



Strategic Alignment and Institutional Resilience in China–Pakistan Bilateralism

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ABSTRACT

China–Pakistan bilateralism represents a strategically significant partnership within the shifting great power nexus, characterized by political trust, economic integration, and institutionalized cooperation. This study aims to examine how strategic agency and institutional coordination jointly sustain the durability of this bilateral relationship, addressing the gap in literature that often treats strategy and institutions separately. A qualitative comparative research design was employed, using document analysis of official agreements, policy frameworks, government reports, and academic studies conducted between January and June 2025. The analysis focused on political, economic, and security sectors to identify patterns of decision-making and coordination. Findings indicate that both states actively exercise strategic agency while relying on formal and informal institutions to translate strategic objectives into sustained outcomes, including policy continuity, sectoral cooperation, and strategic stability. Economic initiatives, especially infrastructure and connectivity projects, demonstrate higher institutional formalization compared to security cooperation, reflecting functional requirements rather than differences in commitment. The study concludes that the resilience of China–Pakistan bilateralism arises from the mutual reinforcement of strategic agency and institutional coordination, highlighting that effective bilateral partnerships require the integration of strategy, governance, and shared norms. These findings contribute to understanding bilateralism, great power dynamics, and institutional governance in international relations.

Keywords: China–Pakistan Bilateralism, Strategic Agency, Institutional Coordination, Great Power Nexus, Policy Continuity

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary international system is increasingly characterized by fluid alignments and overlapping spheres of influence, where bilateral relationships operate within wider great power rivalries (Jackson, 2020; Yasmin et al., 2023). The rapid transformation of global order—driven by the rise of China, the reassertion of Russian power, and the relative decline of American hegemony—has created new strategic opportunities and constraints for states across the developing world. In this evolving landscape, China–Pakistan relations stand out as a

strategically significant partnership that has endured shifts in regional and global power configurations (Zaidi & Nirmal, 2022; Ullah, Yasir, Khan, & Ullah, 2024). Frequently described as an “all-weather strategic cooperative partnership,” the bilateral relationship has expanded beyond traditional security cooperation to encompass economic integration (Iqbala & Xianbingb, 2025), diplomatic coordination, and institutionalized policy engagement (Olsen, 2023). This transformation reflects broader changes in global politics (Held et al., 2016), particularly the intensification of United States–China competition and the reconfiguration of power dynamics in Asia (Ramos, 2025), where middle powers seek to navigate structural constraints while preserving strategic autonomy.

The historical roots of China–Pakistan relations date back to 1951 when the two countries formally established diplomatic ties. Since then, the relationship has evolved through multiple phases, each shaped by the prevailing regional security environment, economic priorities, and the broader dynamics of great power competition. During the Cold War era, Pakistan served as a critical bridge between China and the United States, facilitating the historic diplomatic opening that reshaped the global balance of power in the 1970s. In the post-Cold War period, the relationship deepened significantly as both nations found common ground in their mutual wariness of Indian regional dominance and their shared interest in maintaining a stable balance of power in South Asia. The launch of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in 2015 marked a transformative moment in this bilateral partnership, elevating economic cooperation to the forefront of the relationship and embedding it within China’s broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework. Today, with investments exceeding 60 billion USD committed to infrastructure development, energy projects, and industrial zones, CPEC represents one of the largest bilateral investment programs in the developing world and serves as the institutional backbone of contemporary China–Pakistan cooperation (M. Ali, 2025).

Scholarly literature has long attempted to explain such partnerships through realist interpretations that emphasize threat perception and balancing behavior (Doeser & Frantzen, 2022). Walt argues that states align not only in response to power but also to perceived threats within their regional environment (Walt, 1987, p. 21). From this perspective, Pakistan’s strategic alignment with China is often framed as a rational response to regional security pressures, particularly those stemming from its rivalry with India (Raza, 2024). While this explanation captures an important dimension of the relationship, it remains insufficient for understanding its durability and depth, especially in light of expanding cooperation in economic planning, infrastructure development, and diplomatic coordination that extend beyond immediate security concerns (Cramaro, 2024). A purely realist framework cannot account for the complex web of institutional arrangements, normative commitments, and identity-based narratives that sustain the partnership across different policy domains and through various periods of internal and external stress.

