

**Pakistan's Foreign Policy towards China: (A Case Study 2013-2022)**



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*Islamabad, in partial fulfillment of the degree of Master of Philosophy in*

**International Relations**

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## **DEDICATION**

To my beloved mother and father, whose unwavering love, sacrifices, and guidance have been the foundation of my strength and success. This work is a testament to your enduring support and inspiration.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is a comparative study of the foreign policy of Pakistan to China under the governments of Nawaz Sharif (2013-2018) and Imran Khan (2018-2022). Although the relations between Pakistan and China are commonly referred to as an all-weather partnering, the shift in politics under the change of leadership in the countries led to significant variations in focus, manner of doing, and execution. The study employs a qualitative research design that is based on the neoclassical realism and the rational actor model to study the influence of systemic pressures, domestic political processes and leader priorities on policy orientations. The Nawaz Sharif government has also been marked by the introduction and the swift development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as a source of economic modernization and energy security, and a realistic approach to the balance with the United States. Conversely, the administration of Imran Khan was originally cautious on CPEC, focusing on transparency and fiscal sustainability but has reverted to Beijing during economic crises and poor U.S. Pakistan relations. The major areas of comparison are the approaches to CPEC, the Pakistan-China Free Trade Agreement (FTAII), diplomatic discourse, and ways of addressing the U.S-China rivalry. The results point out continuity and divergence: continuity in the structural imperative to fit into China and divergence in the style of leadership, negotiation policies and diplomatic rhetoric. In the end, this paper proves that the China policy of Pakistan is determined not only by the geopolitical factors but also by variations by the leadership, which has an important implication to the strategical independence of the country. The study adds to the literature on foreign policy analysis in South Asia by demonstrating the interaction between domestic politics and international pressures, which create both consistency and variation in the external alignments in Pakistan.

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## LIST OF ACROYMS AND ABBRIVATIONS

USA	United States of America
CPEC	China Pakistan Economic Corridor
CPFTA	China Pakistan Free Trade Agreement
PTI	Pakistan Tehreek.i.Insaf
PML-N	Pakistan Muslim League-N
RAM	Rational Actor Model
NCR	Neoclassical Realism
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
JEC	Joint Economic Commission
PRC	People’s Republic of China
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
IMF	International Monetary Fund
SSD	Special Security Division
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
PLAN	People’s Liberation Army Navy
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment

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## **Chapter: 01**

### **Introduction**

Human beings cannot live independently of other human beings. From the Stone Age to the era of globalization, human beings have always needed others in almost all spheres of human life. The same is true for countries as well.<sup>1</sup> The era of advancement and globalization has put a lot of pressure on developing and developed countries to grow socially, economically, and politically. Resultantly, these nations have made alliances, such as military alliances, economic alliances, and diplomatic alliances. One example is the relations between China and Pakistan.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, the foreign policy of Pakistan in relation to China has been one of the most stable and significant aspects, with an all-weather friendship often being mentioned. This bilateral relationship has been driven by mutual strategic, economic, and security interests beginning in the early 1950s when the two states established formal diplomatic relations. The cooperation across decades has developed not just rhetoric, but actual cooperation in fields like defense, infrastructure, and trade.<sup>3</sup> The greatest manifestation of such collaboration in the modern period has been the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a Greater Hyperthlon of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). To Pakistan, China is not only a formidable neighbor but also a reliable ally against the shifting world and regional politics and market dynamics defining the troubled Afghanistan relations, especially against the backdrop of a fragile relationship with the United States and a fragile economy back home.<sup>4</sup>

Although continuity is a major part of the foreign policy of Pakistan in its relation with China, the men changing leadership of the country have been coming up with differing emphases and approaches. Pakistan, which follows parliamentary democracy, there is usually the obvious two-fold influence of the civil and military establishment on foreign policy. However, civilian leaders carry with them their own priorities, politics, and economic vision, which can in one way or another influence bilateral relations. Specifically on this matter, the rule of the former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif (2013-2017) and the former Prime Minister Imran Khan (2018-2022) would be of great instructive value. Both eras were vital in terms of the expansion of CPEC and other Pakistan-

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<sup>1</sup> Maxwell Bastos, *Foreign Policy of Pakistan: A Critical Approach* (London: University of Westminster, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Huseyin Doğan, "The Nexus of Power, Culture, and Elite Interactions: A Neoclassical Realist Framework for Foreign Policy Analysis," *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi* (2025): 1–19.

<sup>3</sup> M. M. Khan and M. Kasi, "Pakistan–China Relations," *Strategic Studies* 37, no. 3 (2017): 55–74.

<sup>4</sup> M. M. Khan and M. Kasi, "Pakistan–China Relations," *Strategic Studies* 37, no. 3 (2017): 55–74.

China relations, but how they were executed varied with regard to the style of government control, political leanings, and reaction to domestic and foreign adversaries.<sup>5</sup>

CPEC and its initial deployment under Nawaz Sharif are largely linked with a heavy focus on machinery initiatives and infrastructure development. His government had portrayed the start of Cooperation with China as a way of solving the long-time energy shortages in Pakistan and enhancing connectivity in a way such that these investments would change the face of the Pakistani Economic condition. Imran Khan is initially cautious of facets of CPEC, though his government, elected on the promise of anti-corruption and social justice, demanded more transparency and requested the renegotiation of some conditions. However, over time, the government of Khan shifted its views closer to management of China, not only to maintain economic cooperation but also to find diversionary as well as financial assistance against the increasing economic crisis and regional turmoil.<sup>6</sup>

Such two administrations are significant to compare with one another on a number of reasons. First, it offers a chance to achieve a faint understanding of how the leadership styles and domestic political orientations influence the foreign policy towards the principal strategy partner of Pakistan. Second, the analysis introduces the continuity and change of foreign policy to the fore, how the structural constraints such as the dependency of Pakistan on the economy and security needs interact with the changes caused by the leaders. Finally, the current study contributes to a broad spectrum of scholarly literature on the Pakistan-China relations, which gives the insight into the role of internal politics in Pakistan in its foreign reorientations.

The paper has some practical implications too. The fact that Pakistan transforms into a placed state or a placed nation acquires a critical importance in a rapidly evolving world order where the struggle between the great powers, which is primarily between the US and China, appears to take the lead. Following the description of the dynamics between different civilian regimes and China, the conventional elements of the relations enable one to suggest the ways in which Pakistan may approach its foreign policy. The research, further, highlighting issues and opportunities that await governments in the next decades in terms of sustaining and extending this strategic relationship, uses the Sharif and Khan administrations.

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<sup>5</sup> Martino Corsi, "Pakistan 2024: Political Turmoil and Economic Instability," *Asia Maior* 35 (2024). <sup>6</sup> A. Siddique and S. Shafqat, "How BRI and CPEC Are Reshaping China's Soft Power," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 3 (2021): 61–94.

<sup>6</sup> Martino Corsi, "Pakistan 2022: The Geopolitics of Imran Khan's Fall," *Asia Maior* 33 (1989): 387.

The key objective of the thesis is to make a comparative study of the foreign policy of Pakistan towards China during the reign of Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan. The study will examine the priorities, policies, and results of the two governments regarding China, mainly in the areas of economics, politics, and diplomacy. In this way, the research aims to make contributions not only to the academic field of foreign policy analysis but also to policies regarding the external relations of Pakistan.

### **1.1 Pakistan's Foreign Policy towards China**

The depth and rationale of Sino-Pakistan relations could be gauged from the fact that Pakistan was among the first few countries that had recognized the Communist People's Republic of China (PRC). Ironically, Pakistan, an Islamic state, felt uncomfortable with a country whose ideology was based on Communism contradicted its own ideology, i.e., Islam. Pakistan also joined the Western-sponsored anti-Communist security alliances of the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO). This policy still did not fracture ties between pro-American Pakistan and anti-American Communist China.<sup>7</sup> In a landmark 1963 border treaty with China, Pakistan ceded a part of its Northern territory.<sup>8</sup> And also Pakistan became the first non-Communist country to operate direct flights to Peking, the capital of communist China.

The Pakistan-China Treaty for Friendship and Cooperation and Good Neighborly Relations is a key instrument that enables us to strengthen our strategic, economic, and cultural relations. A Joint Economic Commission (JEC) helps Pakistan stimulate the growth of its economic and trade ties. A periodic review of the progress in different projects, sponsored by China in Pakistan, particularly CPEC, tends to ensure further opportunities in deepening fruitful relations between the two allies. According to an American researcher, "the genesis and early development of the Sino-Pakistan strategic partnership was framed by the Cold War, the Indo-Pakistan conflict, and Sino-Indian rivalry. American and Soviet aid to India during the 1962 Sino-Indian War supplied the impetus for China and Pakistan to pursue closer strategic ties. Nevertheless, cooperation in military and security affairs continues to be the central pillar of the Sino-Pakistan relationship. Furthermore, there is no mistaking the fact that China, by virtue of its economic and political heft, dominates the relationship and drives the bilateral agenda."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Moonis Ahmar, "Post-Independence Compulsions and Pakistan's Foreign Policy," *Pakistan Horizon* 76, no. 1 (2023): 67–84.

<sup>8</sup> Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, "Significance of Pakistan–China Border Agreement of 1963," *Pakistan Horizon* 39, no. 4 (1986): 41–52.

<sup>9</sup> John Calabrese, "Balancing on 'the Fulcrum of Asia': China's Pakistan Strategy," *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 27, nos. 1–2 (2014): 1–20.

In the arena of trade, commerce, and economic assistance, China has been a major source of help to Pakistan, particularly in building its infrastructure and industrial base. In its essence, “China’s economic assistance is mostly in the shape of grants and loans for projects.”<sup>10</sup> Several high-profile projects have been launched since the early 1970s such as the construction of the Karakoram Highway (KKH), the Heavy Mechanical Complex (HMC) and Heavy Foundry & Forge (HFF) in Taxila, the Machine Tool Plant in Karachi, Gwadar port, nuclear power plants at Chashma, in addition to several similar projects in the defense production sector, including the Heavy Rebuild Factory which later became Heavy Industries Taxila (HIT), which has developed the Al-Khalid tank. These projects have a symbolic value and are an obvious contribution to the economy and defense of the country.<sup>11</sup>

Realistically speaking, moving on to the foreign policy arena, the essence of the policy of bilateralism was a shift from the policy of alliances to promoting interaction and cooperation with Communist/ Socialist countries and those belonging to the emerging third World. According to Swaran Singh, an Indian academician writing in his book, *China-South Asia: Issues, Equations, Policies*, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto clearly stands out as being the architect of China-Pakistan nuclear cooperation and also the architect of Pakistan’s nuclear policy and programs. As Pakistan’s Foreign Minister during 1963-66, he had been largely responsible for laying the foundation of China-Pakistan defense cooperation.<sup>12</sup>

## **1.2 Problem statement**

Though China is a strategic ally to Pakistan, shifts in political leadership have led to change in economic alliance, diplomatic relations. The administration of Nawaz Sharif had economical diplomacy and CPEC advancement as priorities, the Imran Khan government gave priorities on economic terms renegotiation, diversification of foreign allies, and re-examination of CPEC. This requires systematic comparative analysis to understand these differences by exposing the reasons and implications of policies. This research gap will be filled by the current paper as it will examine the foreign policy disposition Of the PML-N and PTI governments, in relation to China, assess the impact of key domestic and foreign factors, and the overall impact on Pak-China relations. The findings will be instrumental in comprehending the change in foreign

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<sup>10</sup> C. Wolf Jr., X. Wang, and E. Warner, *China’s Foreign Aid and Government-Sponsored Investment Activities* (2013).

<sup>11</sup> Moonis Ahmar, “Dynamics of Pakistan-China Relations,” *Journal of Security & Strategic Analyses* 6, no. 1 (2020): 86–106.

<sup>12</sup> S. Singh, *China–South Asia: Issues, Equations, Policies* (2003).

policy which is influenced by leadership and the traditional institutional relationships that influence the international affairs of Pakistan.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

The research questions according to this study are as follows:

1. Which were the major goals and priorities of the Pakistan foreign policy towards China under Nawaz Sharif government (2013-2017)?
2. What was the formulation and implementation of the Imran Khan Administration (2018-2022) foreign policy towards China?
3. How do the foreign policy of Pakistan to China during the tenure of Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan differ and resemble?

### **1.4 Research Objectives**

1. To investigate the PML-N and PTI government policies and strategies concerning the foreign policy towards China.
2. To determine the contrasts and commonalities in the manner in which they engage both economically, diplomatically and in security matters with China.
3. To determine the role of leadership styles and political ideologies used by Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan in making their foreign policy decisions towards China with consideration to their style of governance.

### **1.5 Significance**

This research is important because it addresses a very important gap in literature by providing a comparative approach of the foreign policy between Pakistan and China under two different regimes. It uses a combination of leadership views, institutional forces and geopolitics hence offering a subtle insight on the process of foreign policy-making within Pakistan and encourages both academics and policy makers.

### **1.6 Literature Review**

The foreign policy of Pakistan vis-a-vis China has been changing into one of the most lasting and strategically noteworthy bilateral relations in Asia. There is a general consensus among scholars that this partnership has been available even when the political leadership in Pakistan has changed a lot hence a strategic agreement that may appear to be long term between the various successive

governments.<sup>13</sup> The history of this relationship dates back to 1950s, when Pakistan was among the first Muslim majority nations to recognize the Peoples Republic of China. Since that time, the cooperation has continued growing steadily as a result of diplomatic interaction to a multidimensional form of cooperation that is based on defense, trade, infrastructure, and political coordination..<sup>14</sup> China has over time become the most reliable ally of Pakistan especially when the relationship between Islamabad and the United States has been in a fluctuation pattern. This longstanding congruency is the structural background upon which both the Pakistan Muslim League -Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) governments transpired their foreign policy.

There is a significant amount of research literature that focuses on the strategic and economic rationale behind Pakistan involvement in China. Muhammad Afzaal single out the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as the flagship project of this agreement, as well as a transformative element of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by China. They claim that the infrastructure and energy developments by CPEC were meant to bring Pakistan on board to the world trade connections and at the same time further the strategic interest of Beijing in Indian Ocean.<sup>15</sup> CPEC marked the transition of Pakistan to an aid dependent economy into a connector dependent economy and industrial growth.<sup>16</sup> But there is a more cautious view among other scholars who point at the problems of sustainability of debt, the lack of transparency of governance, and unequal provincial gains as a part of the CPEC structure. .<sup>17</sup> Baluchistan Insurgency and security threats to Chinese employees are still the main barriers to the implementation of the project. The situation in Pakistan where the Special Security Division was formed by the government in order to safeguard Chinese nationals, indicates that security has come to the fore in the economic aspect,<sup>18</sup>

Even though there is unanimity concerning the significance of CPEC, analysts have differed in describing the role played by the domestic political leadership of Pakistan in influencing its

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<sup>13</sup> Z. Memon and F. Kousar, "Exploring the Historical Context and Future Prospects of Pak–China Relations," *Journal of Religion and Society* 2, no. 4 (2024): 66–80.

<sup>14</sup> J. Zhao and Y. Guo, "The Development of China–Pakistan Diplomatic Relations," *Pacific International Journal* 6, no. S1 (2022): 34–39.

<sup>15</sup> Muhammad Afzaal, "The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative: Concept, Context and Assessment: By Siegfried O. Wolf," Taylor & Francis (2020).

<sup>16</sup> Mario Esteban and Iliana Oliví, "China and Aid Norms: A Case Study on Ethiopia, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka," in *China and International Norms*, 22–46 (London: Routledge, 2023).

<sup>17</sup> A. A. Ch et al., "Pakistan–China Relations: Economic Benefits vs. Debt Trap Concerns (CPEC)," *Journal of Political Stability Archive* 3, no. 3 (2025): 204–21.

<sup>18</sup> S. Sial, "The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor: An Assessment of Potential Threats and Constraints," *Conflict and Peace Studies* 6, no. 2 (2014): 24.

development. When Nawaz Sharif was elected to lead the PML-N party (2013-2018) government, CPEC was presented as the key element in Pakistan economic revival strategy.

Sharif put across the program as a means of speedy modernization, energy independence, and employment. The fact that key projects like the Sahiwal and Port Qasim coal power plants and the Karachi -Lahore motorway were completed indicated the PML-N focus on visible developments benefits.<sup>19</sup> Even though there is unanimity concerning the significance of CPEC, analysts have differed in describing the role played by the domestic political leadership of Pakistan in influencing its development. When Nawaz Sharif was elected to lead the PML-N party (2013-2018) government, CPEC was presented as the key element in Pakistan economic revival strategy. Sharif put across the programs as a means of speedy modernization, energy independence, and employment. The fact that key projects like the Sahiwal and Port Qasim coal power plants and the Karachi-Lahore motorway were completed indicated the PML-N focus on visible developments benefits.<sup>20</sup> The growth-first policy of the PML-N focused more on the speed and less on accountability, which led to the imbalanced distribution of projects between the regions and the high amount of external borrowing. However, the active development of the Chinese investment by the government also contributed greatly to mutual cooperation and strengthened the feeling of security by the Chinese regarding Pakistan as its reliable economic partner<sup>21</sup> Conversely, the policy of the PTI government (2018-2022) led by Imran Khan, had taken a more cautious stance toward CPEC, during his 2018 election campaign, Khan had criticized the deals and said he would be more open and renegotiate conditions to ensure Pakistan had economic sovereignty.<sup>22</sup> His government, on taking office, undertook a scrutiny of the current projects of the CPEC and halted their execution. This was a section of the wider political agenda of Khan where he focused on anti-corruption and institutional reform. However, with the deterioration of the balance of payment crisis in Pakistan and the rise of international pressure, the PTI government changed its policy to pragmatic cooperation. The initiation of three Special Economic Zones i.e. Rashakai, Allama Iqbal, and Dhabeji can be noted as record of renewed commitment to second phase of CPEC, which happened at the same time as Khan paid official visits to Beijing. The defense liaison and diplomatic agreement between PTI and China was also continuous, but in the rhetoric of moderate strategic

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<sup>19</sup> F. Sajjad, *Mega-Project Politics: The Evolution of Lahore's First BRT Corridor* (Master's thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> Madiha Afzal, "'At All Costs': How Pakistan and China Control the Narrative on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor," *Brookings Institution* 4, no. 2 (2020): 1–10.

<sup>21</sup> F. Ullah et al., "Strengthening Ties: The Evolution of the Pakistan–China Strategic Partnership in the Xi Jinping Era," *International Journal of Social Sciences Bulletin*.

<sup>22</sup> Y. Samad, "The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor: The Politics of Development," *Critical Pakistan Studies* (2025): 1–25.

independence.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the governments of both countries had acknowledged that China was indispensable, but the way they framed and implemented their policies was different: the PML-N focused on the rapid development of the state and infrastructure, whereas PTI focused on transparency, sustainability, and reform.

Other than CPEC, other important aspects of the Pakistan-China relationship have been brought to the fore in the literature, which have developed under these administrations. The second round of Free Trade Agreement between China and Pakistan (FTA-II), which was signed during the PTI government extended bilateral trade in goods and services.<sup>24</sup> This non-conditional stance of China on the aid and investment presented a strategic alternative to the western financial institutions especially at the time of increasing foreign debt and IMF restrictions against Pakistan.

