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Security Nexus Perspectives

STRATEGIC COMPETITION: WHY PAKISTAN MATTERS

By Saira Yamin, Ph.D.*

[“In a world of growing complexity, the most connected states are the most powerful.”](#) Joseph Samuel Nye Jr.

As U.S.-China strategic competition intensifies, staying ahead of the game requires strengthening existing relationships in the Indo-Pacific while also creating new ones. At the same time, the U.S. must make every effort to renew and rebuild relationships which may be withering. Pakistan falls in this category. Assessing the U.S. strategic response to China’s rising power, the [Center for a New American Security](#) notes that the “outcome of this contest between the two will likely be determined by the strength and scope of their alliances in the region.” In the same vein, a [Washington Post](#) opinion piece on the rise of China suggests that the strategic challenge faced by the U.S. “will require both cooperation within the community of free nations and — whenever possible — working with not-yet-free countries that face the same threat.” Remaining adaptive and responsive to changing conditions in the Indo-Pacific region will, therefore, be of the essence. Enhancing and increasing the scope of U.S. global influence through greater reliance on [soft power](#), thereby widening the means through which the U.S. engages with other nations, will be fundamental to such an approach.

It is worth noting that Pakistan remains vitally important to U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific, not least because of its [all-weather strategic cooperative partnership](#) with China who regards it as an [“element of its strategic competition with the United States and India.”](#) The current state of U.S.-Pakistan relations is symptomatic of an increasing ambiguity that is counterproductive to advancing U.S. interests. To state the obvious, the more the U.S. distances itself from Pakistan, a country not very long ago considered a [“key U.S. ally in the region,”](#) the more expedient it will be for China to pursue its global economic, political and military aspirations.

China and Pakistan: An All-Weather Friendship

The China-Pakistan relationship is often poeticized by Pakistani elites, [who describe it as higher than the peaks of Himalayas, deeper than the depths of the Arabian sea, sweeter than honey and stronger than steel.](#) The Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has referred to the relationship as [“close as lips and teeth,”](#) while

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Strategic Competition: Why Pakistan Matters

President Xi Jinping has described it as “[unbreakable and rock-solid.](#)” The [Iron Brotherhood](#) is premised upon a long history of diplomatic, defense, and economic ties. Pakistan was amongst the first countries to recognize the People’s Republic of China, diplomatic relations were established in 1951, and the two forged a close relationship despite Beijing’s prolonged international isolation in the 1960s through the early 1970s. Their close geographic linkages were bolstered by the construction of the 800 mile-long Karakorum Highway (KKH), also known as the Pakistan China Friendship Highway or National Highway 35.¹ KKH is believed to be the highest paved road in the world -- taking nearly [two decades](#) (1959-1978) to construct. It links China’s Kashgar in the western Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang, with Hasan Abdal, a town within a stone’s throw from Islamabad, providing a conduit for multi-dimensional cooperation and reinforcing their long-standing association.



China Xinjiang Karakorum Highway Kashgar to Tashkurgan. August 8, 2007.

Source: [Wikimedia Commons.](#)



Karakorum Highway, Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan. October 11, 2015