Institutionalist scholars provide a complementary lens by emphasizing the role of formal and informal institutions in sustaining cooperation over time (Cooper et al., 2022). Keohane highlights that institutional arrangements reduce uncertainty and facilitate coordination by establishing predictable rules and expectations among states (Keohane, 2020). In the China–Pakistan context, bilateral committees, joint working groups, and long-term development frameworks have institutionalized cooperation across multiple sectors (Memon &

Kousar, 2024). These mechanisms suggest that the relationship is not merely reactive to external threats but is embedded within governance structures that enable policy continuity and mutual adjustment (Tasleem, 2022). The establishment of the Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC) under CPEC, for example, demonstrates how both states have created formal institutions to manage the implementation of large-scale economic projects, coordinate policy responses to implementation challenges, and maintain transparency in decision-making processes. Such institutional depth is rarely observed in bilateral partnerships of a similar nature between advanced and developing states, making the China–Pakistan case analytically distinctive and theoretically instructive.

Constructivist perspectives further enrich the analysis by focusing on shared identities, narratives, and norms that shape state behavior (Phillips, 2023). Wendt contends that interests are socially constructed through interaction and sustained engagement rather than being fixed or purely material (Wendt, 1995). The persistent political discourse emphasizing trust, brotherhood, and strategic convergence between China and Pakistan illustrates how symbolic narratives reinforce cooperation and legitimize policy alignment (Shah et al., 2025). Such ideational factors help explain why bilateral engagement remains resilient even during periods of economic strain or regional instability (Cooper & Shaw, 2009). The repeated invocation of the “all-weather friendship” metaphor in official communications, state visits, and academic exchanges reflects a deliberate effort by both governments to cultivate a shared identity that transcends immediate political and economic calculations. This ideational dimension of the relationship provides a normative foundation upon which institutional coordination rests, making the partnership more resilient to the kind of transactional pressures that undermine cooperation in other bilateral contexts.

Despite the breadth of existing scholarship, a key problem persists in the literature: China–Pakistan relations are often examined through fragmented analytical lenses that separate strategic intent from institutional practice (Dar & Janbaz, 2024). Studies focusing on defense cooperation tend to overlook governance mechanisms (Ahmed & Rasool, 2023), while analyses of economic initiatives such as CPEC emphasize financial and infrastructural outcomes without adequately addressing strategic agency (Kinne, 2018). Small (2015, p. 39) underscores the strategic logic of Sino–Pakistani defense cooperation, while Rolland situates CPEC within China’s broader geoeconomic strategy under the Belt and Road Initiative (M. Ali, 2025). However, these works rarely interrogate how strategic choices are operationalized through coordinated institutions, or how such coordination differentiates this partnership from other asymmetric bilateral relationships. The result is an incomplete analytical picture that fails to capture the mutual reinforcement between strategic agency and institutional coordination that lies at the heart of the partnership’s durability.

This article seeks to address this gap by examining how strategic agency and institutional coordination jointly shape China–Pakistan bilateralism within the broader great power nexus (Ch et al., 2025). The central objective is to analyze how both states exercise agency within structural constraints while relying on institutional mechanisms to translate strategic intent into sustained policy outcomes. The research questions guiding this study are: (1) How do China and Pakistan exercise strategic agency within the constraints of the contemporary great power nexus? (2) What institutional mechanisms facilitate and sustain bilateral coordination across