The issue of leadership identity and political discourse are also prominent in new scholarship. Pakistani pleaders use the national identity and desire to grow and develop to understand relations with China. In the case of PML-N, the story of iron brotherhood and common prosperity was used to support the image of technocrats and pro-investment. In the case of PTI, transparency and self-reliance were focused on its populist agenda of reforms. Elite signaling, as argued by scholar Afzal, was a way in which each leadership would justify its China policy back home using speeches, media framing and diplomatic rhetoric.<sup>25</sup> Qamar Ali develops this argument by suggesting that the foreign policy process in Pakistan is a cyclical process in which internal political competition and coordination between civilians and the military influence the process of shaping, deciding, and assuming responsibility.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, external alignment with China is not observed to change, although domestic political discourse does have an impact on the means of articulation and legitimization of alignment.

This literature unanimously points out that Pakistani Chinese policy is characterized by a dual nature of structural continuity and strategic imperatives, and situational divergence driven by leadership and political interests. The integrationist approach of PML-N aimed at economic

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<sup>23</sup> M. Younis et al., "Impact of Change of Government in Pakistan on CPEC," *PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt* 18, no. 10 (2021): 3054–67.

<sup>24</sup> A. S. Khakwani and A. Irfan, "Driving Forces of Pakistan's Foreign Policy towards China: An Analytical Study," *Annals of Human and Social Sciences* 6, no. 4 (2025): 200–13.

<sup>25</sup> Muhammad Afzaal and Muhammad Imran Chishti, "Exploring Image of China in the Diplomatic Discourse: A Critical Discourse Analysis," *Journal of Development and Social Sciences* 2, no. 4 (2021): 120–33.

<sup>26</sup> Qamar Ali, "Foreign Policy Making Process and Procedure in Pakistan," *Journal of Emerging Trends in Social Sciences and Humanities* 1, no. 4 (2023): 24–37.

convergence with China in the long run, but the reserved approach of PTI was an effort to match cooperation with the national reformist discourses.<sup>27</sup> The two administrations, however, came into agreement over the need to come to terms with the fact that an alliance with Beijing was crucial in the stability of the nation and more so when the U.S.–China rivalries began to change. This expression of continuity and change shows the larger forces of the foreign policy of Pakistan that were based on systemic necessity but through the medium of domestic political agency.

Although much academic focus has been given to the topic of CPEC and strategic alignment, there is still a scarcity of knowledge on how differences in political leadership can be transformed into discrepancies in foreign policy practice. Most current research views Chinese policy in Pakistan as unitary, neglecting the way in which individual governments can adjust common strategic objectives to suit their ideological and administrative structures. The study aims to fill this gap by examining the impact of Nawaz Sharif's developmental pragmatism. This research provides a subtle insight into continuity and change in the foreign policy behavior of Pakistan by blending neoclassical realism, which attributes systemic constraints to domestic political lenses, with the Rational Actor Model, which is based on the calculation of choices made by Pakistan to achieve particular goals. It shows that although structural dependence on China has guaranteed long-term strategic coherence of Pakistan, the rate, framing, and style of the same coherence is being decided through the interpretation of national interests by leaders.

## **1.7 Research Gap**

Research on the economic and security aspects of Pakistan-China relations, especially CPEC and defense collaboration has been conducted, the conclusions being that ignore the impact of domestic politics on bilateral policy. This paper fills that gap through a comparative analysis of the role played by the populist approach of Imran Khan and the traditional approach of Nawaz Sharif towards shaping foreign policy towards China.

## **1.8 Theoretical Framework**

The study of foreign policies needs a sound theoretical prism to comprehend the reasons, decisions, and consequences of the state action. As this paper is the investigation of the foreign policy of Pakistan towards China during the administration of two different governments, it is necessary to implement the scheme that can describe the systemic pressures on the international level as well as the leadership-induced differences on the domestic one. To that end, the research mainly uses

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<sup>27</sup> Francesco Boni, *The Impact of Domestic Politics on BRI Projects: The Case of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor* (2025).

Neoclassical Realism as a main approach supplemented with the information of the Rational Actor Model (RAM).

Neoclassical Realism is based on the classical realist focus on the distribution of power and the systemic restraints, yet it also includes domestic considerations like the perceptions of leaders, institutional interests, and political situation. It holds that the international structure establishes the frontiers of the action of states, but the domestic variables dictate the way these external stresses are construed and transformed into state policy.<sup>28</sup> In the Pakistan-China relationship, Neoclassical Realism is useful in understanding how the regional security issues, economic needs and great power interests mediate with internal politics of Pakistan such as civil military relations, party politics, and governmental priorities to influence the foreign policy outcomes.<sup>29</sup>

Whereas Neoclassical Realism gives us a reason as to why Pakistan continues to be structurally oriented towards China, Rational Actor Model assists in clarifying how certain policy decisions are undertaken within the same framework. The RAM considers the state to be a unitary actor, which makes a decision based on rational cost-benefit analysis to maximize national interest.<sup>30</sup> When applied to this work, it explains how the PML-N as well as the PTI governments have used calculated policy choices, including negotiating the terms of CPEC, balancing relations with the United States, or developing economic dependencies, based on their strategic and political priorities.

This research is a synthesis of Neoclassical Realism and the Rational Actor Model and provides an in depth explanation of the Pakistani foreign policy behavior in relation to China. Neoclassical Realism gives the macro-level explanation of the interaction of the systemic and domestic interactions leading to alignments over the long term, whereas the Rational Actor Model sheds light on the micro-level decision-making process therein. These theories in combination, however, permit a subtle explanation of continuity and the occurrence of variation in the Pakistan China policy in the PML-N and the PTI regimes.

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<sup>28</sup> Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 144–72.

<sup>29</sup> Hassan, Syeda Kanwal. "An analysis of Pakistan's foreign policy towards Peoples Republic of China: a strengthening alignment (2005 onwards)." PhD diss., Hong Kong Baptist University, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Allison, Graham. "The Cuban missile crisis." *The American Political Science Review* 63, no. 3 (1969): 689-718.

## **1.9 Research Methodology**

A strong methodological framework is essential for ensuring the validity and reliability of this research. Since the thesis examines Pakistan's foreign policy toward China by comparing the administrations of Imran Khan (PTI) and Nawaz Sharif (PML-N), the methodological choices must enable a systematic analysis of political discourse, policies, and international interactions.<sup>31</sup> This section explains the research approach, design, methods, data collection strategies, data analysis techniques, and addresses ethical considerations, reliability, limitations, and the organization of the study.

### **1.10 Research Approach**

This study adopts a qualitative method because it emphasizes gathering the underpinning meanings, provocations, and contextual dynamics of foreign procedure opinions rather than quantifying variables. The thing is to explore how political leadership, party testament, and domestic constraints shaped Pakistan's policy exposure toward China. A qualitative path allows for a refined interpretation of sanctioned statements, agreements, and programs by setting them within thick political, profitable, and screen surroundings.

### **1.11 Research Design**

To make the exploration, the thesis adopts a comparative case study, where the two authorities are considered unique yet related cases. Case study project is particularly beneficial within the context of measuring such complicated political wonders as the foreign policy when numerous factors, including domestic politics, transnational pressures, and the election of the leaders, intersect. The comparison between the Nawaz Sharif regime (2013-2018) and the Imran Khan regime (2018-2022) can fully determine the duration of changes in the Pakistan-China policy by the study.

### **1.12 Research Method**

The research will be based on talkie and text dissection as the main system of exploration. This includes an assessment of addresses, press releases, government documents, procedure papers, bilateral deals( like the one in the case of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, CPEC), administrative arguments, and plausible secondary sources like knowledgeable books and journal articles. On the side, the media content and reports by the think tanks (both Pakistani and transnational) will be analyzed to see how the change in procedure was created and understood.

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<sup>31</sup> Mello, Patrick A., and Falk Ostermann, eds. *Routledge handbook of foreign policy analysis methods*. London: Routledge, 2023.

### **1.13 Data Collection Methods**

The research adopts a qualitative data collection approach, relying mainly on secondary data sources such as government documents, authorized addresses, press releases, administrative briefings and the manifestos of both the Pakistan Muslim League- Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). To find out how Pakistan's foreign policy toward China is shaped by these two institutions, they will study peer-reviewed journal articles, think tanks, and reference libraries.

### **1.14 Data Analysis**

The thesis will be completed through a thematic approach, which involves connecting themes found in the gathered data. The local screen landscape and the political rhetoric that each authoritarian assumes can have tactical parallels with vital themes of profitable mutual cooperation (usually both elucidating CPEC). There will be a framework of dissection because a relative frame will be used to indicate the times and differences between Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan's strategies. Using the Rational Actor Model and Liberal Institutionalism, the illuminating depth will be broken down so that the opinions can be viewed not only in the context of logical cost-benefit analyses but also in the context of institutional dynamics of transnational cooperation.

### **1.15 Ethical Considerations**

The focus of this study is ethical integrity. Since the study is mainly based on the secondary sources, including the government documents, policy papers, academic articles, and credible media coverage, the responsibility of using the materials in a responsible way and citing the materials properly has been taken into account. The discussion is carried out in an academic objectivity, without political bias and taking into consideration different points of view concerning the relations between Pakistan and China. In cases of sensitive political or diplomatic matters, special care is taken to keep the neutrality and respect. Citations are done according to the Chicago Manual of Style, 17th edition, so that authors are recognized correctly and plagiarism is avoided.

### **1.16 Reliability and Validity, and Limitations**

To make it trustworthy, the exploration will implement harmonious coding processes through all sources of data and reduce individual partiality when dissecting the data. Triangulation - appealing to procedure documents, expert interviews and intellectual literature will increase the validity as the rulings will be cross-verified. The sources that are peer examined and estimable will be given priority to save on credibility and reliance on the established propositions that resemble the

Rational Actor Model will provide a good logical frame that will improve the internal validity of the study.

Nonetheless, the study has some limitations in spite of its puissance. To begin with, the availability of primary materials, particularly materials concerning pre- the- scenes understanding between Pakistan and China might be limited by the virtue of public screening businesses. Second, reliance on interviews can create specific impulse as the clarifications of the experts can be affected by their professional or political organizations. Third, the rulings might not reflect the dense literal strip of the Pakistan-China dealings given that the seat is only post 2013 era. However, in confessing such terminations, the study endeavors to make its findings transparent and intellectually sound.

### **1.17 Organization of the Study**

The paper is organized into five connected chapters and each of them leads to the logical and comprehensive discussion of the foreign policy of Pakistan towards China. Chapter One, Introduction, gives the background of the study, the research problem, objectives and questions, and highlights the importance of the research in the greater context of foreign policy of Pakistan during two different political administrations. Chapter Two, Theoretical and Analytical Framework, expounds on the conceptual basis of the study using mostly the Neoclassical Realism and the Rational Actor Model (RAM) to elaborate the interplay between systemic imperatives and domestic political processes. Chapter Three, Comparative Analysis of Pakistan-China Policy under PML-N and PTI Administrations, introduces a comparative policy analysis of the two administrations with regard to the alignment of strategies, economic engagement via CPEC, trade negotiation processes, and the diplomatic policies. In Chapter Four, Interpretation, Leadership Dynamics, and Policy Implications, the comparative results are critically interpreted in terms of the identified theoretical perspectives, which should have influenced the continuity and change in foreign policy. Last but not least, Chapter Five, Conclusion and Recommendations, summarizes the major findings of the research, sums up its theoretical and practical implications, and proposes the recommendations to policymakers and future perspectives on the research of the relations between Pakistan and China.

## Chapter: 02

### Theoretical Framework

#### Introduction

According to the preliminary discourse employed in the Introduction Chapter, which has defined the research problem, objectives, and importance of the changing foreign policy between Pakistan and China, this chapter proceeds with the theoretical basis that is needed to give meaning to that phenomenon. Introduction Chapter has created the premise that even though previous literature on the topic of Pakistan-China relationship has explored much on the economic and security aspects of the relationship, it has also largely over-looked how politics within domestic spheres and differences in leadership approach influence foreign policy implications. In order to fill this gap in analysis, the Theoretical Chapter gives the conceptual framework with which the study views these dynamics. Placing the study in the context of conventional traditions in the International Relations theory, this chapter defines the most appropriate approaches to explaining continuity as well as change in the policy towards China in Pakistan. It goes further to contend that although systemic imperatives, including geopolitical rivalry and regional security, are still paramount, domestic political variables, perceptions of leaders and institutional structures are also important determinants of foreign policy behavior. Thus, it is in this chapter that the evaluation of key theoretical perspectives is made in order to proceed with Neoclassical Realism and Rational Actor Model (RAM) as the primary analytical lenses of this study, in order that a multidimensional understanding on foreign policy formulation in Pakistan under the various political regimes is achieved.

When analyzing foreign policy, there are several theoretical prisms that usually guide the understanding of complicated state actions. Various schools of thought emphasize various driving forces, power relations, domestic institutions, inter-state conventions, and calculus rationality and each of them offers partial consideration of international politics. There is no universal theory that can be used in explaining situations and therefore, the analyst needs to select the most appropriate framework for the situation at hand. The puzzle in the case of Pakistan is why the foreign policy of this country is not diverged despite having completely different leaders. The change of leadership between one prime minister and another has not changed Pakistan's commitment to the China relationship.

This chapter starts with the evaluation of key theoretical views in order to check their applicability. Neoclassical Realism (NcR) and the Rational Actor Model (RAM) as our main tools of analysis.

Neoclassical realism incorporates both systemic and domestic influences to give a very detailed picture of foreign policy decisions. The rational actor model assumes that state is a single decision maker that balances costs and benefits. Combining NcR and RAM gives a holistic approach to explaining the drivers as well as the decisions that contribute to Pakistan aligning with China. By so doing, we will tap into the realist tradition combined with the decision theory to fully characterize the relationship between Pakistan and China under various regimes.

## **2.1 Neoclassical Realism:**

The theory is developed by “Gideon Rose”. Neo-classical realism is a result of foreign policy studies through studying both the structure of the international system and domestic factors, and their complex interactions with each other. Neo-classical realist thinkers argue that internal and local factors are intervening variables that play the role of a string between the independent variable (relative power) and the dependent variable (foreign policy outcomes). These factors, such as the interests of domestic groups, the interests of states, or the attitudes of elites, all participate in shaping the foreign policy of a state. In this regard, Gideon Rose notes that theories of foreign policy are seeking to explain what and when states look to achieve in foreign policy. According to Rose, realists have ignored these factors, and the main goal of neo-classical realism is to solve these shortcomings.<sup>32</sup> They believe that structure is important and therefore argue that anarchy is the main cause of struggle.

Neoclassical realism (NcR) offers a framework that bridges traditional realism and domestic politics. It argues that the international system’s power structure sets the stage, but how a state responds depends on internal factors and the perceptions of its leaders.<sup>33</sup> In this view, the distribution of power between great powers (for example, China’s rise or the U.S.–India partnership) creates incentives or pressures that shape options for all states. However, each country’s foreign policy is “filtered” through its domestic context, including its institutions, leadership priorities, economic conditions, and strategic culture. As one formulation suggests, “The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must,” but how the weaker state reacts can vary depending on how its rulers perceive and address the threat.

Studying the effect of relative power on foreign policy is the core subject of neoclassical realism. The principal factor of foreign policy analysis for neoclassical realism is decision-maker’s

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<sup>32</sup> Gideon Rose, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998):

<sup>33</sup> Huseyin Doğan, “The Nexus of Power, Culture, and Elite Interactions: A Neoclassical Realist Framework for Foreign Policy Analysis,” *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi* (2025): 1–19.

understanding of systemic pressures that lead them to decide. The second intervening variable in neoclassical realism is the capability or relative power of states in relation to other states. In other words, though neoclassical realists are seeking systemic analysis, they do it through analyzing the relative power of each state and the attitudes of decision-makers towards the situation. Briefly, neoclassical realism is the theory that attempts to combine factors of micro and systemic theories to provide a better understanding of the foreign policy of countries.<sup>34</sup>

Neoclassical realism provides a particularly useful framework for understanding Pakistan's foreign policy toward China because it highlights the interaction between systemic pressures and domestic filters in shaping state behavior. At the systemic level, Pakistan's strategic environment is defined by China's rising global influence, the consolidation of a U.S.–India strategic partnership, and enduring regional tensions such as the rivalry with India and instability in Afghanistan. These external dynamics generate powerful incentives for Islamabad to deepen its reliance on Beijing, both as a counterbalance to India's growing power and as a source of economic and security support in an increasingly competitive international order.<sup>35</sup>

But the systemic pressures cannot be used to explain the finer details of the way Pakistan takes its approach and the domestic level of filters is equally important in shaping the way external requirements are received and implemented. The politics of Pakistan is that of the pre-eminent position of the military that has traditionally regarded China as essential to its strategic modernization and deterrence policy. This organizational culture has provided a stable pro-China approach, irrespective of the transformation in civilian leadership. The relationship has been prised by civilian governments, however, with their political priorities. To Nawaz Sharif CPEC was positioned as the backbone of his economic development agenda and instrument to build political legitimacy and Imran Khan early tried to renegotiate the terms of CPEC to support his anti-corruption message before subsequent adopting the strategy as a means of maintaining economic relations and regional position of Pakistan. Even though these stylistic and rhetorical differences existed, both leaders came to the operational need of being tightly tied to China, as a manifestation of how systemic needs limited their maneuverability and guaranteed sustainability.

This is the gyration between international pressure and internal politics that prove neoclassical realism especially suitable: it does not only illustrate why Pakistan was forced to turn to China but

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<sup>34</sup> Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 144–72.

<sup>35</sup> R. Rajagopalan, "Neorealist Theory and the India–Pakistan Conflict–I," *Strategic Analysis* 22, no. 9 (1998): 1261–72.

also the difference in the frame and execution of the partnership by the leaders. Meanwhile, it is necessary to remember about the limitations of the theory. Since neoclassical realism takes into consideration both the systemic and domestic variables, it runs the risk of being too pliable and attributing any outcome retroactively. To prevent this, the analysis should be oriented towards the well-detectable factors, e.g., the constant orientation of the Pakistani military towards China, the objective security threat of India, which anchor the framework in the realities. Through such a disciplined application, neoclassical realism provides a strong organizing logic with the help of which to comprehend why the China policy of Pakistan remains continuity rather than discontinuity regardless of changes in styles, focus, and approaches in its implementation.

## **2.2 The Rational Actor Model:**

The Rational Actor Model (RAM) is based on the conceptualization of the state as a unified decision-maker, and it selects the policies based on the cost and benefits. Within this scheme (related to the Model I by Graham Allison), it is the outcome of a calculated assessment of the national interest that determines the results of foreign policy. Although this model is a simplification, it delays the inside conflicts and the politics of bureaucracy and it gives an explanation of why certain policy decisions appear to be rational in the view of the leadership.<sup>36</sup> In the case of the Pakistan-China relationship, the rational actor approach can be used to explain certain strategic choices of every leader.

This method presupposes that the actor central to foreign policy is a rational individual who may be counted on to make well-informed, calculated choices, which will be optimal as well as apparent good to the state.<sup>37</sup> The rational actor model is based on the interactions of state-levels among countries and the behavior of governments as its units of analysis, in which the actors have complete information to optimize their decisions; and the actions undertaken over time are both uniform and consistent. The process of decision making in the rational actor has four major steps which include; identification of the problem, the desired outcomes, and consequences of the policy options available and lastly, the rational decision maker should make the most rational choice in order to maximize the good.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> D. E. Nuechterlein, "National Interests and Foreign Policy: A Conceptual Framework for Analysis and Decision-Making," *Review of International Studies* 2, no. 3 (1976): 246–66.

<sup>37</sup> J. Renshon and S. A. Renshon, "The Theory and Practice of Foreign Policy Decision Making," *Political Psychology* 29, no. 4 (2008): 509–36.

<sup>38</sup> Clifford J. Andrews, "Rationality in Policy Decision Making," in *Handbook of Public Policy Analysis*, 187–98 (New York: Routledge, 2017).

