both nations.

The factual record contradicts Valtich's allegations that CPEC financing encompasses intergovernmental loans, direct investment, and unconditional grants. Infrastructure projects are funded via interest-free or intergovernmental concessional loans; Gwadar Port development relies on grants and investment partnerships; energy projects adopt the Independent Power Producer (IPP) model, with private firms securing commercial bank loans independently. The economic gains Pakistan derives from CPEC far outweigh its debt repayment obligations. The corridor functions as a catalyst for national economic expansion, projected to lift Pakistan's annual GDP growth rate by 2 to 3 percentage points, while resolving critical bottlenecks including energy supply, transport infrastructure, and domestic supply chains.²⁶

Chinese enterprises implement targeted local engagement practices for Gwadar projects that deliver comprehensive economic and social benefits to the region. Firstly, Localized staffing policies. Local Pakistani residents constitute the vast majority of the workforce, excluding only essential managerial and technical specialists. All recruits receive six-month or longer vocational training, generating massive direct and indirect local employment opportunities. Secondly, Localized procurement protocols. All construction materials and machinery including cement, steel, sand, and heavy equipment are sourced domestically. The New Gwadar International Airport project transports sand and aggregate from Turbat, a distant

²⁶ Pakistani government releases statement refuting Western media's false reports on CPEC, Xinhua Silk Road, <https://www.imsilkroad.com/news/p/114323.html>, last accessed: June 15, 2026.

inland district, stimulating regional industrial activity and boosting household incomes. Thirdly, Corporate social responsibility commitments: All Chinese firms operating in Gwadar provide free water and electricity to nearby residential communities, fund village road and bridge construction, and build schools and medical clinics to address local livelihoods difficulties.²⁷

Prospects of China-Pakistan Joint Construction of the Belt and Road Initiative

For a long time, China has offered diverse assistance to Pakistan following the principles of equality and mutual benefit, pragmatic efficiency, respect for local demands and no political strings attached. Meanwhile, China has consistently delivered on the consensus reached by the heads of state of the two countries and conducted extensive pragmatic cooperation in infrastructure, energy, trade, people's livelihoods and other fields, achieving all-round progress in the China-Pakistan all-weather strategic cooperative partnership. Going forward, leveraging the Belt and Road Initiative, China and Pakistan will upgrade CPEC to version 2.0, accelerate the building of an ever closer China-Pakistan community with a shared future for the new era, and sustain the sound framework of win-win bilateral cooperation. To address practical obstacles hindering bilateral cooperation, both sides can explore long-term innovative cooperation pathways by focusing on the following priority areas:

Improving the Benefit-Sharing and Distribution Mechanism

First, establish a China-Pakistan cross-border and inter-provincial coordination office alongside regular communication channels, where all stakeholders can negotiate over project approval, dispute mediation, investment planning and information exchange. This aims to

²⁷ Consul General Li Bijian in Karachi Exclusive Interview with DAWN, Official Website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/yz_676205/1206_676308/1206x2_676328/202206/t20220622_10707450.shtml, last accessed: June 15, 2026.

clarify divided supervisory responsibilities in cooperation, to balance the interest demands of all participating parties, to ensure full transparency and fairness of cooperative projects, and to deliver more tangible outcomes from bilateral collaboration.

Second, build a tiered bilateral coordination and deliberation mechanism, and formulate systematized alignment standards for cross-border cooperation laws and regulations. By clarifying the norms governing regional cooperation, phased coordination of bilateral cooperation costs and risk control of all cooperative undertakings, the two sides can fully unlock bilateral cooperation strengths and guarantee the feasibility and implementability of China-Pakistan joint projects.

Third, tilt support toward industrial incubation for underdeveloped provinces. The two sides will further improve local industrial support policies and provide targeted skill training, startup subsidies for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), green channels for agricultural exports to China, and preferential procurement rights for local products for remote and less developed provinces including Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These measures will expand local employment and income streams for residents, and effectively narrow inter-provincial development gaps.

Fourth, guarantee local communities' participation and decision-making power. Federal, provincial and tribal representatives shall engage in regular consultations throughout all project phases covering site selection, environmental impact assessment, project initiation and benefit distribution. This ensures local governments' right to know and deliberative say in setting local benefit allocation ratios, and that local demands are fully assessed and addressed.

Fifth, give full play to the coordinating role of local political parties, industrial and commercial associations, think tanks and civil society organizations to break the constraints of unitary decision-making.