political, economic, and security domains? (3) How do strategic agency and institutional coordination interact to produce durable cooperative outcomes in the bilateral relationship? By adopting a comparative analytical approach grounded in international relations theory and supported by existing empirical studies (Guo, 2025), the article aims to contribute to a more integrated understanding of bilateral cooperation in an era of systemic transition. In doing so, it advances debates on strategic bilateralism, institutional governance, and the capacity of states to navigate great power competition without sacrificing long-term partnership stability.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative comparative research design to examine strategic agency and institutional coordination in China–Pakistan bilateral relations. A qualitative approach is selected because it allows for an in-depth understanding of policy processes (Fischer & Maggetti, 2017), institutional interactions, and strategic narratives that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement. The choice of a comparative dimension reflects the need to examine patterns of coordination across different policy sectors—political, economic, and security—in order to identify both the commonalities and variations in how strategic agency and institutional coordination operate. This approach is consistent with established methodological frameworks in comparative international relations research, which emphasize the utility of within-case and cross-case comparison for identifying causal mechanisms and theoretical patterns. The research focuses on bilateral cooperation within the context of broader great power dynamics, with particular attention to political, economic, and diplomatic coordination mechanisms that have shaped the contemporary China–Pakistan partnership. The research was conducted between January and June 2025, drawing on documentary and secondary data sources that provide a rich empirical basis for analyzing bilateral relations over an extended historical period. The study is not confined to a single physical location, as it relies on documents and studies produced and published across multiple jurisdictions and institutional contexts. The analytical focus covers China–Pakistan bilateral engagements at the national and institutional levels, including official state interactions, policy frameworks, and cooperative initiatives that reflect strategic coordination between the two countries. The primary unit of analysis is the bilateral relationship between China and Pakistan, examined through the lens of specific cooperative arrangements and policy mechanisms that can be empirically identified and systematically compared. Research subjects consist of official policy documents, bilateral agreements, joint statements, government reports, and publicly available institutional records related to political, economic, and security cooperation. In addition, relevant academic publications and policy analyses are included to support contextual interpretation and theoretical grounding. The selection of sources prioritizes materials that directly address the mechanisms and outcomes of bilateral coordination, ensuring that the analysis is grounded in concrete empirical evidence rather than general descriptions of the relationship. Data collection is carried out through systematic reviews of official government websites, international organization databases, academic journals, and policy research platforms. Only credible and verifiable sources are included to ensure the reliability of the data. All collected materials are documented and categorized to facilitate transparent and replicable analysis. The primary research instrument used in this study is a document analysis guide

developed to ensure systematic examination of the selected materials. The guide includes indicators related to strategic objectives, institutional structures, coordination practices, and policy outcomes, thereby enabling consistent application of the analytical framework across different domains and time periods. Data analysis is conducted using qualitative content analysis, wherein the collected documents are coded based on predefined analytical categories derived from international relations theory and the research objectives. The analysis focuses on identifying relationships between strategic agency and institutional coordination, as well as similarities and differences in policy implementation across political, economic, and security sectors. The findings are then interpreted within the integrated theoretical framework that draws on realist, institutionalist, and constructivist perspectives to provide a comprehensive account of the bilateral relationship. Validity is ensured through source triangulation and by cross-referencing findings with established scholarship in the field.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Inform Strategic Agency in China–Pakistan Bilateral Relations

The analysis reveals that both China and Pakistan exercise robust forms of strategic agency within the bilateral relationship, despite the significant power asymmetry that characterizes their partnership. China, as the dominant partner in material terms, demonstrates strategic agency through its deliberate structuring of bilateral institutions, its selective deployment of economic resources, and its management of the relationship's symbolic dimensions. The CPEC framework, for instance, was designed not merely as an economic initiative but as a strategic instrument through which China seeks to secure overland access to the Arabian Sea, diversify its energy supply routes, and consolidate its regional influence in South Asia. Chinese decision-makers have consistently framed CPEC investments as expressions of mutual benefit and shared development, thereby legitimizing China's presence in Pakistan and neutralizing potential domestic resistance to the scale of Chinese involvement in the country's infrastructure and economy (Guo, 2025).