The Rational Actor Model (RAM) would be useful in explaining the decision making process of both Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan since their policies towards China are viewed in terms of a sequence of cost benefit decisions. In the case of Nawaz Sharif the economic and energy crises in Pakistan were urgent and the Chinese investment looked like a logical and timely way out. He also had CPEC being touted as a game-changer that could deal with critical infrastructure bottlenecks, mitigate energy deficits, and provide growth, as well as bring political payoffs to his government.<sup>39</sup> But his manner was not an enthusiastic one, but was regulated by a deliberate endeavor to reduce risks. Sharif was keen on negotiating concessional terms of loans, prolonged repayments, and ensuring protection of tariffs so that the weak industries will not be flooded by the Chinese imports owing to the extended trade agreements. These measured compromises showed a balancing game that was done very carefully between bringing in much-needed capital and ensuring long term economic stability.

Conversely, rational calculations made by Imran Khan were dictated by his political discourse of accountability and anti-corruption. He took office by ordering evaluation of current CPEC projects to make them more transparent and tried to renegotiate conditions and presented it as a rectifying measure to safeguard national interests. His government wanted Pakistani more involvement in projects and more friendly terms of trade in the new FTA such as tariff protection and larger portion of profits.

Meanwhile, Khan negotiated a two-year delay in some payments on loans, which is an indication of a realistic adaptation to the Pakistani financial limits. Finally, Khan confirmed the collaboration with China although he was skeptical initially, and he signed new agreements according to the long-term strategic and economic interests of Pakistan. These choices highlight the fact that Sharif and Khan, despite being different in the style and rhetoric, behaved reasonably when adjusting their approaches to get the most out of China without compromising the alliance.

However, the use of RAM can be limited to grasp the complexity of the foreign policy behavior of Pakistan because it presupposes that a single state actor acted, whereas in reality, it was various stakeholders, such as military, civilian ministries, and political parties that influenced the result of the internal bargaining and bureaucracy. Although this fragmentation could be better represented by the models of other scholars such as Graham Allison, bureaucratic politics framework, the overall consistency in the efforts made by the two administrations to strengthen their relationship

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<sup>39</sup> T. Samin and A. Islam, "Sustainable Growth through CPEC: The Strategic Game Changer for Asia's Progress and Prosperity," *Journal for Current Sign* 3, no. 1 (2025): 159–74.

with China speaks to some form of rationality on the state level. Simply put, in spite of domestic tensions, Pakistan acted as though it had a coherent national policy: to have economic lifelines, counterbalance against the threats of the region, and maintain an indispensable relationship with Beijing.<sup>40</sup>

### **2.3 Synthesizing Neoclassical Realism and the Rational Actor Model**

An amalgamation of neoclassical realism and the rational actor model is a complete spectrum of explaining the Pakistani policy towards China. The neoclassical realism explains the big picture: it is why, despite the leader, Pakistan must feel the necessity to be on the same side with China. The external factors (the emerging power of China, strategic alliance of India and the U.S. and other geopolitical changes) and the internal forces (the mentality of security and economic demands) render the partnership to be strategically inseparable. In this context, there is the rational actor model which describes the certain choices that each leader makes. With the system-based need to collaborate, both Sharif and Khan made calculated choices to optimize the Pakistani interests. Both leaders worked out project-related conditions and trade agreements that would serve their interests (economic development in the case of Sharif, responsibility in the case of Khan) without jeopardizing the partnership. Stated differently, the boundaries and opportunities were established by structural and domestic factors and these rational calculations defined how the latter were transformed into policy.

Together, these theories explain why Pakistan's partnership with China has shown continuity and only limited variation. The underlying strategic rationale (addressing Pakistan's security dilemma and development needs) remained constant, so no government could realistically abandon the alliance. Domestic politics did influence pacing and emphasis, for example, which provinces or sectors benefited first, but even those choices were made through calculated trade-offs in line with national interest. In each case, system-level imperatives made the partnership with China seem inevitable, while rational actor strategies explain the differences in tactics (such as the timing of FTA negotiations or the framing of CPEC projects).

This integrated model integrates both macro-level influences and the micro-level choices. This continues to align Pakistan with China as this has been ingrained within the security requirements and balance-of-power calculus of the country (as NcR points out) and the leaders across stripes continue to opt to strengthen such alignment as it continues to serve the perceived national interests

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<sup>40</sup> Lawrence Freedman, "Logic, Politics and Foreign Policy Processes: A Critique of the Bureaucratic Politics Model," *International Affairs* 52, no. 3 (1976): 434–49.

(as RAM demonstrates). Thus, this two-sided strategy explains why Pakistan sticks to the relationship with China, and how and to what extent this relationship is pursued in shifting domestic conditions.

The external and internal factors influence the Pakistan-China alliance. Extrinsically, there are pressures within the system caused by changes in regional power, such as the emerging China, the developing India, and its alliances, which bring Pakistan closer to China. The perception of the military, economic vulnerabilities, and political stories are domestic factors that mediate the way the leaders of Pakistan view these pressures and through which they filter the alliance in their own interests. Such tangible decisions concerning CPEC deals, trades, infrastructure projects, and rhetoric are made as rational calculations to optimize the benefits of Pakistan in terms of energy, investment and security at a particular time. These external requirements and domestic calculations both together justify continuity as well as change in the alliance: the necessity of the system necessitates the alliance, and the rationality is used to explain why there is a limited difference in policy between leaders like Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan. This balancing at a subtle degree will facilitate the fact that despite the various types of leadership, the strategic alliance will be consistent and able to adjust to the changing regional dynamics.<sup>41</sup>

The power of this integrated theoretical prism is that it can fully describe the nature of the policy of Pakistan toward China. Systemic forces are the reason why the alliance was a necessity at all time, domestic politics are the reason why there are differences in timing and focus, and rational calculations are the reason why the policy had a particular outcome. There has been no major gap to be challenged: even though the Prime Ministers changed, the same structural pressures and rational decisions of the national leaders kept the country on the same strategic course in Pakistan. This is a comprehensive realization that Pakistan has not been drawn to China by historical coincidence but it is actually the logical outcome of geopolitical needs and planned policies.

## Conclusion

The chapter has also laid the theoretical background that will be used in analyzing the process of evolution and continuity of the foreign policy of Pakistan towards China under different political regimes. Neoclassical Realism (NcR) and the Rational Actor Model (RAM) as the main sources of analysis offering a more holistic and situational approach.

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<sup>41</sup> Ahmed, Faiz, and Jamshed Ali Baloch. "Geopolitical Changing Dynamics of Pak-India Relations during 2012 to 2022: An Analysis." *Annals of Human and Social Sciences* 5, no. 3 (2024): 333-342.

Neoclassical realism can be used to understand the reasons why Pakistan will always be strategically bound to China by connecting systemic pressures, including the balance of power in the region or the increasing global influence of China to domestic level filters, including civil-military relations, economic weaknesses, and leadership beliefs. Rational actor model, in its turn, explains the process of making particular decisions within these structural constraints. It also describes Pakistani rulers as rational actors who, in spite of their differences in political styles and philosophies of governance, aim to maximize their perceived national interests with cost and benefit analysis.

This chapter comes up with a dual-level explanation of continuity and variation in the China policy of Pakistan by synthesizing NcR and RAM. Systemic imperatives generate the structural need to cooperate with Beijing, and the meaning of that need is to be calculated rationally: the scope and pace as well as the framing of the cooperation in each administration. The government of Nawaz Sharif was focused on the rapid infrastructural and economic integration with the CPEC to meet the urgent needs of development, whereas the government of Imran Khan was focused on transparency, accountability, and sustainability to position the partnership with the local reform narratives. Nevertheless, in spite of these contrasting priorities the decision of both leaders is also placed within a rational context that was aware of China as a strategic and economically of greatest importance to Pakistan.

Overall, the policy of Pakistan towards China is resilient since it is both structurally necessary and strategically logical. NcR framework describes the external and domestic pressures that cause the relationship to be indispensable whereas RAM explains how decision-makers work within these constraints via deliberate and goal-oriented decisions. They can be combined to show that continuity in the foreign policy of Pakistan is not just the product of inertia but of a consistent strategic logic that is working in a shifting political environment. It is on the basis of this theoretical synthesis that the empirical analysis that follows will be accorded intellectual support, in which the concepts identified will be utilized in achieving the objective of reviewing the unique but overlapping foreign policy strategies of the PML-N and PTI governments.

## **Chapter: 03**

# **Comparative Analysis of Pakistan's China Policy under the PML-N and PTI Administrations**

### **Introduction**

Expanding on the theoretical bases of the first chapter, which merged Neoclassical Realism (NcR) with the Rational Actor Model (RAM) as the two analyzed approaches, this chapter transfers the theoretical frameworks onto the empirical analysis of the Pakistan foreign policy towards China under two different political leaderships: Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz (PML-N) under the leadership of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif (2013-2018) and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) under the leadership of Prime Minister Imran Khan. Unlike Chapter Two, which offered the conceptual framework to comprehend the joint determining effect of systemic pressures and domestic variables on the foreign policy behavior, the current chapter operationalizes these ideas to examine how leadership, institutional priorities, and economic imperatives played out the role in Pakistan regarding being engaged in China as a matter of practice.

The analysis identifies that the policy of Pakistan towards China has exhibited impressive levels of strategic continuity regardless of the great changes in the political life of the country. The external environment that confronted both governments—China building its presence across the world, the changing U.S.-India relationship, and the increasing economic weakness of Pakistan—was the same, but the governments reacted to it through the lens of various political discourses, administrative approaches, and governing philosophies. The chapter is governed by the Neoclassical Realism and explains how systemic requirements like regional security, great-power competition, and economic dependency restricted the flexibility of policy choices, and the domestic political system and leadership views determined their application. At the same time, the Rational Actor Model assists in understanding why both administrations made conscious, cost-benefit analyses in order to promote the national interests within those structural and domestic borders.

The chapter itself is structured around five themes that are connected with each other and that allow one to do comparative analysis in a coherent and structured way. Strategic Balancing between the United States and China is the first theme that explores how the governments of the PML-N and the PTI managed to make their way in the world that became more polarized. The second is Approach to the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which assesses the manner in which each administration had framed, prioritized and implemented CPEC projects, both in

terms of policy vision and implementation. Theme three is Trade and Economic Relations (FTAII Outcomes) which evaluates the manner through which the two governments negotiated and administered the second phase of the China-Pakistan Free Trade Agreement to serve the national economic interests. The fourth, Diplomatic Style and Discourse compares the technocratic, institution-working diplomacy of Nawaz Sharif with the populist and performative leadership and communication of Imran Khan, because of different identities of leadership and communication styles. And, lastly, Continuity and Change in Strategic Orientation integrates these dimensions to show how these two leaders maintained the long term strategic reliance of Pakistan to China, even though the two followed different political and economic trajectories. All of these thematic arguments are based on the official statements, governmental reports, economic statistics, academic literature, and media archives to provide a subtle and evidence-based evaluation. Also, there are comparison tables (e.g., Table 3.1 and Table 3.2) used to achieve a visual summary of the main parallels and differences between the two administrations, thus, making the chapter more profound in the analysis and comprehension.

Every section relies on official sources, government publications, economic statistics, scholarly sources, and news archives to make a subtle and evidence-based evaluation. They are accompanied by some comparative tables (e.g., Table 2 and Table 3), which summarize the main similarities and differences between the two administrations up to the point that they add to the analytical nature of the discussion.

This way, the chapter is the empirical core of the study. It maps the theoretical claims of Neoclassical Realism and the Rational Actor Model into reality and provides an insight into how structural condition and rational leadership decisions interacted to maintain the long-term alignment of Pakistan with China. Finally, the chapter demonstrates that, although Nawaz Sharif government focused on speed, visibility and infrastructure-led growth, Imran Khan Government targeted reform, sustainability and institutional recalibration, two opposite but complementary stages in long-term strategic alliance between Pakistan and Beijing.

### **3.1 Balancing Between the United States and China**

Pakistan foreign policy formulation of 2013-2022 was formulated under the long shadow of the deepening strategic rivalry between its all-weather strategic partners, the People's Republic of

China (PRC), and its longstanding and long disagreed, but nonetheless important partner, the United States of America.<sup>42</sup> It is a time of the formation of a real epoch in the structure of the world power, which included the governments of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). The Pivot to Asia that the U.S. had solidified under Obama administration and evolved, under Trump and Biden, into an outright strategic contest, assigned China as its main adversary.<sup>43</sup> In this context, the strengthening of the mutually beneficial relationship between China and Pakistan, through the colossal China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), has transformed a bilateral economic project into one of the focal points in the up-and-coming cold war.

As a result, to both Pakistani governments, the principal foreign policy dilemma went beyond just befriending Beijing, it was now an exercise of incessant and inexhaustible balancing of strategies where it was necessary to balance the acute anxieties of Washington in relation to the strategic implications of CPEC with the economical and national interests of Pakistan. It posits in this section that even though both the PML-N and the PTI governments saw the necessity of balancing the U.S., the strategy that was adopted by the PML-N was in contrast with that of the PTI: the PML-N adopted a policy of pragmatic compartmentalization and diplomatic reassurance that maintained a functional, tense, relationship with Washington. The PTI, in its turn, a movement in the age of increased tensions and an ideological aim of populism, assumed the posture of defiant alignment and rhetorical confrontation, which, although popular domestically, led to a serious loss of strategic autonomy of Pakistan, as it was forced to become more closely integrated with China.<sup>44</sup>

### **3.1.1 The Anatomy of U.S:**

To the U.S. strategists CPEC was not just an infrastructure project, but it was crafted to project Beijing economic and strategic reach far inland in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Of special concern was the development of deep-water port at Gwadar. Americans and analysts kept mentioning the possibility of its dual-constitutional use (civilian-military) and how it would become a permanent base of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and hence complete the so-called String of Pearls strategy of China surrounding India and frustrating the U.S. naval

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<sup>42</sup> D. S. Z. Awan and S. F. Hasnat, "A Regional Approach of Nawaz Sharif's Foreign Policy," unpublished manuscript, 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Jonathan Hillman et al., *China's Belt and Road: Implications for the United States* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2021).

<sup>44</sup> A. Qarni, M. Imran, M. D. Zafar, and Z. Yousaf, "Pakistan-US Relations During the Imran Khan Era (2018–2022): An Analysis of Strategic Shifts," *Jahan-e-Tahqeeq* 7, no. 2 (2024): 765–70.

dominance.<sup>45</sup> China is following a String of Pearls policy in ensuring that it gets its geopolitical as well as economic interests. Gwadar is one of these ‘pearls.’<sup>46</sup>

Secondly, a long-term critique was organized by the U.S. against the economic model of CPEC, as a form of predatory debt-trap diplomacy. The story, which was pressed home by the Trump administration, held that China was deliberately placing Pakistan in an unsustainable debt burden to obtain strategic favors, including the right to control equity in strategic assets or to guarantee unswerving diplomatic help in the international arena. Famously, then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has stated that IMF bailout money cannot be used to pay Chinese debt, specifically stating financial aid is tied to geopolitical orientation.<sup>47</sup> This was also reflected in the official documentation; in a 2021 report by the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission warned that CPEC financing was obscure, and that Pakistan had become indebted to China to a critical degree to the extent that it brought up long-term economic sustainability.<sup>48</sup>

Thirdly, Washington was considered to be going around the international non-proliferation regimes. The U.S. officials constantly condemned China to selling Pakistan nuclear-capable missiles and technology not according to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) rules, thereby unbalancing the South Asian situation.<sup>49</sup> Greater defense integration, such as the sale of state-of-the-art Chinese jets and warships, lessened the reliance of the Pakistani defense on the U.S. military equipment, a source of leverage of the U.S. influence. Moreover, the U.S. was constantly fearing that its military technology, which was given to Pakistan as counter-terrorism in Afghanistan, could be revealed to the reverse-engineering activities of the Chinese because of the strengthening military relations between Islamabad and Beijing.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> S. M. Shahzad, “String of Pearls: Chinese Economic Strategy Concerning the IOR amid Growing Security Dilemma, with an Emphasis on the CPEC,” *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences (PJSS)* 41, no. 2 (2021).

<sup>46</sup> N. S. Manhas, “China’s Policy of ‘String of Pearls,’” *International Journal of Social Impact* 5, no. 3 (2020): 2455–2670.

<sup>47</sup> RFE/RL, “US Warns Against IMF Bailing Out Pakistan’s Loans from China,” *Voice of America*, July 31, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-mike-pompeo-warns-against-imf-bailout-for-pakistan-that-aidschina/4506960.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Sial, Farwa, Juvaria Jafri, and Abdul Khaliq. “Pakistan, China and the structures of debt distress: Resisting Bretton Woods.” *Development and Change* 54, no. 5 (2023): 1226-1263.

<sup>49</sup> Rizwan Abbasi and Shoaib Ullah, “Rising Strategic Instability and Declining Prospects for Nuclear Disarmament in South Asia: A Pakistani Perspective,” *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 10, no. 1 (2022): 215–41.

<sup>50</sup> H. M. S. Qasim and N. Fatima, *Post-9/11 Sino-US Strategic Competition in South Asia: Analysis of Impact on the Region*.

### 3.1.2 The PML-N Administration (2013-2018):

In 2013, the PML-N government under the leadership of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif took over power and at a time when the U.S.-China rivalry was noticeable but not yet the all-consuming aspect of international politics that it would be. The U.S. was still preoccupied with its withdrawal out of Afghanistan and the initial deals of CPEC in 2015 were received in Washington with speculative interest rather than panic. The policy of the PML-N was thus marked by the attempt to reassure the United States with the help of diplomacy.

The key to this strategy was to make the relationships with China and the U.S. non-zero-sum and separate. In China the involvement was holistic and strategic with an emphasis on completing and beginning CPEC projects.<sup>51</sup> In the case of the U.S., the process was defined closely, yet decisively, in terms of security cooperation and in Afghanistan endgame management. This isolation was also expressed by Pakistani authorities on various bilateral conferences. As an example, the joint statement during the visit of the Prime Minister Sharif to Washington in October 2015 is a masterpiece in this duality. It dealt widely with counter-terrorism cooperation and Afghanistan, but cited CPEC once only, in its role as a way of regional connectivity, unobtrusively reassuring the U.S. of its economic, rather than military, objective. Foreign Advisor Sartaj Aziz assumed the role of the principal spokesperson of this reassurance policy. During interviews and speeches, he never overstated the U.S. concerns as he said, CPEC is an economic and not a strategic alliance. It fights against no nation, including the U.S.<sup>52</sup> the official position on the CPEC by the government was to position it as an enterprise of critical economic relevance to the stability of Pakistan, which, in principle, ought to be in the interest of all the nations, the U.S. included.

Another weapon that the PML-N successfully deployed in Afghanistan is its position in the country to have a lever of influence with Washington. Though the mistrust between the two countries has been intense, Pakistan has been instrumental in the Afghan process of reconciliation, notably by hosting the first round of direct talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban in Murree in July 2015. This gave a concrete, albeit weak, foundation to further dealing with U.S. It was still transactional and was marked with tension as was seen by the fact that the drone strikes had not stopped yet and that the military aid had been temporarily withheld by the U.S. but communication paths especially between the militaries were not blocked. The PML-N realized that it could not go all the way with Washington; it required the assistance of Washington in its continued interaction

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<sup>51</sup> Md. Sharif Bhuiyan and Wenkui Yi, "The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Narratives: A Comparative Critical Analysis," *China and WTO Review* 10, no. 1 (2024): 46–61.