Sixth, respond to the demands of vulnerable groups in remote areas through small yet beautiful livelihoods projects. It encompasses various “small yet beautiful” livelihoods projects such as grassroots medical stations, agricultural irrigation facilities, agricultural risk protection systems, pest monitoring networks, mutual technical assistance programs and rural infrastructure built, which shall fully accommodate the practical needs of vulnerable groups like traditional tribes and ethnic minorities. Resource allocation and policy support will be geared toward these groups to materialize the blueprint of China-Pakistan cooperation and to yield quantifiable on-the-ground dividends.

Establishing a China-Pakistan Collaborative Public Opinion Governance System

First, China and Pakistan shall jointly release official refutations to accurately counter foreign false narratives. Authorities of both sides will publish authoritative articles and release authentic data simultaneously on mainstream domestic and international media platforms to break the monopoly over public narratives held by foreign media outlets.

Second, deepen media cooperation between China and Pakistan in experience exchange, talent training, joint production, technological R&D, and project expansion. Diverse perspectives and voices from both countries can reach audiences across multiple platforms and channels, comprehensively boosting China and Pakistan's media autonomy.

Third, set up a China-Pakistan media liaison mechanism. It aims to enable synchronous bilateral information sharing and open up channels for local stakeholders to voice their views.

Joint publication and its distribution via overseas channels can be realized through this mechanism.

Fourth, co-build a China-Pakistan joint data center. Supported by reliable computing and network services, both sides can adjust cooperation directions in a timely manner and break the information and data monopoly controlled by external media forces.

Fifth, build up permanent news bureaus on each other's territory. Permanent news institutions facilitate timely and accurate information dissemination, eliminate cognitive biases, build bridges of mutual trust, and vividly tell stories of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Sixth, establish a regular communication and exchange mechanism for media and think tank personnel of both countries. Conduct regular exchanges through seminars, training visits and joint interviews will institutionalize long-term interactions between Chinese and Pakistani media and think tank personnel. The two sides can reach consensus on topical issues, communication materials and agenda framework to align think tank research with the dissemination requirements of information products and effectively enhance media influence.

Building a Digital Empowerment Support System

First, develop a digital platform for shared project information that integrates customs data from both sides. The platform will centrally publicize the approval progress of cooperative projects, investment trends, coordinated interception of suspicious goods, and joint assessment on trade risks to deliver precise and efficient implementation of bilateral projects.

Second, construct a digital dialogue and cooperation network for China and Pakistan with multi-tiered online exchange platforms. Relying on this digital network, all stakeholders can regularly exchange needs to ease divergences and resolve potential conflicts.

Third, continuously advance the development of intelligent customs clearance in Pakistan to boost cross-border trade facilitation. Building on territorial direct-release smart declaration and smart logistics monitoring systems, both sides will continuously deploy intelligent inspection robots, AI-powered inspection terminals and other smart equipment. Pakistan will roll out a full-range of intelligent functions including AI-assisted declaration, intelligent logistics monitoring, smart scanning, automated review, robotic inspection and AI-assisted release. Digital and intelligent transformation will substantially streamline cross-border customs clearance procedures.

Fourth, implement full-chain intelligent supervision from origin to ports to cut cross-border logistics costs for local products. Intelligent checkpoints, smart customs locks and portable rapid inspection devices will be deployed at Pakistani customs offices and division-level inspection stations to realize end-to-end digital supervision of goods from domestic production bases to Chinese ports.

Fifth, strengthen training of digital professionals to sustain sound operation of the China-Pakistan Digital Innovation Corridor. The two sides will cultivate high-end interdisciplinary digital professionals through industry-education integration, overseas practical training, scientific research collaboration and joint university-enterprise training. Meanwhile, frontline digital industrial parks will carry out training for hands-on practitioners specializing in cross-border e-commerce and industrial park operations.

Sixth, establish and perfect the China-Pakistan mutual recognition mechanism of cross-border data to fuel long-term growth of bilateral digital trade. This mechanism enables mutual recognition and exchange of enterprises' operational qualifications, cross-border e-commerce

filing data and corporate credit records between the two countries, simplifying enterprise declaration procedures, shortening customs clearance lead times, attracting large-scale agglomeration of enterprises in industrial parks and drawing leading cross-border digital service providers to set up operations, thus consolidating the foundation for China-Pakistan digital industry development.

Developing a Diversified Layout across Various Investment Sectors

Diversified investment layout serves as a core pillar for deepening and solidifying China-Pakistan cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative. In the future, the two sides will continuously scale up investment collaboration across mining and processing, infrastructure, public health, energy development, ecological governance, digital economy and other sectors. Tourism cooperation between China and Pakistan is cited as an example below:

First, further develop sister cities for cultural and tourism exchanges to consolidate the foundation of bilateral urban cooperation. Based on sister-city agreements, China and Pakistan will continue to establish more cultural and tourism sister cities, enabling mutual tourist referrals, joint promotion of travel routes and co-investment in cultural tourism projects. These efforts will consolidate public consensus and mutual learning between the two nations.