Pakistan, for its part, exercises strategic agency through its ability to leverage the bilateral relationship to secure economic resources, diplomatic support, and security guarantees that enhance its position relative to regional competitors. Far from being a passive recipient of Chinese patronage, Pakistan has actively shaped the terms of bilateral cooperation by negotiating the sectoral priorities of CPEC investment, insisting on the inclusion of special economic zones in the project portfolio, and maintaining a degree of independence in its foreign policy orientation that prevents the relationship from developing into a dependency relationship (Ch et al., 2025). Pakistani officials have also demonstrated strategic agency in their management of the India–Pakistan rivalry by using the China relationship as a diplomatic counterweight to Indian regional dominance, thereby preserving Pakistan's ability to project power and resist pressure from its larger neighbor. This dynamic illustrates how even materially weaker states can exercise meaningful agency within asymmetric partnerships when they possess strategic assets that the dominant partner values and when the partnership is governed by clear institutional frameworks that constrain unilateral behavior.

The exercise of strategic agency by both parties is further evident in their respective approaches to the broader great power competition between the United States and China.

Pakistan has historically sought to balance its relationships with both powers, maintaining security cooperation with the United States while deepening economic and political ties with China. However, the intensification of US–China competition in recent years has made this balancing act increasingly difficult, as both powers have pressed Pakistan to align more closely with their respective strategic visions for the region (Ramos, 2025). Pakistan's response has been to selectively deepen cooperation with China in domains where Chinese support is most critical—particularly economic development and military technology transfer—while maintaining sufficient engagement with the United States to preserve access to international financial institutions and Western markets. This nuanced approach to strategic positioning reflects a sophisticated form of agency that exploits the structural contradictions of great power competition rather than simply aligning with one side or the other.

Institutional Coordination Mechanisms

The institutional framework governing China–Pakistan bilateral relations has grown substantially in complexity and scope over the past decade. At the apex of the institutional structure sits the Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC), which serves as the primary governance body for CPEC implementation and provides a platform for high-level policy coordination between the two governments. Below the JCC, a network of sector-specific working groups and technical committees manages cooperation in areas ranging from energy and transportation to agriculture and social development. This multi-layered institutional architecture enables coordination at multiple levels of government simultaneously, reducing the transaction costs associated with bilateral cooperation and ensuring that strategic objectives are translated into concrete implementation plans (Memon & Kousar, 2024). The formalization of these institutional arrangements represents a significant evolution from the earlier phase of the bilateral relationship, when cooperation was managed primarily through ad hoc diplomatic exchanges and personal relationships between leaders.

In the security domain, institutional coordination takes a somewhat different form, reflecting the sensitive nature of defense cooperation and the need for operational flexibility. Security cooperation between China and Pakistan is governed through a combination of formal arrangements—including defense protocols, arms transfer agreements, and joint training programs—and informal coordination mechanisms that allow for responsive adaptation to changing security conditions. The Pakistan Army's close relationship with the People's Liberation Army (PLA), cultivated over decades of joint exercises and officer exchange programs, provides an informal but highly effective channel for strategic communication and coordination. This informal dimension of security cooperation complements the formal institutional framework and enhances the overall resilience of the bilateral relationship by maintaining channels of communication that can function even when formal diplomatic processes are under strain (Tasleem, 2022). The contrast between the high degree of formalization in economic cooperation and the greater reliance on informal mechanisms in security cooperation reflects functional differences in the requirements of these respective domains rather than differences in strategic commitment.

Diplomatic coordination between China and Pakistan is facilitated through a dense network of bilateral consultative mechanisms, including regular foreign minister meetings,

parliamentary exchanges, and multi-level government consultations. These mechanisms ensure that the two governments maintain aligned positions on key international issues, from UN Security Council votes on matters related to South Asian security to positions on global governance reform and multilateral economic arrangements. China's consistent support for Pakistan in international forums—including its use of the Security Council veto to block Indian-sponsored resolutions on terrorism—demonstrates the political value of this diplomatic coordination for Pakistan and underscores the reciprocal nature of the partnership (Shah et al., 2025). For China, Pakistan's diplomatic support on issues related to Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang provides important validation of its positions in international forums and helps to consolidate the normative framework within which China seeks to advance its global governance agenda.