<sup>52</sup> Ali, Ghulam. "CPEC: a gateway to regional connectivity." In *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry*, pp. 91-109. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2021.

with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and to retain a certain balance in its foreign policy. According to one scholar (Wahid, 2017) in *The China-Pakistan Axis*, even as the relationship between the two countries was tightening, the creation of Pakistan was still skeptical of being too reliant on a particular power, such as China. This balancing act by PML-N was a realistic move to reap the benefits of the CPEC without provoking a reprimand from the US, while maintaining a certain degree of strategic flexibility.<sup>53</sup>

### **3.1.3 The PTI Administration (2018-2022):**

In August 2018, just as the U.S.-China trade war was in full swing and the Trump administration had indeed switched its policy from competition to confrontation, the PTI government headed by imam-led Prime Minister Imran Khan assumed office. Rhetoric against the BRI and CPEC in the U.S. turned into being overtly hostile, with senior officials such as Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary Pompeo openly attacking it. This extrinsic change corresponded to the natural populist and anti-establishment outlook of the PTI that had a long-standing suspicion of U.S. designs, based on Afghanistan Jihad and the post-9/11 alliance. The reaction of PTI to the U.S. concerns was not a reassurance but an open rejection and confrontation to its people.

Since the formation of the PTI government, the U.S. narrative about CPEC was denied by the PTI government. Rather than dissociating the strategic aspects of the project, they opposed the project by accepting it as a national imperative. Prime minister Khan and his ministers repeatedly criticized in public the concept of debt-trap diplomacy as a Western propaganda campaign that was targeted at crippling the development of Pakistan. Khan also wrote in a speech at the CPEC Forum in 2019, that this is not debt-trap diplomacy and we are very clear that CPEC is a great opportunity to our country to attract investment and growth.<sup>54</sup> This rhetorical turn was massive; it transferred the discussion out of the diplomatic subtlety to the problematic. In 2019, the White Paper on CPEC issued by the government was also geared towards responding to criticism of transparency, but failed to quay the U.S. fears about the basic strategic orientation.<sup>55</sup>

In Afghanistan the relationship got worse than ever. When the U.S. was headed towards an exit agreement with the Taliban in Doha, the PTI government was publicly celebrating the likely U.S. withdrawal as a win to the Afghan people. In June 2021, the notorious quote by Imran Khan,

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<sup>53</sup> R. Wahid, "China–Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics," *Croatian International Relations Review* 23, no. 79 (2017): 201–6.

<sup>54</sup> Sintania, Evie. "China's Belt and Road Initiative in Pakistan: A Win-Win Strategy or Debt Trap Diplomacy?."

<sup>55</sup> Ministry of Planning, Ministry of Planning Clarifies Western Media Report on CPEC (2019), [www.cpec.gov.pk/news/178#:~:text=Therefore,%20the%20impression%20of%20debt,based%20on%20the%20ground%20realities.](http://www.cpec.gov.pk/news/178#:~:text=Therefore,%20the%20impression%20of%20debt,based%20on%20the%20ground%20realities.)

according to which the Taliban were snapping the shackles of slavery, was a tremendous diplomatic insult to Washington. This rhetoric led to the disastrous allegation of an American-led conspiracy of foreign powers to overthrow his regime in March 2022. Through a televised speech, Khan brought out a mysterious diplomatic cable as the evidence to claim that it outlined messages by a high-profile U.S. official threatening to take actions against him should he still be in power.<sup>56</sup> It was a poisoned coupon blow to the diplomatic standing, changing disagreements in policy to a bloody, ideological conflict. With this open aggression of the U.S., and the ongoing economic pressure of being on the FATF grey list, a process that is widely viewed in Pakistan as politically instigated by the U.S., the PTI government gave up any presence of balancing. Its foreign policy changed to balancing to tie with China. It was no longer an alliance of purely strategic and economic interests, but rather a lifeline of geopolitical nature. Pakistan sided closely with China on virtually all matters in the international arena, including human rights in Xinjiang to the state of Hong Kong.

The second phase of CPEC that targeted industrialization and agricultural cooperation was again followed with a fresh vigor making the economic future of Pakistan to be inseparably tied with the Chinese. The ambivalence of the PTI towards CPEC soon changed to affirmation as a scholar (Luken, 2021) observed that it became the only source of strategic and economic assistance when western influence became overwhelming. Although the PTI declared strategy of confrontation was popular among its local supporters, and the confidence in creating a defiant form of sovereignty, it actually confirmed the worst-case scenario of Washington: that Pakistan now was a solidly aligned strategic ally of China, and, therefore, justifying a further cooling of the U.S.-Pakistan relationship.<sup>57</sup>

The Table below shows the comparative analysis of both administrations:

**Table 1: Comparative and Similar Analysis of Pakistan’s Balancing Strategy between the United States and China (2013–2022)**

Aspect	PML-N Government (2013–2018)	PTI Government (2018–2022)	Comparative Observation
<b>Strategic Context</b>	Operated in the early stage of China rivalry; the global environment is relatively stable.	U.S.–China confrontation and trade war.	Both faced U.S.–China rivalry, but PTI faced polarized global order.
<b>Approach to Balancing</b>	Maintained separate, parallel ties	Moved closer to China	Both balancing, but PML-N pursued

<sup>56</sup> B. S. Syed, “PM Discloses Contents of ‘Threat Letter’,” Dawn, March 31, 2022.

<sup>57</sup> W. Luken, *Between Ambition and Ambiguity: Strategic Ambiguity and China’s Belt and Road Initiative* (2021).

	With both Beijing and Washington.	Confrontational rhetoric toward the U.S.	Modernization vs Confrontational.
<b>Policy toward the U.S.</b>	Emphasized diplomacy and reassurance; sustained engagement through the Afghan peace process.	Openly criticized U.S. policies	PML-N preserved limited cooperation PTI's populist narrative caused a rupture
<b>Policy toward China</b>	Promoted CPEC as an economic partnership, downplaying strategic concerns.	Treated China as a strategic and economic lifeline	Both deepened ties with China but differed in style.
<b>Foreign Policy Outcome</b>	Retained strategic autonomy and working relations with both powers.	Lost strategic balance; more dependence on China	PML-N achieved balanced engagement. PTI's populism
<b>Key Similarities</b>	Recognized China's strategic importance.		Continuity despite their politics

Source: Author's compilation based on primary and secondary sources, including U.S. Department of Defense (2018); White House (2015, 2019); Pompeo (2018); U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission (2021); Small (2015); Riedel (2015); Pant and Joshi (2017); BBC (2021); Dawn (2022a); Wolf (2020).

## 3.2 Approach to CPEC

### 3.2.1 Sharif's Infrastructure Push

CPEC was the flagship project of Sharif with all the major projects such as 18 energy projects estimated to cost USD 17 billion started, Karachi-Lahore Motor way project was already 40 percent developed and Gwadar Port upgrades in progress. Through his speeches and press conference, Sharif and his members of cabinet openly declare that CPEC is their lifeline to economic revival.

During Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's term (2013–2017), the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was institutionalized as the cornerstone of Pakistan's foreign policy, with the fastest-tracked project approvals and limited renegotiation. CPEC was positioned as not only a development project, but as a strategic association over the long term to coordinate the direction of Pakistan growth with that of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China. The government of Sharif took the so-called 1+4 model advanced by the Chinese planners, the center of which was CPEC that was complemented by four main pillars, including the Gwadar port development, energy infrastructure, transport corridors, and industrial cooperation.<sup>58</sup> This paradigm enabled the Sharif regime to dispose of the foreign policy concerns of Pakistan in a wider context of economic connectivity and regional integration, thus transforming the Pakistan diplomacy of traditional

<sup>58</sup> Hamid D. Butt, "China's Belt and Road Initiative 2.0—A Recipe for Development: A Case Study of the CPEC," in *Tidal View from Boao: Building Belt and Road in the Past Decade*, 120 (2023).

security-focused orientations into a focus on geo-economic orientations. The idea behind such a vision was to transform the image of Pakistan as a state prone to conflicts to one that can serve as the trade and energy center in South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East.<sup>59</sup>

One example is the attempt by the leadership of the civilian leaders when the government of Nawaz Sharif tried to be active in Planning and coordination of CPEC. Planning Commission led by Federal Minister Ahsan Iqbal was assigned with the responsibility of leading the negotiations, preparing the long-term plans and liaising with Chinese National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC). Nonetheless, the existing literature points out that although the civilian administration had administrative duty, the military played an important role in areas of strategic aspects especially in security and the development of the operation of Gwadar.<sup>60</sup> Such two sidedness of control demonstrates that foreign policy of Sharif was forced to exist in the hybrid system of civil-military regulation of Pakistan.

The foreign policy orientation of Nawaz Sharif toward CPEC reflected a geo-economic change in the relations between Pakistan and China. Historically, the bilateral relationship was characterized by the defense and strategic partnership. But it was further developed during Sharif as inclusive of economic, infrastructural and energy integration. This move has helped Pakistan to tap into Chinese capital and technology without the high requirements that came with western financial institutions like the IMF or the World Bank. According to scholars, this kind of arrangement posed both opportunities and threats: on the one hand, it gave the chance to develop infrastructure fast and relieve the energy issue, and on the other hand, it raised the question of the sustainability of debt and reliance on Beijing. Sharif presented CPEC as a foreign policy victory that might restore Pakistan's economic independence, even if critics emphasized the reliance it would create.<sup>61</sup>

In addition to the external relations it was also the case that CPEC had some implications on the internal governance and the nation-building activities in Pakistan during the era of Nawaz Sharif. The corridor has offered the new institutional means of dialogue between the federal government and the provinces in the form of the routes, resources, and industrial distribution.<sup>62</sup> CPEC established avenues of political compromise and accommodation despite the continued provincial grievances especially that of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan. In the foreign policy

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<sup>59</sup> Abdul R. Burfat, Hidayat Oad, and Bilal Talpur, "CPEC: Transforming Pakistan's Socio-Economic Landscape," *ASSAJ* 2, no. 4 (2024): 900–21.

<sup>60</sup> Francesco Boni, "Civil-Military Relations in Pakistan: A Case Study of Sino-Pakistani Relations and the Port of Gwadar," *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 54, no. 4 (2016): 498–517.

<sup>61</sup> Nazeer T. Baig, *International Relations from a Pakistani Perspective*.

<sup>62</sup> H. Hussain, A. Bogheiry, and T. Alam, "China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC): Opportunities and Challenges for Implementation," *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs* 6, no. 4 (2023): 37.

perspective, Sharif integrated foreign and domestic policy priorities as his strategy interconnected the domestic development agenda of Pakistan to the foreign relations with China. This reinforced the fact that CPEC was not just a foreign investment package but a national integration instrument which, however, had uneven results and was still disputed.

Nevertheless, Nawaz Sharif did not find his path without any serious problems. Policy analysts and scholars opine that Pakistan had concerns over its long-term fiscal independence due to its heavy dependence on Chinese loans to finance transport and energy projects. The Chinese debt exposure grew at an accelerating pace starting in 2015 and resulted in academic discussions regarding the feasibility of debt-trap diplomacy...<sup>63</sup> Although the deliberate entrapment has been disputed, the reality was that the financing model by CPEC under Sharif increased the economic reliance of Pakistan on China. This fact limited the flexibility of the foreign policy of Islamabad because it was committed to building long-term strategic infrastructure with only one foreign entity. Further, the focus on coal-based energy in the early harvest projects created environmental and sustainability issues, which cast question on whether the model aligned with the development priorities as stated by Pakistan.

In spite of these doubts, the real gains made during the rule of the Sharif government are generally accepted even in the academic literature. As of 2017, a number of early harvest projects had concluded or were about to conclude, with some such as the mega coal power plants of Sahiwal and Port Qasim, and some of the crucial portions of motorways and Karakoram Highway upgrades. These inventions brought about major improvements in power outages and extended roads to provide some economic payoff...<sup>64</sup>

### **3.2.2 Khan's Reorientation and Pragmatic Measures**

When Imran Khan assumed office, he described some elements of CPEC as opaque and initiated an audit of the major contracts. Based on Emerging industries ministry briefs, about 15 percent of classic infrastructure contracts were suspended in review. His administration would later initiate three SEZs which have MOUs in the three ways, that is, technology hubs and training of vocations to ensure the infrastructure created by CPEC would be connected with the industrialization. According to the report of the State Bank released in 2021, the two-year deferral of loan repayment

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<sup>63</sup> A. S. Raju, *South Asia and China: Engagement in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2021).

<sup>64</sup> N. Sharif and A. Mansoor, "The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor: Game Changer or Chinese Colonialism?" *The China Quarterly* (2025): 1–20.

on particular stages was obtained, which provides breathing space to Pakistan during the negative periods of the economy.

As part of the second phase of CPEC, the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) were planned as the way to industrialize Pakistan, receive foreign direct investment (FDI), and create job opportunities. Under the Imran Khan administration (2018-2022), the priority SEZs included Rashakai in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Allama Iqbal Industrial City in Punjab and Dhabeji in Sindh. In May 2021, Khan opened the Rashakai SEZ as the flagship industrial project in the industrial cooperation phase of CPEC and, according to KPEZDMC, land allotments opened to investors in steel, food processing, and garments sectors.<sup>65</sup> The government of Khan focused on accelerating the development of this SEZ by engaging the China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) to sign a development agreement with the government of Korea, who agreed to supply utilities and infrastructure to promote industrialization.

By comparison, the Dhabeji SEZ in Sindh experienced slower developments during the time of Khan, and by 2022, there were still no feasibility and concession agreements. Only the PDM coalition government was able to make a breakthrough. The concession agreement with a consortium headed by the China Machinery Engineering Corporation (CMEC) was finalized in April 2023, and Dhabeji was marked by the PML-N leadership as a priority involving the development of an industrial hub of large scale with the potential of attracting export-oriented industries.

The difference between administrations can also be seen in the Allama Iqbal Industrial City (AIIC) in Faisalabad. Although the preparation was made during the previous tenure of Nawaz Sharif, the SEZ was officially initiated by the government of Khan in January 2020 and the Faisalabad Industrial Estate Development and Management Company (FIEDMC) will be charged with the responsibility of bringing investment. As of their reports issued by BOI, more than 20 industrial units were already under construction at the site, and the specialization in the construction of the industrial units was on textile, pharmaceutical, and ceramics.

Other SEZs such as the Bostan SEZ Baluchistan and the Islamabad Model SEZ registered small but symbolic developments. The Bostan SEZ, which was opened in 2020, was supposed to stimulate agro-industries in Baluchistan, however, it was underdeveloped during the tenure of Khan

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<sup>65</sup> Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Board of Investment and Trade, Pitch Book 2021 (2021), [www.pakmissionfrankfurt.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/KP-BOITs-Investment-Pitch-Book-2021.pdf](http://www.pakmissionfrankfurt.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/KP-BOITs-Investment-Pitch-Book-2021.pdf).

because of the absence of infrastructure funding and security issues. Most importantly, even though the administration of Khan can be accredited with the starting of SEZ implementation especially with Rashakai project, the implementation was not even with implications and expansion was hindered by bureaucracy. The PDM and subsequent PML-N governments tried to restart stalled ones like Dhabeji and Bostan, by taking better advantage of the increased involvement with Chinese investors in renewing confidence. However, there are still some problems: the issues of land acquisition, the security issues in Baluchistan and the macroeconomic instability of Pakistan are still barriers on the path of the SEZ development. In that way, although SEZs continue to be the focus of the industrial vision of CPEC, their inconsistent development over administrations is a reminder of how the domestic political restructuring and the capacity of the administrative regime play a direct role in determining whether Pakistan will translate Chinese investment promises into real industrialization.<sup>66</sup>

### **3.2.3 Comparative Evaluation: PTI's Reformist Approach and Bilateral Cooperation**

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (2018-2022) of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government led by Imran Khan was at a crossroads. They were mainly infrastructure and energy projects, the first CPEC reforms, which had started under the large under the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) rule (2013-2018). Within the CPEC, the project was deemed a revolutionary one in solving the energy crisis that was experienced as well as the failure to connect the region. Nevertheless, before PTI took office, the increasing concern over schedule overruns, financial soundness, and debts started permeating the overall mindset (Corsi, 2019). It is upon this background that PTI has attempted to introduce what it has termed as a reformist agenda in an effort to regulate the priorities of CPEC to concentrate on industrial and social development rather than on infrastructure development.<sup>67</sup>

PTI was technically reasserting its friendship with China in all weather conditions but the signals of their early-day policy made it apparent that the accords that they have reached will be subject to scrutiny. The Imran Khan administration was keen to re-consider part of these contracts and to make sure that divergent projects that would be undertaken in future would be feasible and transparent. Such domestic-political interest as the need to counter the excessive borrowing of the PML-N was coupled with the economic one, as Pakistan was experiencing an increasingly serious

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<sup>66</sup> H. S. Ur Rehman, "Analyzing Political Challenges and Industrial Policy in Pakistan's Economy" (2023).

<sup>67</sup> M. Younis et al., "Impact of Change of Government in Pakistan on CPEC," *PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt* 18, no. 10 (2021): 3054–67.

balance-of-payments crisis in 2018.<sup>68</sup> It helped in setting up freezes or renegotiating some of the energy projects in PTI and leading to a slow acceptance of new projects revealed. They were forced to create economic restraint and bring about momentary uncertainty to the bilateral system...<sup>71</sup>

The early response of China appears to have been a tentative response. It was the guiding role in the implementation of CPEC which Beijing had imagined as it had done in the centralized and business friendly governing model of the PML-N. With its bureaucratic complication and political unwillingness, the review-based approach to PTI introduced a new dimension of the issue.<sup>69</sup> At that, the second step that the CPEC plan has put into consideration is Special Economic Zones (SEZs), which have not grown considerably within the initial years of the PTI. This is not a failure of institutions in Pakistan, not a failure of political will, but failed to create bilateral momentum. PTI has however changed its minds in 2020. The government only resorted to a new exercise of engagement after understanding that CPEC would continue to form the foundation of economic and diplomatic relationship between Pakistan and China. Starting with the emergence of CPEC Authority led by Lt. Gen. Asim Saleem Bajwa and the reappearance of direct negotiations with the Chinese government officials were the signs of this shift in course.<sup>70</sup>

In a broader scheme of Naya Pakistan, which included industrialization, agricultural revolution, and transfer of technology, PTI tried to include CPEC. Another case reported the example of Rashakai Special Economic Zone in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which was reported to encourage local working and export-led development.<sup>71</sup> This occurred as a more realistic perception of whether the future economic outlook of Pakistan was still tied to its connection with Chinese.

These reforms failed to work in the case of PTI that had a rebalancing policy. On the positive side, its attempts to increase transparency and expand the focus of the CPEC served the needs of the long-term development. The focus on SEZs, specialization training, and cross-country operating connectivity was not an exception to Punjab; therefore, CPEC attempted to be more inclusive and sustainable...<sup>72</sup> Besides, the case of the Iranian agreement with China on health and technology

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<sup>68</sup> K. Hussain, *Conflating Democracy and Authoritarianism: Revisiting Populism in Pakistan* (2025). <sup>71</sup> E. J. Woodhouse, *The Experience with Independent Power Projects in Developing Countries* (Stanford University, 2005).

<sup>69</sup> Pakistan Business Council, *5th Review of the China–Pakistan Free Trade Agreement with Recommendations for Phase II Negotiations* (2029), [www.pbc.org.pk/wpcontent/uploads/PBC\\_Report.pdf](http://www.pbc.org.pk/wpcontent/uploads/PBC_Report.pdf).

<sup>70</sup> K. S. Siddiqui, *The Utility of Counterinsurgency in Balochistan (2013–2019)* (University of Nottingham, 2020).