Second, carefully plan cross-border cultural and artistic exchange to consolidate popular support for local cooperation. Relying on paired cultural and tourism sister cities, both sides will host various transnational activities including cultural festivals, art exhibitions, film festivals and art weeks.

Third, establish a high-level exchange mechanism for tourism cities with permanent liaison offices. Leveraging the Silk Road International Alliance of Tourism Cities, the two

sides will set up high-level communication channels for tourism cities and permanent coordinating institutions such as joint cooperation committees to negotiate and reach consensus on cultural tourism project cooperation, co-construction of tourism facilities, regional comprehensive development planning, etc.

Fourth, build an integrated multi-media communications ecosystem and cultivate a portfolio of international brand events. Domestic and international mainstream media, official overseas media outlets and cross-border digital media platforms will intensify the promotion of China-Pakistan cultural tourism products and enrich the supply of high-quality tourism products. It will expand coverage of Sino-Pakistani sports events, sports tourism programs and customized outdoor travel packages. The two sides will coordinate with international branded sports event operators and outdoor sport clubs to jointly foster the integrated development of sports tourism, outdoor recreation as well as wellness residential tourism, and roll out targeted supporting policies to fuel their growth.

Fifth, tap into the potential of the port economy to empower integrated border cultural, sports and tourism sectors to pursue high-quality upgrading. Capitalizing on the geographical advantages of China-Pakistan border ports, both sides will prioritize tourism products such as border gate sightseeing, highland outdoor expeditions, characteristic border trade shopping and cross-border ethnic folk experiences. Signature sports events including self-driving rally challenges and mountain hiking competitions will be held to integrate scenic spots, premium cross-border travel routes and branded sports competitions. Drawing on the locational strengths of border ports, we will advance the high-quality upgrading of diverse cultural and tourism cooperation sectors.

Sixth, seize digital opportunities to innovate presentation forms and communication channels for the China-Pakistan cultural and tourism sectors. Both sides will leverage technological innovation to empower industrial upgrading and deepen the integration of information technology with cultural tourism. For instance, VR, 5D holographic projection and 3D mapping can be deployed at China-Pakistan ports to launch digital experience programs including cloud-based virtual tours, AR interactive check-in experiences and digital Silk Road passport stamp collection, enhancing the viewing appeal, participatory appeal and interactivity of tourism projects. Local cultural, sports and tourism elements can also be integrated to build immersive performance venues as well as interactive experience spaces for visitors. Such new digital business formats will unlock the consumption potential of cultural and tourism sectors at border ports.

Conclusion

Since the two countries forged their all-weather strategic cooperative partnership, advanced high-quality Belt and Road cooperation, and jointly built a closer China-Pakistan community with a shared future for a new era, China and Pakistan have always been sincere and interdependent friends through both good and hard times underpinned by mutual trust and mutual support. This paper systematically reviews the substantial gains of pragmatic cooperation between China and Pakistan, which consistently delivers lasting benefits to the Pakistani people. As China and Pakistan advance in-depth cooperation under the BRI, both sides are confronted with multiple constraints, such as volatile domestic political landscapes, inter-provincial interest rivalry, and interference from separatist forces. Among these constraints, divergent interests and public opinion manipulation are the two major internal and

external obstacles hindering further bilateral cooperation. To address the challenges, both sides should explore long-term innovative cooperation pathways centered on tilted support toward industrial incubation for underdeveloped provinces, responding to the demands of vulnerable groups in remote areas through small yet beautiful livelihoods projects, setting up a China-Pakistan media liaison mechanism, building up permanent news bureaus on each other's territory, continuously advancing the development of intelligent customs clearance in Pakistan to boost cross-border trade facilitation, tapping into the potential of the port economy to empower integrated border cultural, sports and tourism sectors to pursue high-quality upgrading, and other targeted cooperative initiatives. In brief, China-Pakistan cooperation will continue to remain people-centered, grounded in pragmatic realities and oriented toward long-term development. Relying on the Five Connectivity framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, bilateral cooperation will further expand and deepen across multiple fields including new connectivity projects, new business forms, digital economy, medical and health care, green low-carbon development, information technology and artificial intelligence. China will uphold its commitment to good-neighborliness, abide by the principle of mutual benefit and win-win gains, and stand shoulder to shoulder with Pakistan to embark on a new journey of the modernization drive.