Sectoral Analysis of Cooperation Outcomes

A sector-by-sector analysis of bilateral cooperation outcomes reveals significant variation in the depth and character of institutional coordination across different domains. In the energy sector, which accounts for the largest share of CPEC investment commitments, institutional coordination has been most formalized and most directly linked to strategic objectives. China's state-owned enterprises, operating under a comprehensive regulatory framework negotiated between the two governments, have constructed and now operate a significant portion of Pakistan's electricity generation capacity. The institutional arrangements governing this cooperation—including power purchase agreements, tariff setting mechanisms, and dispute resolution procedures—provide a clear example of how formal institutional frameworks translate strategic investments into durable bilateral commitments. The energy sector also illustrates the challenges of institutional coordination in the context of asymmetric partnerships, as Pakistan has periodically faced difficulties in meeting its financial obligations under the agreed frameworks, necessitating renegotiation of terms and testing the resilience of bilateral institutions under economic stress (M. Ali, 2025).

Transportation infrastructure represents another domain of intensive institutional coordination, with the Karakoram Highway upgrade and related road, rail, and port projects creating physical connectivity that reinforces bilateral interdependence. The institutional framework governing these projects involves coordination not only between Chinese contractors and Pakistani government agencies but also among multiple Pakistani federal and provincial authorities, adding layers of complexity to the coordination challenge. The success of transportation infrastructure projects in the face of this complexity reflects the effectiveness of the joint project management structures established under CPEC and highlights the importance of multi-level institutional coordination in large-scale bilateral initiatives. The physical infrastructure created through these projects also has strategic dimensions beyond their economic function, providing China with overland access routes that reduce its dependence on maritime corridors that could potentially be disrupted by naval competitors (Kinne, 2018).

In the agricultural and social development sectors, bilateral cooperation has been more limited in scale but illustrates the potential for institutional coordination to expand cooperation into non-traditional domains. Agricultural technology transfer programs, scholarship exchanges, and cultural cooperation initiatives have been organized through dedicated bilateral frameworks that operate independently of the primary CPEC governance structure. While these

initiatives are smaller in scale and lower in strategic priority than energy and transportation projects, they serve an important function in building societal foundations for bilateral cooperation by creating networks of personal and professional connections that can sustain the relationship beyond official governmental channels. The expansion of cooperation into these domains reflects a deliberate strategic choice by both governments to deepen the breadth of their partnership and reduce its dependence on any single sectoral pillar (Dar & Janbaz, 2024).

Interaction Between Strategic Agency and Institutional Coordination

The findings demonstrate that strategic agency and institutional coordination do not operate independently but rather interact in a mutually reinforcing manner that enhances the overall durability of the bilateral relationship. Strategic agency provides the direction and purpose of bilateral cooperation, setting the objectives that institutions are designed to serve. Institutions, in turn, provide the channels and mechanisms through which strategic objectives are operationalized, creating feedback loops that inform subsequent strategic decisions and enable adaptive learning by both governments. This dynamic interaction between strategy and institutions produces a form of cooperation that is both purposeful and resilient, capable of adapting to changing circumstances without losing coherence or strategic direction (Keohane, 2020; Cooper et al., 2022).

The CPEC case provides perhaps the clearest illustration of this interaction. The strategic decision by both governments to pursue large-scale infrastructure investment was operationalized through the creation of dedicated institutional structures that coordinate project implementation, manage financial flows, and resolve disputes. As implementation has proceeded, the feedback from institutional processes has informed subsequent strategic decisions about project prioritization, financing arrangements, and the management of implementation challenges. This iterative relationship between strategic agency and institutional coordination has produced a pattern of adaptive management that has allowed CPEC to survive significant implementation challenges, including security incidents, political transitions, and economic stress, without fundamentally derailing the partnership (M. Ali, 2025). The ability of both governments to maintain institutional continuity through periods of political change—including multiple changes of government in Pakistan—reflects the degree to which strategic commitments have been embedded in institutional frameworks that transcend individual political leaders.