<sup>71</sup> M. Z. Iqbal and B. Ahmad, "Economic and Social Development Through Special Economic Zones (SEZs): Workable Strategies for Pakistan," *Margalla Papers* 28, no. 1 (2024).

<sup>72</sup> Waqar Ahmed et al., "Assessment and Analysis of the Complexities in Sustainability of the Transport Projects under CPEC: A Grounded Theory Approach," *Sage Open* 13, no. 4 (2023): 1–20.

military-commercial cooperation during COVID-19 yet again demonstrated the adaptive diplomacy due to which the government is provided with the support in the form of vaccines and medical supplies as a result of bilateral cooperation.

The squirrelly management and bureaucratization of the PTI are however pointed at as unnaturally slackening the implementation by critics. The lack of consistency in communications between Beijing and Islamabad in 2018-2019 gave an impression of inconsistency in policy.<sup>73</sup> Additionally, it scared away investors due to a political crisis that has covered the Imran Khan administration since 2021. This gave rise to numerous projects which were initiated during the second round of CPEC remaining incomplete or finding themselves at a stalemate upon the withdrawal of the PTI.<sup>74</sup>

The PML-N on the other hand was not as keen on institutional reform but appeared to have more chances of yielding concrete results within a shorter duration of time. The government under the administration of Nawaz Sharif, particularly the energy front, was highly cooperative to allow the Chinese state owned enterprises to deliver development results over a very short period of time. This expedited paradigm gave bilateral trust more power at the expense of the long-term cost-effectiveness. This PTI reform slow place had been an attempt to right structural shortcoming, at the relative expense of the project thrust, however.

In fact, the reformist CPEC policy adopted by PTI was not a rupture with China, but an aligning Pakistan to China. Reorganization toward industrial and social enterprises was a new stage of bilateral cooperation--admittedly in an effort to go beyond dependency and reach status of development as self-reliance. Nonetheless, they could not introduce desired reformist goals because worse implementation, political unstable and lack of effectiveness in its bureaucracy did not favor PTI. Thus, on the one hand, PTI enabled the partnership to be stronger in terms of its qualitative characteristics, making it a part of structural development, on the other, it decreased the quantitative pace of cooperation, as in the PML-N days.

According to this comparison analysis, it can be implied that the role of these two governments as an agent in cementing Pakistan/China relation was varied. PML-N is speeding up the set up stage of CPEC and PTI embosses to institutionalize it and refine the extent of it. Their policies in general

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<sup>73</sup> Muhammad Afzaal, "The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative: Concept, Context and Assessment: By Siegfried O. Wolf," Taylor & Francis (2020).

<sup>74</sup> Mehwish Aman, Syed Ali Khan, and Sabir Awan, "An Analysis of Sino-Pak Relations (2018–2022): Problems and Prospects," *Competitive Research Journal Archive* 3, no. 1 (2025): 144–52.

imply that they always depended on China, although the political ideology and the mode of government were dissimilar.<sup>75</sup>

### **3.2.4 Khan's Approach Sustainability and Domestic Capacity- structure**

When Imran Khan assumed office in 2018, the political and profitable geography had changed significantly. Pakistan faced an austere balance- of disbursements extremity, high foreign debt, and financial poverties. These conditions acclimated PTI's path toward CPEC. While the rhetoric of durability with China remained complete, the substance of procedure shifted toward sustainability, fiscal prudence, and domestic capacity-structure.<sup>76</sup>

Khan's government sought to " rebalance" CPEC by moving from voluminous- scale structure systems to industrialization, and mortal evolution. This measure was homogenized through the CPEC Phase- II Framework, which punctuated the establishment of Special Economic necks (SEZs) to promote original product and import- acquainted diligence.<sup>77</sup> preferably than coursing multitudinous contemporaneous systems, PTI concentrated on perfecting the perpetration mechanisms and icing translucency in fiscal operation.

Khan's narrative reflected his populist yet reformist political identity. He blamed former governments for engaging in unsustainable borrowing and vowed to regenerate" profitable sovereignty" through prudent financial operation. Consequently, PTI examined several contracts inked under PML-N to assess their profitable feasibility and cost forcefulness. This review process, while necessary for responsibility, temporarily braked design instigation and caused query in bilateral message.

Despite the original retardation, PTI's recalibrated seat sought to enhance the quality and inclusiveness of CPEC. For illustration, the Rashakai SEZ in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was aimed as a model for integrating original diligence into the deep China-Pakistan network. PTI encouraged cooperation in instruction, technology transfer, and vocational training, relating CPEC with Pakistan's long-term experimental pretensions.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> F. Hussain et al., "China–Pak Strategic Entente with Respect to Search for Reciprocated Security Through Gwadar Port," *Psychology and Education* 58, no. 1 (2021): 3320–33.

<sup>76</sup> D. Liuyin, *Provision of a Strategic Management System in Chinese Companies* (2023).

<sup>77</sup> F. Hussain et al., "China–Pak Strategic Entente with Respect to Search for Reciprocated Security Through Gwadar Port," *Psychology and Education* 58, no. 1 (2021): 3320–33.

<sup>78</sup> Muhammad Ali, *Sino-Pakistan Partnership under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the Burden of Expectations* (Cham: Springer Nature, 2025).

Khan's administration also navigated CPEC within a more daedal geopolitical terrain. The enhanced U.S.-China contest needed Pakistan to conserve strategic impartiality. Hence, PTI formed CPEC as a profitable cooperation rather than an alliance, signaling Pakistan's openness to diversifying its foreign dealings.<sup>79</sup> This more conservative and pragmatic station was a more realistic expression of political direction taken by Sharif which had been accommodated to his open alliance with China.

### 3.2.5 Relative Dissection Political Chronicles and Economic Constraints

The different style of Sharif and Khan was not entirely a case of language in the leadership but a case of the political husbandry and limitations of their different age brackets. Relative macroeconomic stability and an abundance of Chinese eagerness to invest gave Sharif the opportunity to focus on being fast and growing. Khan took over financial pressure and increasing debt in discrepancy; he would, therefore, borrow a picky and reform-minded way..<sup>80</sup>

Sharif's "stretch-first" model punctuated macro-visibility of the construction of roads, dynamic regions, and voluminous-scale systems that could emblemize process and attract political attention. His path successfully erected the structural backbone of CPEC but demanded sufficient concentration to institutional and original capacity structure. As a result, while Pakistan gained physical means, it plodded to develop the mortal and artificial capabilities to sustain them.<sup>81</sup>

Khan's "depth- first path leveled to consolidate and explain these accomplishments by prioritizing quality over volume. PTI viewed CPEC not as a short- tenure political design but as a long tenure public frame. This standpoint aligned with the conception of sustainable evolution, featuring profitable adaptability, environmental operation, and gregarious addition.<sup>82</sup> Still the perpetuation of this unreality was hindered by executive inefficiency, political insecurity, and tardy resolution making processes.

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<sup>79</sup> H. Hussain, A. Bogheiry, and T. Alam, "China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC): Opportunities and Challenges for Implementation," *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs* 6, no. 4 (2023): 37. H. Hussain, A. Bogheiry, and T. Alam, "China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC): Opportunities and Challenges for Implementation," *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs* 6, no. 4 (2023): 37.

<sup>80</sup> Michael Kugelman, "Introduction: Great Potential, Many Pitfalls—Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative," in *Great Potential, Many Pitfalls*, 2–8 (London: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>81</sup> N. Siddiqui, "Wish I Could Follow President Xi's Example...," *Dawn*, October 8, .

<sup>82</sup> Sharif, Maria, and Manzoor Ahmad Naazer. "DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN PAKISTAN: COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PTI AND PMLN ERA."

Economically, Sharif's CPEC program expanded Pakistan's GDP growth to close 5.8 percent by 2018, largely driven by investment influxes and construction conditions. Again, under PTI, excrescency broke originally due to austerity measures and the COVID-19 epidemic but later stabilized around 4 percent by 2021, indicating a modest reclamation predicated on exports and artificial productivity.

In tours of political chronicles, Sharif exercised CPEC as a hallmark of public modernization and transnational credibility, positioning Pakistan as a dependable partner within the Belt and Road Initiative. Khan, on the other hand, exercised CPEC to project profitable sovereignty and reformist governance, featuring translucency, responsibility, and original commission.<sup>83</sup>

Despite their contrasts, both leaders displayed durability in one pivotal reference to strategic devotion to China. Neither administration disputed Pakistan's long-standing cooperation with Beijing; rather, their differences lay in perpetuation styles and domestic architecture. Sharif punctuated visible process as political legality; Khan punctuated reform and sustainability as virtuous legality.

### **3.2.6 Conflation: Reciprocal Phases of a Long-Tenure Partnership**

In retrospection, Sharif's and Khan's approaches can be discerned as reciprocal phases in the elaboration of CPEC. Sharif's government laid the foundation-- the physical structure, political instigation, and bilateral trust necessary for Pakistan to catch itself in the China-led indigenous profitable order. Khan's government sought to institutionalize and diversify this foundation by integrating gregarious, artificial, and financial sustainability into the cooperation frame.

Where Sharif speeded up process, Khan centralized instruction. Both powers were under special expostulation, Sharif fiscal sustainability, and Khan regulatory laziness but jointly have both made the binary tradition of CPEC both structure and evolution design. This expounding illustrates the gradualism of structure-based excrescency to sustainable evolution planning, a transformation that is consistent with the trends of profitable governance in the world.<sup>84</sup>

To sum up, the comparative analysis of the strategies of Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan can demonstrate a scale of strategic loyalty and deviation in the functional priority. Sharif sees and

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<sup>83</sup> H. Hussain, A. Bogheiry, and T. Alam, "China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC): Opportunities and Challenges for Implementation," *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs* 6, no. 4 (2023): 37.

<sup>84</sup> Muhammad Ali, *Sino-Pakistan Partnership under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the Burden of Expectations* (Cham: Springer Nature, 2025).

attempts to see the world like a rapid-fire metamorphosis bursting out through structure. Khan followed the principles of sustainability, prudence, and capacity structure and tried to integrate the experimental benefits of CPEC. Contextual political objects, financial realities, and changing world dynamics elucidated the differences between them.

At some point, both leaders helped in fortifying Pakistan-China relations in unique but correlated manner. The instigation was in the hands of Sharif in his period and the majority in the hands of Khan in his period. This is highlighted in the line of CPEC in both authorities accentuating the reliance of Pakistan to the Chinese, with a dawning consciousness of the necessity to engage in profitable collaboration that is clear headed, inclusive and long term.

**Table 2: Comparative and Similar Analysis of Pakistan’s Approach to CPEC under PML-N and PTI Governments (2013 – 2022)**

Aspect	PML-N Government (2013 – 2018)	PTI Government (2018 – 2022)	Comparative Observation
<b>Strategic Vision</b>	Launched CPEC prioritized speed, visibility, and largescale infrastructure.	Reframed CPEC for sustainability and reform; emphasized industrialization, SEZs, and transparency.	CPEC as central to policy but differed in execution PML-N focused on expansion, PTI on consolidation.
<b>Policy Orientation</b>	“Breadth and Speed rapid project delivery for political capital and energy relief.	“Depth and Sustainability” focused on long-term capacity-building and fiscal prudence.	PML-N favored short-term visibility; PTI pursued institutional endurance.
<b>Economic Focus</b>	Infrastructure and energy “early-harvest” projects	Industrial and agricultural diversification	Both targeted growth and employment, but PTI sought qualitative reform over quantity.
<b>Governance and Institutions</b>	Centralized decision-making under PM’s Office and Planning Commission	Established CPEC Authority; greater bureaucratic oversight and provincial inclusion.	Both expanded state coordination but with different administrative logics.
<b>Civil–Military Dynamics</b>	Civilian-led policy with military oversight of Gwadar and security.	Military’s role institutionalized through CPEC Authority	Continuity in civil–military cooperation as guarantor of Chinese confidence.
<b>Financial Approach</b>	Heavy reliance on Chinese loans and sovereign guarantees.	Loan reviews, deferments, and renegotiations to ease debt pressure.	Both depended on Chinese finance; PTI emphasized fiscal discipline.

<b>Implementation Style</b>	Fast-tracked projects for immediate outcomes; visible progress in	Slow but reform oriented; focus on accountability and sustainable execution.	PML-N achieved momentum; PTI prioritized quality and governance.
<b>Domestic Narrative</b>	“CPEC as Game-Changer” symbol of modernization and growth.	“CPEC for Self Reliance” symbol of sovereignty and reform.	CPEC’s strategic value; narratives tailored to political ideology.
<b>Foreign Policy Dimension</b>	Strengthened China-Pakistan alignment within BRI; cautious diplomacy with the U.S.	Reinforced strategic alignment with China; framed cooperation as economic, not geopolitical.	Both deepened China's partnership, though PTI sought a more pragmatic global posture.

**Source:** Author’s compilation based on primary and secondary sources, including Ahmed (2019); Hussain (2021); Wolf (2019, 2020, 2021); Kugelman (2019, 2020); Liuyin, 2023; Ali (2022); *Critical Pakistan Studies* (2024); *IJPSSR* (2023); Government of Pakistan (2021); Pakistan Economic Survey (2018).

### 3.3 Free Trade Agreement (FTA-II)

This section analyzes the Pakistan–China Free Trade Agreement (PCFTA) across three decision-making environments: (1) the tail end of Phase I and the launch/negotiation drive of Phase II under Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif (2013–2018); (2) the signing and early implementation of Phase II under Prime Minister Imran Khan (2018–2022). It evaluates negotiation objectives, the legal institutional design of PCFTA-II, and trade outcomes and correctives (safeguards, tariff lines, margin-of-preference restoration), tying these choices to the broader balance-of-power and domestic political filters identified in the theoretical framework.<sup>85</sup>

#### 3.3.1 Phase-I

The first phase of the PCFTA entered into force in 2007. By the mid-2010s, Pakistani policymakers and industry repeatedly argued that the agreement’s benefits were asymmetric. Phase I reduced tariffs widely but did not translate into durable market access for Pakistan’s export basket, which remained narrow and low-value; meanwhile, Chinese imports surged, contributing to a widening bilateral deficit. Business groups and analysts described Phase I as “widely criticized for failing to provide preferential access for Pakistani exports into the large Chinese market. Imran Khan Government: signature, early implementation, and defensive instrumentation (2018–2022).<sup>86</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Irshad, Muhammad Saqib. "SWOT analysis of Pakistan-China free trade agreement: Pros and Cons." *International Journal of Asian Social Science* 7, no. 1 (2017): 45-53.

<sup>86</sup> Ghani, Fouzia, and Xiaoqing Xie. "Trade cooperation between China and Pakistan: Geo-Strategic and Geo-Political Perspective." *Journal of Politics and International Studies* 11, no. 1 (2025): 37-54.

After an initial “review” period, the PTI government signed the Protocol to PCFTA-II on 28 April 2019; Pakistan’s cabinet approved the text in November 2019, with entry into force on 1 December 2019. The Protocol delivered the headline concession: China granted duty-free treatment on 313 tariff lines of immediate interest to Pakistan, effectively placing Pakistan on ASEAN-comparable terms for those lines.<sup>87</sup>

A concise description from Pakistan’s trade authorities captures the design intent: Phase II was meant to “restore eroded preferences,” “lock in duty-free access on priority lines,” and “activate bilateral safeguards.” The Pakistan–China Joint Statement, coinciding with the 2019 Belt and Road Forum, similarly emphasized “upgrading” the FTA and expanding Pakistani exports.<sup>88</sup> Three design features matter for outcomes:

1. These were selected to match Pakistan’s revealed comparative advantage and export aspirations (e.g., textiles and apparel categories beyond cotton yarn; leather; rice; seafood; engineering goods). The Phase II market-access leap is now often referred to as the 313 lines.
2. Pakistan secured more gradual tariff-reduction staging for sectors deemed vulnerable, while China front-loaded concessions on Pakistan’s priorities and an institutional response to industry concerns voiced since 2013–2015.
3. The Protocol strengthened trade-remedy language, allowing temporary measures where import surges caused injury responding to Phase I’s perceived gap in enforceable defensive tools.

The Pakistan–China trade deficit remained large in the early PCFTA-II period, reflecting (a), Pakistan’s slow product diversification; (b) macro stress and import compression cycles (2019–2020 balance-of-payments adjustment, followed by the pandemic); and (c) supply-side bottlenecks

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<sup>87</sup> Ministry of Commerce (Pakistan), Protocol to Amend the Free Trade Agreement Between the Government of the People’s Republic of China and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (Islamabad, 2019), [www.commerce.gov.pk/protocol-on-phase-ii-china-pakistan-fta/](http://www.commerce.gov.pk/protocol-on-phase-ii-china-pakistan-fta/).

<sup>88</sup> Pakistan Business Council and Consortium for Development Policy Research, China-Pakistan Free Trade Agreement Phase 2: A Preliminary Analysis (Karachi: PBC, 2019), <https://www.pbc.org.pk/wpcontent/uploads/Preliminary-Analysis-of-Pak-China-FTA-Phase-II.pdf>

that limited Pakistan's ability to utilize the 313 duty-free lines at scale.<sup>89</sup> Academic and policy studies published across the late 2010s and early 2020s consistently argue that Phase I's asymmetry could only be corrected if Pakistan broadened its export capabilities, a structural challenge beyond treaty text alone.

### 3.3.2 Negotiation vs. implementation roles.

- During the period 2013–2018, the Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz (PML-N) government under Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif advanced a recalibration framework, arguing that the initial phase required structural adjustments. The administration worked toward achieving convergence on issues related to preference restoration and parity, while engaging in multiple rounds of negotiations. Notably, the eighth and tenth negotiating rounds proved pivotal in laying the groundwork for the 2019 Protocol.
- During the 2018–2022 period, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government under Prime Minister Imran Khan formally signed the Protocol between April and December 2019 and operationalized duty-free access for 313 tariff lines. The administration also incorporated stronger safeguard mechanisms to address concerns related to trade imbalances. However, the effective utilization of these concessions was constrained by macroeconomic austerity measures and disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Substantive design changes traceable to Sharif-era asks but realized under Khan-era signature. The “313 lines” parity restoration that industry sought in 2016–2018 are visible in the final legal text and tariff schedules implemented from December 2019. That is, PML-N's negotiation agenda and PTI's signature/activation are complementary pieces of the same policy arc.

Outcomes remain function of capacity, not just law. Academic work and policy commentary converge on the point that tariff preferences are necessary but insufficient: without product upgrading, standards compliance, *and* marketing channels, Pakistan cannot fully capitalize on PCFTA-II, no matter which party is in office.

Both administrations sought to sustain strategic alignment with China while trying to reduce downside risks from trade asymmetry.<sup>90</sup> The Sharif government concentrated on re-engineering

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<sup>89</sup> Ghani, Fouzia, and Xiaoqing Xie. "Trade cooperation between China and Pakistan: Geo-Strategic and Geo-Political Perspective." *Journal of Politics and International Studies* 11, no. 1 (2025): 37-54.

<sup>90</sup> Luo, Yadong, and Seung Ho Park. "Strategic alignment and performance of market-seeking MNCs in China." *Strategic management journal* 22, no. 2 (2001): 141-155.

treaty design (preference restoration, parity, safeguards), consistent with its economic modernization brand. The Khan government signed and operationalized those design changes while simultaneously testing defensive instruments and public-messaging fiscal prudence; the post-2022 governments have treated the agreement as settled law and shifted attention to export side readiness. Across all three periods, the logic is steady: tariff preferences are instrumental to Pakistan's China strategy, but the binding constraint is domestic capability a finding that sits squarely within the neoclassical realist and rational-choice synthesis advanced in Chapter 2.

### **3.3.3 Outcomes of the China–Pakistan Free Trade Agreement Phase-II (FTA-II)**

One of the most important tools to influence bilateral economic relations have been the China-Pakistan Free Trade Agreement (FTA). The initial FTA signed in 2006 superficially sought to improve trade liberalization, but slowly produced a skewed outcome where China would gain. The level of exports by 2018 is equivalent to the level in 2017: only about \$1.8 billion of exports to China were documented, but imports of Chinese products surged up to 12 billion dollar, leading to large trade deficit (Kugelman, 2021). Consideration of these issues prompted both governments to negotiate FTA Phase-II (FTA-II) in order to establish a more balanced agreement that would promote Pakistani industries and exports.

This discussion will focus on FTA-II in three perspectives: negotiating it and executing it under the PTI (2018-2022), establishing the preliminary conditions of trade under the PML-N (2013-2018), and the following comparison of trade results in both phases.

### **3.3.4 Under PTI Negotiation and Implementation.**

In a move that marked one of the most significant trade policies facing the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) administration when it came to power in the year 2018, one clean-up they convinced themselves to do was the looming imbalance between Pakistan and China trade relations. China-Pakistan FTA Phase-II, signed in April 2019 and operationalized in January 2020 was the outcome of long years of negotiation but was completed under the leadership of Imran Khan. The agreement opened tariff-free access to 313 Pakistani goods, such as textiles, leather, agricultural goods, and minerals on equal terms with those already offered by China to the ASEAN countries.

Scholar argues that seen as a trade document; FTA-II was a strategic platform enabling the diversification of exports and the decrease of the bilateral trade deficit by PTI. The government encouraged the sale of value-added products but discouraged the sale of raw materials as a method of expanding competitiveness and competitiveness in commodities such as textiles, surgical goods,

and engineering products. The Met Office estimates that these loosening measures would raise exports by between 30 and 40 percent within five years.<sup>91</sup>

The other notable innovation of PTI was the addition of a safeguard system to shield home industries. The previous stage of the FTA had enabled the flood of cheap Chinese products to inundate Pakistani markets, especially electronics and building materials. FTA-II provided provisions that allowed Pakistan to place temporary levies in the case of local industries suffering harm due to excessive importation.<sup>92</sup> This represented the PTI's safe and reformist position-liberalization within economic sovereignty.

Within the scope of FTA-II rollout, the COVID-19 outbreak caused trade movements to be initially interrupted. Nevertheless, both nations quickly adjusted to switching to digital trade facilitation. In the end, it is expected that by late 2021, Pakistan's exports to China would have increased by almost 25 percent through the sale of rice, seafood, and textiles (China Economic Net 2022). These figures were celebrated by the Imran Khan Administration as a sign that FTA-II had started giving positive results. However, some analysts such as Small (2021) believe that it was a minor increase relative to the magnitude of the revival of the Pakistani slurry of trade, indicating that it was structurally limited in terms of competitiveness and export diversification.<sup>93</sup>

In addition, PTI tried to associate FTA-II with industrial stage of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The government expected Chinese investment in Special Economic Zones (SEZs) could assist Pakistani manufacturers receive tariff reductions and build greater capacity to export products (Wolf 2021). Despite the less rapid development pace of the SEZs than anticipated, the trade and industrial policy integration process under the PTI marked a transition to a more ambitious perspective of economic cooperation with China.

### **3.3.5 Pre-Trade Engagements of the PML - N**

The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (2013-2018) administration (government) had established FTA-II on the basis of initial talks and continued economic interaction with China. At that time bilateral relations were mostly governed by the initiation of CPEC in 2015 which focused more on

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<sup>91</sup> Michael Kugelman, "Introduction: Great Potential, Many Pitfalls—Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative," in *Great Potential, Many Pitfalls*, 2–8 (London: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>92</sup> Ministry of Commerce (Pakistan), *Protocol to Amend the Free Trade Agreement Between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan* (Islamabad: Government of Pakistan, 2019), <https://www.commerce.gov.pk/protocol-on-phase-ii-chinapakistan-fta/>

<sup>93</sup> Lang, James M. *Small teaching: Everyday lessons from the science of learning*. John Wiley & Sons, 2021.

large scale infrastructure and energy ventures than liberalizing trade.<sup>94</sup> Nonetheless, the increasing trade asymmetry became a common theme among Pakistani exporters and policymakers.

In Pakistan, exports to China have seen little improvement with a decline in exports of Pakistan, increasing only to roughly \$2 billion in 2018 after increasing to 1.6 billion in 2013, and an increase of nearly twofold in imports under Nawaz Sharif.<sup>95</sup> The equivocality cast doubt on the efficiency of the original FTA. Consequently, in 2017, PML-N began renegotiating with a new focus on ensuring Pakistan can offer additional tariff-free access to Chinese markets and enhance rules of origin.

However, the PML-N had a broader economic strategy of favoring quick involvement and the project-based diplomacy over structural reform. When it came to CPEC projects, its administration was highly dependent on Chinese financing, which added to increasing external debt and declining fiscal space to implement trade reforms.<sup>96</sup> The government led by Nawaz Sharif was able to package trade imbalanced as a cost of development which would lead to industrial exports in the future.

On the political front, the intertwined relationship PML-N had with Beijing accorded it a negotiating platform. Continuous policy across Pakistan made Chinese officials feel appreciated, with much of the preliminary FTA-II formulated between 2017 and 2018. But the preoccupation with mega projects caused the government to forget the imminent need to directly solve the trade deficits. As such, although PML-N helped generate diplomatic traction with regard to FTA-II, effective signing and its enforcement occurred during the PTI leave.

**Table 3: Comparative Trade Analysis**

Period	Exports to China	Imports from China	Trade Deficit	Export Growth (%)
2013–2018 (PML-N)	1.6 → 1.9	6.5 → 12.0	10.1	+18%
2018–2022 (PTI)	1.9 → 2.5	12.0 → 13.5	11.1	+31%

<sup>94</sup> Michael Kugelman, "Introduction: Great Potential, Many Pitfalls—Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative," in *Great Potential, Many Pitfalls*, 2–8 (London: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>95</sup> Ali, Murad. *Sino-Pakistan Partnership Under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the Burden of Expectations*. Springer Nature, 2025.

<sup>96</sup> F. Hussain et al., "China–Pak Strategic Entente with Respect to Search for Reciprocated Security Through Gwadar Port," *Psychology and Education* 58, no. 1 (2021): 3320–33.

*(Source: Hypothetical data based on trends discussed in Kugelman 2020; China Economic Net 2022)*

As shown off over, Pakistan's exports to China grew briskly during PTI's term, incompletely due to FTA- II's tariff frolicking and bettered product access. Still, the common trade deficiency remained high, reflecting Pakistan's reliance on Chinese ministry, electronics, and moderate goods.<sup>97</sup> While PTI played to abjectly boost import diversity, structural terminations similar as weak artificial capacity and restricted value- appended product lasted to circumscribe trade balance advancements.

Comparatively, PML- N's phase demonstrated stronger import- driven excrecency linked to structure evolution, whereas PTI's period concentrated more on import improvement. The PML- N model was investment- heavy and leveled at rapid-fire profitable expansion, while PTI's trade program sought sustainability through artificial competitiveness. Despite these differences, both ages maintained China as Pakistan's top trading mate, emphasizing the durability of strategic profitable reliance.<sup>98</sup> Likewise, FTA- II represented a procedure development in Pakistan–China profitable dealings. Under PTI, trade was decreasingly institutionalized through conventional mechanisms, involving the establishment of a Pakistan – China Business Council and periodical review meetings between commerce machineries. These institutional reforms handed lesser management and responsibility, assimilated to PML-N's design- grounded engagement.

Still, criticizers note that indeed under PTI, Pakistan's import basket to China remained narrow. Roughly 60 percent of exports were confined to low- value goods like rice, cotton, and seafood.<sup>99</sup> Without diversifying productive capacity, tariff adjustments alone could not fundamentally transform the structure of bilateral trade. Although the PTI government achieved short-term gains in export expansion, the long-term sustainability of trade performance remained uncertain.

### **3.4 Diplomatic Style**

#### **3.4.1 Sharif's Diplomatic Style**

The technocratic, institutional and contractual approaches were the foundation of the diplomatic style adopted by Nawaz Sharif in his third tenure as the Prime Minister (20132017) in approaching

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<sup>97</sup> Shah, Syed H., Muhammad A. Kamal, and Da L. Yu. "Did China-Pakistan free trade agreement promote trade and development in Pakistan?." *International Journal of Finance & Economics* 27, no. 3 (2022): 3459-3474.

<sup>98</sup> Mehwish Aman, Syed Ali Khan, and Sabir Awan, "An Analysis of Sino-Pak Relations (2018–2022): Problems and Prospects," *Competitive Research Journal Archive* 3, no. 1 (2025): 144–52.

<sup>99</sup> Michael Kugelman, "Introduction: Great Potential, Many Pitfalls—Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative," in *Great Potential, Many Pitfalls*, 2–8 (London: Routledge, 2021).

China. His diplomatic style was not just a sign of his own leadership style, which is pragmatic, business-focused, and founded upon economic development, but also the world order of relationships that Pakistan had with China at that time, which was undergoing a paradigm shift with the introduction of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This is in contrast to leaders who had been overly dependent on populist rhetoric, Sharif diplomatic style was characterized by a cautious pragmatic position, careful planning and the choice to ground promises on formal institutional structures. This gave a sense of predictability and reliability which appealed to the Chinese policymakers who believe in the stability and long term relations with foreigners.

This institutionalized style was already displayed when Sharif began his first dealings with China after becoming the president in 2013. When he chose Beijing as his first foreign trip as Prime Minister, it was a pointer to consistency and renewal of the strategic alliance. In this visit, he and the Premier Li Keqiang signed the Common Vision of Deepening China–Pakistan Strategic Cooperative Partnership in the New Era.<sup>100</sup> What was remarkable about the document was its confirmation of the strategic cooperation along with the precision with which it delivered mechanisms through which it would be implemented including reinforcing the Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC) on CPEC. Sharif emphasized the need to incorporate the partnership into bureaucratic and organizational systems by highlighting the preference of organized diplomacy rather than symbolic gestures. This technocratic mark was in line with his overall domestic political approach that stressed great infrastructural and economic developments as instruments of power.

An example of Sharif diplomacy was how the President of China, Xi Jinping, paid a state visit to Pakistan in 2015 a visit that was largely hailed as the most historic event in bilateral relations. More than fifty agreements and memoranda of understanding were signed which valued an estimated 46 billion, in terms of energy projects, infrastructure development, and operationalization of Gwadar Port.<sup>109</sup> The ceremony itself was the subject of Sharif style: very structured, substance-oriented and contract oriented. Instead of focusing on emotive or populist rhetoric, the statements of the visit by Sharif focused on technical details, schedules, and change transformational possibilities of CPEC as an economic development driver. This focus on practical detail was pleasing to Chinese tastes

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<sup>100</sup> “Common Vision for Deepening China–Pakistan Strategic Cooperative Partnership in the New Era,” Beijing, 2013, [www.auckland.china-consulate.gov.cn/eng/chinanews/201307/t20130708\\_171199.htm](http://www.auckland.china-consulate.gov.cn/eng/chinanews/201307/t20130708_171199.htm). <sup>109</sup> “President Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech at Pakistan’s Parliament: ‘Building a China–Pakistan Community of Shared Destiny to Pursue Closer Win-Win Cooperation’” (2015), [www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/2015zt/xjpdbstjxgswfbfydnxycxyfldrhyhlwly60znjnhd/202406/t20240606\\_11381322.html](http://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/2015zt/xjpdbstjxgswfbfydnxycxyfldrhyhlwly60znjnhd/202406/t20240606_11381322.html).

of clarity, action, and outcome and strengthens the reputation of Pakistan as a stable collaborator in the development of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The diplomatic style of Sharif is also brightened by his diplomatic speeches at international forums. In 2017, at the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing, he put the CPEC and the BRI in the context of inclusivity, openness, and mutual gain, and insisted that these initiatives should not be politicized. This restrained wording demonstrates his practical diplomacy: he did not resort to idealistic rhetoric or antagonism but instead placed Pakistan as a collaborative partner that fits into the Chinese vision of the world and at the same time could attract wider international audiences who feared the consequences of the geopolitics. This style was, therefore, pragmatism mixed with moderation, where he used the language that stressed on collective prosperity without arousing rival powers. This equilibrium highlights the overall diplomatic instinct of Sharif to make sure the foreign policy of Pakistan was positive and predictable.<sup>101</sup>

Bureaucratic and institutional diplomacy was a defining feature of Nawaz Sharif's engagement with China. His government consistently empowered the Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC) to function as the principal decision-making body of CPEC, delegating negotiations and implementation to civil servants and technical experts.<sup>102</sup> This institutional reliance contributed to the depersonalization of diplomacy, shifting the emphasis from individual leadership charisma to structured state-to-state arrangements. Such an approach fostered a sustainable and resilient framework capable of withstanding domestic political transitions, thereby enhancing Chinese policymakers' confidence in Pakistan's policy continuity. This contractual and institutionalized model of engagement aligned with China's preference for stability and predictability during leadership changes, in contrast to the more leader-centric diplomatic style adopted under Imran Khan.

Another notable feature of Nawaz Sharif's diplomatic style was his relatively low-profile approach. Although he participated in formal ceremonies and official engagements, his rhetoric remained measured and restrained. Rather than employing emotive or highly personalized language, he emphasized the institutional continuity and historical foundations of Pakistan–China relations. This cautious and understated style distinguished his diplomacy from populist approaches that rely on

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<sup>101</sup> A. Maqsood, "One Day Conference: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) on 19 June 2017," South Asian Voices Institute (2017), [www.thesvi.org/report-on-beltand-road-initiative-bri-and-china-pakistan-economic-corridor-cpec/](http://www.thesvi.org/report-on-beltand-road-initiative-bri-and-china-pakistan-economic-corridor-cpec/).

<sup>102</sup> Y. Samad, "The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor: The Politics of Development," *Critical Pakistan Studies* (2025): 1–25.

overt displays of unity and symbolic dramatization. His avoidance of sensationalism reflected an awareness of China's preference for subtle, results-oriented diplomacy, where concrete agreements and policy implementation take precedence over performative gestures. Accordingly, Sharif's public statements were typically grounded in tangible outcomes of cooperation rather than exaggerated symbolic proclamations.

Critics, however, note that the diplomacy of Sharif with China was occasionally too technocratic, lacking the emotional interest that would help him to arouse masses towards the alliance of Pakistan with China. The language of the CPEC agreements was very technical and thus the common people of Pakistan had no interest in the agreements and the opposition parties at times presented the agreements as being an elitist group or disproportionately favoring the political stronghold of Sharif in Punjab. In this sense, the diplomacy of Sharif, however, useful in establishing trust with China, was deficient in a populist aspect that could engrave the partnership in the Pakistani internal politics. However, seen through the prism of Beijing, this pragmatic, contractual nature was hugely esteemed, as they had a sense of predictability and seriousness of intent.

### **3.4.2 Imran Khan's Diplomatic Style**

The approach of Imran Khan to China as Prime Minister (2018-2022) was the complete opposite of Nawaz Sharif. Where Sharif was technocratic, institutionalized, and contract-oriented, Khan was a great fan of populism, charisma, and performative reassurance in the process of handling the Pakistan-China relationship. His personal identity as an anti-elite reformist and a populist leader drew the basis to his diplomacy, and this impacted the tone and content of his interactions with China. This did not imply that the Khan essentially changed the nature of the Pakistan-China policy; there was a continuum in terms of content, but style and approach to his diplomacy bore a different quality that differentiated him from that of his predecessor.

The tenor of the China diplomacy was determined by the first official visit of Khan to Beijing in November 2018. The joint statement issued by his meeting with President Xi Jinping was very rhetorical that was filled with affirmations of the All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership and a Community of Shared Future in the New Era.<sup>103</sup> The frequent focus on slogans and symbolic words was a transition to a more emotive, populist style of diplomacy. Instead of addressing technical specifics of the projects or the institutional mechanisms, Khan predetermined the manifestations of loyalty and solidarity, the iron brotherhood and mutual trust between the two

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<sup>103</sup> Zhao, Jing, and Yaling Guo. "The Development of China-Pakistan Diplomatic Relations." *Pacific International Journal* 6, no. S1 (2022): 34-39.

states. This rhetoric was in part directed toward a domestic audience: where Sharif was addressing the elites and technocrats, Khan was addressing China as the most reliable ally of Pakistan, in a form that could be easily comprehended and made emotionally appealing to the masses.

Performative reassurance was one of the key characteristics of the diplomatic strategy of Khan. His time came when Pakistan was economically plagued by its accumulating crisis, the COVID19 pandemic and a spate of anti-China terrorism against Chinese engineers and engineering projects in Pakistan. The developments raised some concern in Beijing over the capability of Pakistan to offer security to its Chinese citizens as well as to guarantee the successful execution of the CPEC. Khan had diplomacy therefore turned into repetitive reassurances to China, most of the time done by joint communiques and public pronouncement.<sup>104</sup> To take an example, in the 2019 and 2020 joint statements, the pledges to guarantee the safety of the Chinese personnel, projects, and institutions in Pakistan were given a prime spot. This was a new aspect of bilateral assertions which had not existed in the time of Sharif and indicated that the diplomacy of Khan was more responding in nature and was intended to calm the anxieties of the Chinese by formal, public undertakings.

Another area where Khan greatly resorted to was the leader-centered diplomacy, where he personalized his relationship with Xi Jinping like never before. Through his speeches and interviews, he was always praising Xi as a leader and especially the anti-corruption campaign by Xi which was frequently mentioned as the source of inspiration to his own domestic reform agenda.<sup>105</sup> Connecting his own political image to the mode of government in which Xi lived, Khan tried to establish a personal connection that was not limited to the institutional structures. It was his kind of populist diplomacy: as a leader like Xi did, he established himself as someone who provided challenge to the established elites and fulfilled the masses. Although this was a strategy that contributed to the creation of a symbolic intimacy between the two leaders, it also brought to mind that the diplomacy of Pakistan seemed to be reliant on the personality of the leader rather than its continuum.

The performative nature of the diplomacy of the United Arab Emirates was seen in the example of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics when the United States, the United Kingdom, and many other Western nations were boycotting the games due to human rights issues. The fact that Khan was in

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<sup>104</sup> S. Hussain, *Imran Khan's Foreign Policy Doctrine: Challenges and Prospects on the Global Stage (2018–2022)*.

<sup>105</sup> N. Siddiqui, "Wish I Could Follow President Xi's Example...," *Dawn*, October 8, .

Beijing at this sensitive time was symbolically strong as it indicated that Pakistan was ready to be with China at any moment when other countries were isolating them.<sup>106</sup> This did not involve actual bargaining but a frontal solidarity an act of performance to assert allegiance. The fact that Khan made the appearance with Xi at the Olympics, where the rest of the leaders avoided being seen, added to the impression that Khan was ready to play the diplomatic theater to prove that Pakistan was a friend to China.

The other unique aspect of the diplomatic style of Khan was the populist rhetoric that he used to tame foreign policy. The comments about China, he tended to make, were to appeal to the common Pakistanis, and Beijing was not just a strategic ally, but developmentally and politically an exemplar. As an example, he kept glorifying the poverty alleviation efforts of China, implying that Pakistan had a lot to understand in Beijing on how to bring millions of people out of poverty.<sup>107</sup>

This was a sharp contrast with the low-profile approach of Sharif: Khan wanted to incorporate the China relationship into the word of his populist reformist agenda, which connected foreign policy to his domestic politics story. Khan turned the bilateral partnership into an instrument of legitimizing his style of governance by bringing out China as an ally and role model.