The role of shared narratives and normative frameworks in sustaining this dynamic should not be underestimated. The “all-weather friendship” discourse that pervades official communications about the bilateral relationship serves an important institutional function by creating a normative expectation of continuity and reliability that constrains the behavior of both governments. Leaders who might otherwise be tempted to renegotiate or scale back bilateral commitments in response to short-term pressures are constrained by the reputational costs of departing from established narrative frameworks. This normative dimension of institutional coordination reinforces the material incentives for cooperation and provides an additional layer of stability that distinguishes the China–Pakistan partnership from more transactional bilateral relationships (Phillips, 2023). The constructivist insight that norms and shared identities are constitutive of interests, rather than merely regulative of behavior, helps to

explain why the partnership has maintained its strategic orientation even as the specific content of cooperation has evolved significantly over time.

Comparative analysis with other bilateral partnerships in the region reveals the distinctive features of the China–Pakistan model. In contrast to China’s relationships with other South Asian states, which tend to be more narrowly focused on specific economic or security objectives, the China–Pakistan partnership is distinguished by its breadth, depth, and degree of institutionalization. The comprehensive nature of the partnership—spanning political, economic, security, and cultural domains—creates multiple reinforcing channels of cooperation that collectively enhance its resilience. A disruption in one domain can be compensated by continued engagement in others, preventing the cascading breakdown that would threaten a more narrowly based partnership. This multi-domain architecture of cooperation reflects the deliberate strategic choices made by both governments over an extended period and demonstrates the cumulative impact of sustained institutional coordination on the overall structure of the bilateral relationship (Dar & Janbaz, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that China–Pakistan bilateralism is best understood as a strategic partnership sustained through the interaction of strategic agency and institutional coordination within a competitive great power environment. The central problem addressed in this research concerned how both states maintain durable cooperation despite structural asymmetries and shifting regional power dynamics. The findings demonstrate that China and Pakistan actively exercise agency by aligning their strategic objectives while relying on institutional mechanisms to translate those objectives into consistent policy outcomes. The most significant finding of this study is that neither strategic agency nor institutional coordination alone is sufficient to explain the durability of the partnership; rather, it is the dynamic interaction between these two dimensions—operating within a framework of shared narratives and normative commitments—that generates the distinctive resilience of China–Pakistan bilateralism. The analysis shows that institutional coordination plays a decisive role in stabilizing bilateral relations across political, economic, and security domains. Rather than functioning as secondary or symbolic arrangements, institutions operate as practical governance tools that reduce uncertainty, facilitate implementation, and preserve continuity during periods of political or economic change. This directly addresses the research objective of identifying the mechanisms that sustain long-term bilateral cooperation beyond immediate strategic or security considerations. The contrast between the high degree of institutional formalization in economic cooperation and the greater reliance on informal coordination mechanisms in security cooperation reflects the functional requirements of these respective domains and should be understood as a feature of the partnership’s adaptive design rather than an inconsistency in strategic commitment. The study also confirms that sectoral differences in institutional depth are shaped by functional requirements rather than inconsistencies in strategic commitment. Economic cooperation exhibits higher levels of formalization due to the long-term planning and regulatory coordination it demands, while security cooperation remains more flexible and adaptive. This finding clarifies why institutional coordination varies across sectors while remaining embedded within a shared strategic framework. The research recognizes several

limitations that should inform the design of future studies. First, the exclusive reliance on documentary and secondary sources limits the ability to access the informal decision-making processes and personal relationships that also shape bilateral outcomes. Second, the study's focus on the national and institutional levels of analysis means that sub-state actors and societal dynamics receive less attention than they warrant. Future research should address these limitations by incorporating primary data collection through interviews with key policymakers and by extending the analysis to subnational levels of governance. Additionally, comparative studies that situate China–Pakistan bilateralism within the broader landscape of Chinese bilateral partnerships across Asia would provide valuable context for evaluating the generalizability of the findings presented here.

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