Meanwhile, the populist diplomacy of Khan was more improvised and technocratic.<sup>108</sup> A contrast to Sharif who was very dependent on institutional bodies like the Joint Cooperation Committee, Khan would make grandiose promises during a speech which was not necessarily supported by comprehensive institutional planning. To illustrate this, he said that the scope of CPEC would be widened to cover agriculture, industrial cooperation, and development of the social sector to make the initiative fit his populist plan, Naya Pakistan.<sup>109</sup> Although such pronouncements were an indication of ambition, critics claimed that the absence of a follow through detail was a shot in the foot and slowed project execution. This points to one of the main drawbacks of the style used by Khan: it was very useful in symbolic reassurance and mobilization of the population, but it was not as institutionally sophisticated and detailed as the implementation would require in the long run.

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<sup>106</sup> Francesco Boni, "Beijing Olympics: Why Pakistan Is Sending One Athlete and Eight Ministers to the Winter Games," *The Conversation*, February 4, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/beijing-olympics-whypakistan-is-sending-one-athlete-and-eight-ministers-to-the-winter-games-176287>.

<sup>107</sup> I. Ullah, "Populism in Foreign Policy: Bhutto and Imran Khan," *Pakistan Social Sciences Review* 8, no. 2 (2024): 508–21.

<sup>108</sup> Zahoor, Adil. "Populism and diaspora politics: Imran Khan and the Pakistani diaspora in the West." In *South Asia from the Margins*, pp. 73-92. Routledge.

<sup>109</sup> S. A. Rana, "Imran Khan's China Model," *Daily Times*, August 7, 2018, [www.dailytimes.com.pk/279245/imran-khans-china-model/](http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/279245/imran-khans-china-model/).

However, the diplomatic strategy used by Khan had its rationale. He tried to keep Chinese trust in Pakistan at a turbulent time of threats to security and financial difficulties, by stressing personal loyalty, emotive rhetoric and observable gestures. His approach was custom made to crisis management: whenever there were questions of the soundness of things, Khan resorted to the very visible declaration of unity to reassure Beijing. This is why statements made under Khan were usually lengthier, more repetitive, and more symbolic than those made under Sharif; they were aimed not to initiate new projects, but to reassert the power of the current partnership.

On the contrary the diplomatic nature of Imran Khan was based on populism. Instead of institutions being the main element, he focused on personal charisma, emotive rhetoric, and symbolism to the masses. He tended to make the relationship with President Xi Jinping very personal, by posing as a reformist leader who was inspired by the anti-corruption decisions of Xi. Imran Khan strategically utilized references to China within his domestic political discourse, portraying China's poverty reduction initiatives and governance structures as normative benchmarks for Pakistan. This rhetorical framing served to legitimize his populist reform agenda by contrasting Pakistan's structural challenges with China's developmental successes.<sup>110</sup> Such diplomacy brought the foreign policy and domestic populism together, and China was not posed as the cooperation but also political legitimacy within the country.

The second axis of distinction is related to the fact that each of the leaders tried to keep China on its toes. Diplomacy of Sharif in the interest of codification and stability. Sharif entrenched the relationship by signing a series of comprehensive deals during the 2015 state visit of Xi Jinping to Gwadar Port on energy, infrastructure and Gwadar Port.<sup>111</sup> His style gave him some level of assurance to Beijing by showing consistency, continuity, and a definite implementation strategy.

Khan, on his part, was ruling in a more unstable time, characterized by terrorism against Chinese nationalities and Pakistan economic crisis. His diplomacy was based therefore on performative reassurance. Joint declarations of Khan often included long-term guarantees of the security of Chinese citizens and projects, which were mostly missing under Sharif. The fact that he decided to

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<sup>110</sup> S. A. Rana, "Imran Khan's China Model," Daily Times, August 7, 2018, [www.dailytimes.com.pk/279245/imran-khans-china-model/](http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/279245/imran-khans-china-model/).

<sup>111</sup> "President Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech at Pakistan's Parliament: 'Building a China-Pakistan Community of Shared Destiny to Pursue Closer Win-Win Cooperation'" (2015), [www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/2015zt/xjpdbstjxgsfwbfydnxycxyfldrhyhwlhy60znjnhd/202406/t20240606\\_11381322.html](http://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/2015zt/xjpdbstjxgsfwbfydnxycxyfldrhyhwlhy60znjnhd/202406/t20240606_11381322.html).

be present at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics despite Western boycotts further portrays this performative assurance, which is a demonstration of loyalty by symbolic presence.<sup>112</sup>

Therefore, it was Sharif who gave a structural assurance to China and Khan giving a performative one. Both strategies were indicative of their situations: Sharif was trying to entrench cooperation at a period of expansion (the launch of CPEC), and Khan was trying to avoid damage to trust at a period of crisis and insecurity.

On the other hand the rhetoric used by Khan was very emotional. He always referred to the concept of iron brotherhood and shared destiny in the political arenas. In his speeches, he positioned China as the most ardent friend of Pakistan and would compare it with the west. Khan incorporated the foreign policy in his populist narrative by means of extremely symbolic and emotional language reaching out to common Pakistanis. This rhetorical break is indicative of their political images Sharif, a technocrat, needed credibility by way of exactness and Khan, a populist, needed to appeal to the heart.

### **3.4.3 Comparative Analysis**

The comparative analysis also shows that although Sharif and Khan were constant in terms of substance, their approach to diplomacy was a manifestation of their political identities. Sharif was a developmentally oriented diplomat who was technocratic, institutionalized, and codified commitments in his diplomacy. The diplomacy of Khan was populist, leader-focused, and performative taking into account his emphasis on charisma and public mobilization.

Each of the two methods possessed its advantages and disadvantages. The technocratic approach in the diplomatic approach of Sharif gave China trust in the reliability of Pakistan due to its enduring structures, but the strategic approach lacked a touch to the common Pakistan. Populist diplomacy by Khan created an effect of resonance and imagery of intimacy with China but at the risk of losing credibility due to lack of an institutional depth.

These mixed styles, after all, highlight the flexibility of the Pakistani diplomacy towards China. Leaders leave a mark of their own style whilst the structural need to maintain strong relationships

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<sup>112</sup> Laar, Rizwan Ahmed, Shusheng Shi, Muhammad Ashraf Azeem, and Rashid Menhas. "Pakistan's participation at the summer Olympic Games, 1948 to 2016: a social development theory approach." *The International journal of the history of sport* 38, no. 5 (2021): 511-526.

with Beijing brings continuity of the strategies. In this respect, China policy of Pakistan is influenced by personal leadership styles, as well as long term geopolitical requirements.

**Table 4: Comparative and Similar Analysis of Diplomatic Styles of Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan toward China (2013–2022)**

Aspect	Nawaz Sharif (2013–2017)	Imran Khan (2018-2022)	Comparative Observation
<b>Diplomatic Foundation</b>	Technocratic, institutionalized, and contract-driven diplomacy relied on bureaucratic	Populist, leader centered, and performative diplomacy, personal charisma and emotional rhetoric over institutions.	Sharif’s diplomacy was structural and institutional; Khan’s was personalized and symbolic.
<b>Leadership Style in Diplomacy</b>	Depersonalized and formal grounded in predictability, documentation, and structured agreements.	Personalized and emotive centered on his relationship with Xi Jinping and public displays of loyalty.	Sharif projected stability and professionalism; Khan projected charisma and solidarity.
<b>Rhetorical Style</b>	Measured, pragmatic, and technocratic; focused on inclusivity and mutual benefit (e.g., BRI Forum 2017).	Emotive, populist, and symbolic; frequently invoked “iron brotherhood” and “shared destiny.”	Sharif appealed to technocrats and policymakers; Khan appealed to public
<b>Reassurance to China</b>	Structural reassurance through codified agreements and consistent institutional mechanisms.	Performative reassurance through public pledges, symbolic gestures, and loyalty affirmations	Sharif’s reassurance was systemic; Khan’s was theatrical, reflecting their differing political contexts.
<b>Institutional Engagement</b>	Strengthened bureaucratic channels and formalized cooperation; relied on officials and committees.	Reduced bureaucratic role; emphasized leader-level interactions and public statements.	Sharif emphasized institutions; Khan emphasized leadership visibility.
<b>Public Diplomacy</b>	Low-profile, restrained, and elite-oriented; limited populist mobilization.	High-profile and populist	Sharif’s diplomacy targeted policy elites; Khan’s targeted the masses.

**Source:** Author’s compilation based on Wolf (2019); Dawn (2); The Conversation (2021); Reddit (2022); Jamal (2025); Rana (2019), Samad (2025); Laar (2021)

## Conclusion

This chapter has explored the foreign policy of Pakistan towards China in 2013-2022 during the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) administration and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) administration showing both behavioral resemblances and differences in their strategy and implementation respectively. The discussion based on the theoretical framework of Neoclassical Realism and further aided by the Rational Actor Model showed that the China policy formulated by Pakistan was influenced by the interplay of systemically demands on one hand and domestic

political factors on the other hand, especially the perceptions of the leadership together with the institutional structures and economic limitations.

The relative analysis of the two governments highlights the fact that as much as the geopolitical conditioning and the economy of Pakistan geographically conditioned the alignment of the country towards China, the engagement mode was deeply ingrained in leadership styles and national priorities. The rule of Nawaz Sharif was the epitome of a technocratic and institutionalized style: his government formalized relations in the form of formal agreements, made rapid advancements in infrastructure building with the CPEC, and attempted to strike a balance between relations with the United States in a pragmatic compartmentalization. His diplomacy conveyed an image of predictability and economic rationality making the China policy of Pakistan part of the bureaucratic continuum and long-term planning.

The administration of Imran Khan, on the contrary, was working in a more unstable international and local context. In the confrontation of heightened U.S.-China competition, the unstable economy, and the security dilemma, Khan took a populist, leader-based, and performative diplomatic stance. His government changed the focus of CPEC into sustainability and industrialization with more focus on transparency and reform and in rhetoric strengthened the loyalty of Pakistan to China. This strategy was effective in maintaining strategic cooperation but it was shallow in terms of institutions and in other cases it limited the strategic flexibility of Pakistan by reducing its range of diplomatic maneuver.

Combined together, the two leaderships can be seen as the stages of development of the relations between Pakistan and China. The administration of Sharif provided the structural and economic base of the partnership with its sharp growth and codification on a contractual basis; the government of Khan aimed to unify and redefine it in a new geopolitical and domestic situation. Although the stylistic and procedural differences exist, both leaders showed the same strategic logic in the light of which the external orientation of Pakistan to China was directed on the basis of counteractions to the insecurity and economic weakness in the region.

## **Chapter: 04**

### **Interpretation, Leadership Dynamics, and Policy Implications**

#### **Introduction**

The chapter, based on the comparative evidence provided in Chapter 3, shifts to the point of interpretation, putting both theoretical perspectives of Neoclassical Realism and the Rational Actor Model (RAM) into play to pinpoint the logic behind the behavior of Pakistan towards China in its foreign policy. Although the above chapter outlined the empirical differences between the PML-N and PTI governments, this chapter attempts to reveal the reasons as to why these differences arose and the manner in which the differences mirror the systemic restrictions, leadership perceptions and domestic political structures. It claims that the policy of Pakistan towards China cannot be explained only by the forces of the external influence or the necessities in the economic life; it should be discussed as the dynamic process influenced by international motives and domestic political arbitration. By placing the comparative results in these theoretical constructs, the chapter brings out the role played by the leaders and their interpretation of national interest, institutional asymmetry especially the military hegemony and political legitimacy in decision making.

The nature of the foreign policy of Pakistan towards China under the rule of Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan is an indicator of a difficult balancing act between continuity and adaptation. The logic of structure of the strategic relationship of Pakistan with China that was based on the long-standing security dilemma, the reliance on foreign capital, and the balance of power changes in South Asia did not change much between the two tenures. Nonetheless, within this consistency, there was considerable difference in the manner in which each leader elaborated, articulated and functionalized that relationship. Sharif dealt with foreign policy as a tool of economic modernization and efficiency in governing and focused on institutional mechanisms and predictable diplomacy. Khan, by contrast, understood diplomacy in populist and performative terms with a focus on ideological history of sovereignty, anti-elitism and moral reform. These differences in response demonstrate that although these two leaders were influenced by the same external pressures, their internal politics and identities as leaders influenced their reactions differently.

In addition, this chapter argues that these domestic filters, civil, and military relations, political instability, and search to legitimacy were the effective mediating variables between the systemic incentives and foreign policy performances in Pakistan. The technocratic involvement of Sharif provided the predictability of bureaucracy but failed because of the political vulnerability and institutional fragmentation. The charismatic diplomacy of Khan created popular excitement but

was usually structurally unbalanced and unsupported by policies. China, in its turn, coped with these changes in a pragmatic manner, keeping the relationships between states unchanged, yet insuring itself with the appeal to closer coordination with the military establishment of Pakistan. In the process, Beijing would focus more on continuity than charisma, such that its strategic and economic interests would not be exposed to the political instability in Pakistan. Through the prism of Neoclassical Realism and RAM, this chapter highlights the point that the China policy of Pakistan is not only the outcome of the geopolitical need but also a consequence of the bargain that is still going on between the structure, the leadership, and the reality of domestic power, a bargain which is still guiding the future course of the foreign policy in Pakistan.

#### **4.1 Technocratic Vision and Institutional Diplomacy under Nawaz Sharif**

When Nawaz Sharif assumed office in 2013, he adopted a technocratic vision on foreign policy that viewed such policy as a tool of economic modernization. This orientation was manifested in his diplomacy with China. CPEC was the crown jewel of the foreign policy by Sharif which was introduced as a kind of a Marshall Plan that would solve the crippling energy shortages and the crumbling infrastructure in Pakistan. The state visit of President Xi Jinping in April 2015 was planned as a historic turning point and more than fifty agreements were signed with up to forty six billion dollars promised investment.<sup>113</sup> Sharif insisted on institutional structures, and created the Joint Cooperation Committee to keep track of progress and integrated CPEC into the bureaucratic planning machinery in Pakistan. His rhetoric always took on the language of Chinese itself, to the benefit of mutual gain and joint prosperity, the image of this was one of predictability and assurance that is of elite level. Simultaneously, Sharif was trying to strike a balance between such an overture to Beijing and a further, albeit tense, involvement in Washington. Nawaz Sharif's 2013 visit to the United States, framed as an effort to "reset" bilateral relations, reflected his preference for strategic balancing rather than overt confrontation. At a time when the launch of CPEC was gaining momentum, Sharif avoided portraying Pakistan's deepening engagement with China as an explicitly anti-American alignment. This calibrated approach was consistent with Beijing's broader strategy of presenting the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as an inclusive and non-confrontational development framework rather than a geopolitical counterweight to the United States.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Pakistan), Joint Statement between the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the People's Republic of China on Establishing the All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership (2015a), [www.mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/joint-statement-between-the-islamic-republic-of-pakistan-and-the-peoples-republic-of-china-on-establishing-the-all-weather-strategic-cooperative-partnership](http://www.mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/joint-statement-between-the-islamic-republic-of-pakistan-and-the-peoples-republic-of-china-on-establishing-the-all-weather-strategic-cooperative-partnership).

<sup>114</sup> S. Dwivedi, "The Rise of China: Pakistani Perspectives," *Griffith Asia Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (2015): 20–37.

But the perceived weakness of Sharif as technocratic diplomat became a victim of the weakness of the domestic politics of the country of Pakistan. It was a big blow to postpone Xi Jinping visit in 2014 because of mass protests in Islamabad organized by Imran Khan and Tahir ul-Qadri.<sup>115</sup> To China, canceling was not an inconvenience caused by poor scheduling, but an indication that the civilian government of Pakistan did not have the ability to compartmentalize strategic diplomacy and the internal upheaval. This episode strengthened the belief held in Beijing that the Army of Pakistan was the surest ensemble of fulfilling promises, especially on security and realization. Rawalpindi has long been considered by China as the stable keystone of the bilateral commitments traditionally and this view was further reinforced when Sharif took over because civil military tensions kept eroding his credibility. By establishing an independent CPEC security unit within the Army, the interdependence of the military channels in Beijing was further institutionalized, and this indicated that the promises of the civilian government were approached with some skepticism.<sup>116</sup>

## **4.2 Populist Diplomacy and Symbolic Reassurance under Imran Khan**

The situation in which Imran Khan is inheriting CPEC is very different. When he came to power in 2018, he did so on the basis of a populist movement that promised to shake up the established elites and bring about reform in his governance. This at first was translated into distrust of CPEC accords under Sharif. The government of Khan declared an overview of the contracts citing issues of transparency and corruption.<sup>117</sup> This brought discomfort to Beijing and it sought political continuity and cautioned against politicization of the corridor. The rhetoric used by Khan in this period was to refocus CPEC towards mega projects and people development especially in agriculture and the social sector. But the deteriorating economic crisis and the dire need of Pakistan to get Chinese financial aid soon had to recalibrate. As of 2019, CPEC was reiterated by Khan, who signed new contracts with its second phase, aimed at industrial zones and diversification of the economy. His diplomacy usually tended to focus on China as a case study on how to reduce poverty and change its governing structure, juxtaposing the success of Beijing against the corruption of its elite in Pakistan.

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<sup>115</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Pakistan), Visit of Chinese President to Pakistan Postponed—To Be Rescheduled at an Early Date (2015b), [www.mofa.gov.pk/visit-of-chinese-president-to-pakistan-postponed-to-be-re-scheduled-at-an-early-date](http://www.mofa.gov.pk/visit-of-chinese-president-to-pakistan-postponed-to-be-re-scheduled-at-an-early-date).

<sup>116</sup> Francesco Boni, "Civil-Military Relations in Pakistan: A Case Study of Sino-Pakistani Relations and the Port of Gwadar," *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 54, no. 4 (2016): 498–517.

<sup>117</sup> S. Hussain, *Imran Khan's Foreign Policy Doctrine: Challenges and Prospects on the Global Stage (2018–2022)*.

The style of Khan was in contrast to that of Sharif where it was overtly performative. They solidarity was dramatized by Khan where Sharif was projecting technocratic stability. This was displayed by his visit to the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics where Western leaders boycotted the event and was shown in the Chinese media as a sign of loyalty to Pakistan.<sup>118</sup> His constant accolades of the Chinese system of governance appealed to his own audience, and reinforced his reputation as a reformist leader who would learn to emulate Beijing. This dramatic diplomacy had its right flanks, however. During 2021–2022, as civil–military relations deteriorated, Imran Khan’s assurances appeared to carry diminishing credibility in Beijing. Security incidents most notably the July 2021 Dasu bus attack, which resulted in the deaths of nine Chinese engineers intensified concerns regarding Pakistan’s capacity to ensure the safety of Chinese personnel.<sup>119</sup> Despite continued rhetorical commitments, China reportedly adopted a more cautious posture, slowing financial disbursements and exercising greater restraint toward new investment initiatives. Following Khan’s removal through a vote of no confidence in April 2022, Beijing’s official response emphasized the continuity of state-to-state relations, underscoring its preference for institutional stability over leader-specific alignment.

Another point of comparison is the Free Trade Agreement. Khan’s pro-business agenda and relationship with the industrial elites predisposed him to eschew further liberalization unless they were accompanied by protection. Contrastingly, Khan has ended the Phase II of the FTA in 2019, which he described as a milestone to the exporters in Pakistan. The agreement provided tariff-free access to 313 products providing Pakistan with the prospects in the sphere of textiles and agriculture.<sup>120</sup> Nonetheless, the flaws in the Pakistan economy like energy shortages, low productivity and the inefficiency of the regulation implied that the exports to China did not increase as projected and the imports kept on rising.<sup>121</sup> This boldness of Khan brought minimal economic benefits and increased trade imbalance. Reflectively, Sharif was cautious and may have had less to

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<sup>118</sup> Francesco Boni, “Beijing Olympics: Why Pakistan Is Sending One Athlete and Eight Ministers to the Winter Games,” *The Conversation*, February 4, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/beijing-olympics-whypakistan-is-sending-one-athlete-and-eight-ministers-to-the-winter-games-176287>.

<sup>119</sup> Areej Hassan, Asad Hassan, and Abeer Salahuddin, “Threat Framing of CPEC in Pakistani Newspapers: Post-Dasu Attack Analysis,” *Global Social Sciences Review* 8 (2023).

<sup>120</sup> Ministry of Commerce (Pakistan), *Protocol to Amend the Free Trade Agreement Between the Government of the People’s Republic of China and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan* (Islamabad, 2019), [www.commerce.gov.pk/protocol-on-phase-ii-china-pakistan-fta/](http://www.commerce.gov.pk/protocol-on-phase-ii-china-pakistan-fta/).

<sup>121</sup> H. Khan, Y. Chen, and L. Lv, “Does the China–Pakistan Free Trade Agreement Benefit the Vegetable Exports of Pakistan? A Gravity Estimation,” *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems* 8 (2024): Article 1362910.

give in the short term but Khan was too full of himself and found his vulnerabilities unveiled and which Pakistan was unprepared to counter.

### **4.3 Civil–Military Mediation in Pakistan–China Relations**

Pakistan Army has long been a key stakeholder in the diplomatic affairs of the country in the context of negotiating with the Chinese, freezing icing process during political instability inside the country. In both the Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan administrations, the centrality of the military in foreign policy formulation emerged not only from its domestic influence but also from Beijing’s perception of the Army as a reliable guarantor of Pakistan’s international commitments. This dynamic underscores a persistent institutional asymmetry within Pakistan’s foreign policy apparatus, whereby civilian governments are largely responsible for shaping political rhetoric and diplomatic posturing, while strategic and operational trust is concentrated in the military establishment.<sup>122</sup> This dynamic highlights a persistent institutional asymmetry within Pakistan’s foreign policy apparatus, in which civilian governments primarily manage political rhetoric and diplomatic positioning, while strategic and operational trust is concentrated in the military establishment. This imbalance became particularly evident during the initiation and implementation of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) under Nawaz Sharif (2013–2018). Although Sharif promoted CPEC as a transformative initiative, his government faced challenges in maintaining political stability and coordinating between domestic business interests and bureaucratic machinery. The civilian-military division of authority, procedural constraints in foreign policy, and ongoing tensions with India limited Sharif’s ability to centralize control over foreign affairs. Beijing, closely monitoring these dynamics, displayed reduced confidence in direct civilian-led engagement. The Special Security Division (SSD) of the Pakistan Army, created to secure CPEC projects, not only demonstrated Islamabad’s commitment but also reflected China’s trust in the Army’s capacity to ensure operational continuity. In practice, while the civilian government signed agreements, the military guaranteed their implementation, thereby institutionalizing its role as a key intermediary between Beijing and Islamabad.<sup>123</sup>

The conservative polite gesture of China at this time was the manifestation of the thick strategic course of the engagement of the authority of Pakistan, which is preferable than the reliance on only tagged leaders. Beijing was finding it difficult to isolate tactfulness without the internal insecurity this holdback of the visit of President Xi Jinping in 2014 by domestic demurrers in Islamabad

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<sup>122</sup> Ellis Joffe, “Party–Army Relations in China: Retrospect and Prospect,” *The China Quarterly* 146 (1996): 299–314.

<sup>123</sup> S. U. Rahman and Z. Shurong, “Governing through Informal Mechanisms: Military Control over State Institutions in Pakistan,” *Asian Survey* 61, no. 6 (2021): 942–70.

added credence to the view of the Beijing. Consequentially, China redefined its engagement program through the intensification of institutional integration with the military set up since the latter serves as the sole guarantor of long-term bilateral engagements. This served as a practical demonstration of how stable relations between Beijing and the Pakistani military could be maintained, even amid potential political shifts in Islamabad.<sup>124</sup>

The intervening role of the military persisted under Imran Khan (2018–2022), albeit within a shifting political landscape. Khan's rise was initially supported by tacit military backing, creating an impression of institutional harmony that reassured Beijing. During the early period of PTI rule, routine civil-military cooperation continued in overseeing CPEC projects and reaffirming the strategic partnership between Pakistan and China. The military's participation in the CPEC Authority and representation within inter-ministerial commissions served as a deliberate measure to depoliticize high-value collaboration and maintain bilateral trust.<sup>125</sup> This cooperative framework allowed the Khan government to negotiate alternative phases of CPEC without undermining China's confidence in the institutional stability of Pakistan.

Nevertheless, with the loss of civil-martial affairs in 2021-2022, Beijing once more got used to a politic posture. The division between Khan and the Army that had been expressed in the internal movables dissensions and the precedents of governance inspired China to borrow a more reserved relationship to the political rhetoric of Khan. Crashes of delinquency in financial bills and a retardation in design perpetration showed the increased carefulness of Beijing. The involvement of Chinese faltered away with time to military interlocutors and control systems, chilling that bilateral cooperation had endured, in fact, as domestic politics fell into troubling times. This Dasu machine rush in July 2021 that killed a number of Chinese masterminds further supported this dependency of Beijing on the service as an element of screen collaboration this sensibility, the Army once more became the stabilizing column of the relationship, bearing the impressions of political instability and functional viability.

This mutually dependent role of the Pakistan Army underscores a structural reality in which Pakistan's foreign policy operates through a dual framework: civilian governments articulate political narratives, while the military executes strategic objectives. This institutional duality informs Beijing's long-term engagement strategy. Scholars note that China does not view the Pakistan Army merely as a security partner, but as a governance actor capable of ensuring the

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<sup>124</sup> Hussain, Shahid, and Muhammad Yasir. "China Pakistan Strategic Partnership: An Examination of Defense Cooperation and Security Implications." (2025).

<sup>125</sup> S. H. Basit, "Terrorizing the CPEC: Managing Transnational Militancy in China–Pakistan Relations," *The Pacific Review* 32, no. 4 (2019): 694–724.

fulfillment of high-stakes and commercially significant commitments. Pakistan's foreign policy has historically been state-centric and pragmatic, relying on the stability provided by the military rather than the ideological or transient agendas of civilian rulers.<sup>126</sup>

The civil-military consensus has been the stabilizing manpower in the Pakistan-China relations through the various governments. Both Sharif and Khan marked the symbolism in politics of friendship with China, but their regimes confronted the institutional administration of the Army in the maintenance of the faith of Beijing. This relationship is an indication of the dense nature of the governance of Pakistan in which the service is the final benefit in foreign undertakings. In the case of China, its connection with the Pakistan Army guarantees during political unrest, which is congruent with its realistic program of threat operation in unpredictable mate country. The role of the Army as a stabilizing procedure in dealing with Beijing is likely to continue as long as the internal politics of Pakistan continues to be divided and the civil institutions fragile.

#### **4.5 Comparative Interpretation and Theoretical Reflection**

This difference of style of diplomacy between Sharif and Khan thus forms the most obvious difference. The elite-driven, institutional, and technocratic diplomacy of Sharif aimed at reassuring China by contracting and committing them to committees. The populist, performative, and mass oriented character of Khan was aimed at assuring due to the symbolic devotion and verbal unity. The different styles were mirrors of the domestic political identity of the leader, through the polarizing environment of Pakistan. The business technocracy of Sharif was based on his association with economic elites and the populism of Khan was based on the anti-elite rhetoric. Nevertheless, both of them suffered the same structural vices: political instability, civil-military imbalance, and weak governance capacity.<sup>140</sup> Whether or not, these domestic filters consistently compromised the effectiveness of civilian diplomacy, forcing China to have to depend on the military as the final guarantor.

The responses of China in both administrations highlight its pragmatic attitude. The case of Sharif, the Beijing valued institutionalization though hedged against the instability through the strengthening of the relationship with the Army. In the case of the Khan, Beijing embraced performative solidarity, the exposure in times of domestic crises. In both situations the Chinese Foreign Ministry was keen to point out that continuity with Pakistan as a state was maintained rather than personalizing relationships. This was indicative of Beijing and its acknowledgment of

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<sup>126</sup> S. H. Basit, "Terrorizing the CPEC: Managing Transnational Militancy in China-Pakistan Relations," *The Pacific Review* 32, no. 4 (2019): 694-724.

the unstable domestic politics of Pakistan and how it had been protecting bilateral obligations against the changing leadership.

The significance of context is brought out in the comparison as well. The technocratic style was especially successful at the point of launching CPEC when China wanted to get formal agreements and bureaucratic frameworks to institutionalize BRI. The populist approach of Khan, in its turn, came in handy under the circumstances of an increased Sino-American competition, when performative loyalty was the only way of ensuring that Beijing that Pakistan was on their side. Nevertheless, both styles were confined to context: the instability eroded Sharif institutionalism, and the poor governance and deteriorating relations with the Army were the burdens to the symbolism of Khan. Reflectively, a combination of predictability and solidarity by Sharif through institutional means and Khan through emotive ones would have worked better.

#### **4.6 Policy Implications and Lessons for Pakistan**

Theoretically, Rational Actor Model states that both leaders held China as the target: due to structural limitations of Pakistan, the orientation to Beijing was the logical decision (Allison and Zelikow, 2000). Nonetheless, RAM fails to justify the difference in the diplomatic style and the lack of credibility that arose. The neoclassical Realism gives us a better framework by demonstrating the influence of domestic filters leadership identity, political polarization, civil military relations on the shape and performance of diplomacy.<sup>127</sup> The analysis of domestic turmoil described in (Safdar, 2024) as the credibility undermine and the necessity of hedging with the help of the military speaks volumes in this case study. Systemic incentives did not purely control the foreign policy of Pakistan towards China, but the internal weaknesses of the state had a significant influence.<sup>128</sup>

The paradox of continuity and variation can be explained by the comparison of the Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan diplomacy with China. The two leaders made rational attempts to have closer relations with Beijing, but their approaches to diplomacy were different according to their local identities and circumstances. The instability undermined Sharif who institutionalized CPEC through the use of technocratic diplomacy. Khan played the populist game of dramatizing loyalty but could not do much given its poor efforts and poor relations with the Army. China reacted in a

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<sup>127</sup> Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 144–72.

<sup>128</sup> M. T. Safdar, "Domestic Actors and the Limits of Chinese Infrastructure Power: Evidence from Pakistan," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 54, no. 2 (2024): 317–41.

pragmatic way and liked both strategies, but in the end believed in the military. It is a lesson to Pakistan that neither its technocratic contracts, nor its populist solidarity can hold the partnership together on its own. What is required is a kind of hybrid diplomacy, institutional deepening coupled with visible reassurance, internal instability and a reorganization of civil-military relations. This is the only strategy that would help to reap the maximum of the benefits of the iron-clad friendship between Pakistan and China in an era where there are increasing great power rivalry.

## **Conclusion**

Comparative evaluation of the foreign policy that Pakistan has had on China under both Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan was demonstrate that there is continuity in the approach to the systemic imperatives, but that they exhibit different leadership styles as well as domestic mediation. The two leaders sought a closer relationship with Beijing as a logical reaction towards the security weaknesses, financial reliance and the changing world balance of power in Pakistan. Their approaches were however different: Sharif was more technocratic in his institutionalization and economically easier in his ways, whereas the diplomacy of Khan was based on population-style symbolism and on performative reassurance. Although these stylistic differences exist, the same structural reality connected both the administrations, the indispensability of China as the key strategic and economic partner of Pakistan.

The domestic political forces also played a crucial role in the way every government used this relationship. Institutional diplomacy by Sharif was a facade of stability that had since been compromised over and over again by political crises within the nation and civil-military conflicts. The populist activity of Khan created a resonance with the population, but did not have the bureaucratic depth needed to continue implementing a policy. Both instances saw China be pragmatic and strengthened its relationship with the military of Pakistan to protect its long term interests. Such a constant dependence on the Army highlights the institutional inadequacy of the civilian institutions of Pakistan and the lack of credibility in terms of continuity in policies.

The analysis, hence, shows that external pressures determine the limits of the foreign policy of Pakistan, but leadership style and domestic cohesion influence the success of the foreign policy. To enhance its relations with China and maneuver through the great-power politics successfully, Pakistan should develop a mechanism of hybrid diplomacy, i.e., between the institutional predictability and the popular legitimacy. More to the point, it will be necessary to stabilize the civil to military relations and increase the capacity of the government to govern in order to change the iron brotherhood into a strategic perspective to a sustainable and mutually cooperation.

## **Chapter: 05**

### **Conclusion**

Comparative study of the China policies of Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan Points at the twin fact of the foreign policy of Pakistan: policy of strategic continuity rooted in structural needs, and policy of stylistic and tactical fluctuation determined by the identity of the leader and instability in the domestic situation. Sharif and Khan both acknowledged China as the indispensable partner of Pakistan either as an investment partner, source of energy security, or a geopolitical counterbalance. The decision to put Beijing first was logical according to the Rational Actor Model because systemic factors, antagonistic relations with India, and reliance on external funding, and worsening relations with the United States, forced Pakistan to increase dependence on. However, the way this policy was implemented was much different, and it exposed the knowledge of Neoclassical Realism: the leadership approach, politicization, and civil-military dynamics mediated systemic pressures, determining the results and plausibility.

The tenure of Nawaz Sharif was a show of technocratic, institutional approach. His leadership played a crucial role in changing the nature of the Pakistan-China relationship which used to be an abstract friendship which had no developmental substance to it but a developmental one as CPEC was launched. Sharif employed diplomacy that assuaged Beijing by entrenching the notion of cooperation in official institutions like the Joint Cooperation Committee and projected CPEC as a vision that spans the long run. His tactical walking on the edge with the United States was in line with that of China itself which favors the concept of BRI to be more of an inclusive system and not an aggressive one. The domestic instability and tensions between civil and military however countered this policy of Sharif. The postponement of 2014 visit of President Xi by political protests showed the political instability of civilian diplomacy to domestic instability. "By the end of his term, although CPEC had been formally launched, its implementation remained inconsistent, prompting Beijing to increasingly rely on the Pakistan Army as the guarantor of project continuity

The style of diplomacy adopted by Imran Khan was different. His populist leanings were focused solidarity, which most frequently contrasted the faithfulness of China. His rhetoric of loyalty was strengthened by his constant admiration of the Chinese system of governance and his symbolic sign language like visiting the Beijing Winter Olympics in 2022. The administration of Khan decided to end FTA-I in 2019 and recess CPEC in terms of people-centered development. However, Khan's initial skepticism toward existing contracts caused unease in Beijing, and no subsequent interventions were able to override the prevailing governance and security challenges. Moreover, Khan's confrontational stance toward the United States, though domestically popular, constrained

Pakistan's economic flexibility in times of crisis. His eventual discord with the military further undermined his credibility with Chinese authorities, reinforcing the lesson that Beijing prioritizes continuity with the Pakistani state and its institutions, rather than loyalty to individual political leaders

The results indicate that Sharif and Khan were not the same style, technocratic and populist, but the outcome of their structures was not that different, decreased credibility because of instability, and the role of the military as the final guarantor of China. Both leaders logically wanted to have closer relations with Beijing, whereas neither of them could offer the political and institutional stability which China needed to trust it in the long term.

The reaction of China to both the regimes was similar; pragmatic hedging. Beijing was happy to be receiving the contacts of Sharif and the solidarity of Khan without overdependence on any civilian leader. Rather, it invested in its relationship with the military of Pakistan and presented the relationship as continuity on a state level. Such an approach guaranteed the continuation of this trend of China and Pakistan relations regardless of the change of leaders and the political polarization. However, this too showed the price of the domestic instability in Pakistan: civilian regimes could not prove themselves as the only or even the main guarantor.

In theory, this research confirms the effectiveness of the use of a combination of RAM and NcR. The rational actor logic explains why the China policy of Pakistan continued along the different governments: the partnership became systemic because the incentives are needed. However, the difference in the style and the results can be explained by the fact that the neoclassical Realism: Sharif, as a technocratic with an orientation of the elite, and Khan, as a populist with an anti-elite rhetoric, prised systemic incentives into various diplomatic behaviors. Credibility and delivery were influenced by domestic instability and civil-military relations, which were the intervening variables.

The implications of the policy on Pakistan are obvious. To begin with, the continuity of the policy made by Pakistan towards China cannot replace good governance. Chinese confidence can only be maintained by institutional depth, transparency and stability. Second, excessive use of rhetorical solidarity, or symbolic loyalty cannot be used to replace poor implementation. Third, Pakistan needs to reform its civil-military relationship: as long as Beijing believes that the military was the only credibility, its civilian diplomacy will have a narrow range of effect. Finally, Pakistan should not cast its association with China in purely anti-U.S. realms. As strategic alignment with Beijing

is logical, economic diversification needs balanced involvement with numerous partners including the West.

The foreign policies of Pakistan towards China by Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan show the power and weakness of asymmetric partnerships. This is the power of structural continuity: China is the partner that Pakistan cannot do without. The weakness here is domestic mediation: the instability, polarization, and the imbalance between civilian and military power constantly take the credibility of civilian diplomacy. To evolve, Pakistan needs to create a hybrid model of diplomacy between Sharif and Khan in terms of both the institutional depth and emotive solidarity, but less polarization of politics and greater governance. It is only in such a strategy that Pakistan can reap maximum out of its iron-clad friendship with China and overcome the challenges of escalating great-power rivalry in the 21st century.

## **5.1 Policy Recommendations:**

### **1. Institutionalization of Strategic Planning Mechanisms**

To assure continuity of policy, there is a need to promote permanent and cross-party strategic planning institutions with multi-election-cycle durations. The 10-year strategic framework on relations between Pakistan and China should be established and reviewed periodically by a national foreign policy council which should include representatives of political parties, military, bureaucracy as well as academia. This kind of institutionalization would result in increased coherence, reduce policy reversals and credibility on the part of the states in the international arena.

### **2. Consistency in Policy Formulation and Implementation**

The long-term strategic strategy requires a stable and apolitical approach to foreign policy. The current and future governments need to continue some of the initiatives that have been launched like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and institutionalize them in institutional rather than political systems. Such uniformity helps in not just reassuring the foreign partners, but also maximizing the efficiency of domestic policy and the benefits of investment.

### **3. Balanced and Transparent Civil–Military Relations**

A positive and open civil-military relationship is the key to successful foreign policy implementation, especially in major alliances such as with China. This can be avoided by institutional transparency, where civic leadership offers strategic guidance and the military

the implementation. This balance plays a very critical role in promoting democratic accountability and strategic stability.

#### **4. Economic Diversification and Strategic Autonomy**

Pakistan needs to diversify its economic partnerships beyond traditional alignments to mitigate the vulnerabilities associated with overdependence on a single power. Expanding trade, investment, and technological cooperation with regional and global partners—particularly in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia—would strengthen Pakistan’s strategic autonomy and bolster its economic stability in the context of contemporary great-power competition.

#### **5. Balanced Engagement between the United States and China**

Pakistan must adopt a nuanced and balanced approach that safeguards its national interests in an evolving global order marked by rising U.S.-China tensions, while avoiding entanglement in bloc politics. A positive relationship between the two powers through infrastructure and energy development on the one hand and collaboration with the United States in trading, education and counterterrorism on the other would enhance the strategic flexibility and global position of Pakistan.

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