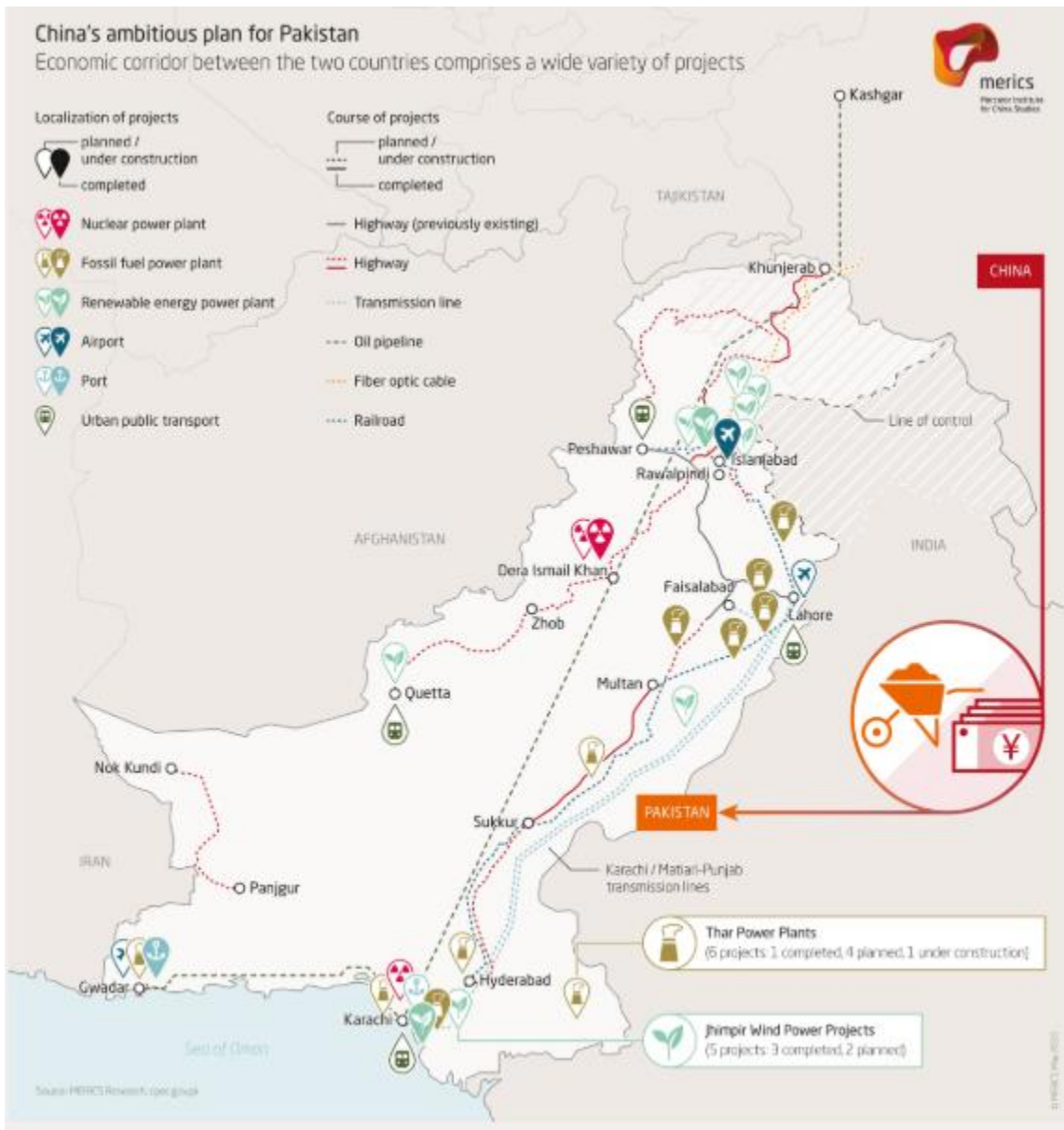
Source: www.123rf.com. [Photo by Suloletta](#).



Karakorum Highway in northern Pakistan. August 2019.
Source: www.123rf.com. [Photo by Lukas Bischoff](#).

Strategic Competition: Why Pakistan Matters

The land linkages between the two countries represent amongst the most important elements of the relationship. Under President Xi Jinping's self-proclaimed "[project of the century](#)," the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), significant Chinese investments to extend and revamp the KKH are underway, an effort often viewed as reviving the ancient Silk Road -- opening up many opportunities for regional integration and global connectivity. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the framework for the KKH overhaul, is [a flagship of China's Belt and Road Initiative](#) (BRI), and one of its "[most ambitious and expensive components](#)." It encompasses a series of mainly Chinese financed network of highways, railroads, pipelines, power plants and industrial parks believed to hold transformative potential for Pakistan's socio-economic and development landscape. Launched in 2015, the fifteen-year plan is projected to cost up to [\\$68 billion](#).



Plans for the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

Source: [Merics.org](https://www.merics.org), May 20, 2020.

Strategic Competition: Why Pakistan Matters

Pakistan's Gwadar Port, a cornerstone of the CPEC and [gateway city](#), is a deep seaport situated on the Arabian Sea. It has been dubbed [the second great monument of Pakistan-China friendship after the Karakorum Highway](#). Along with wide-ranging growth and infrastructural development for Pakistan, CPEC links China's landlocked and remote Xinjiang province with Gwadar port. It is only [240 miles from the Strait of Hormuz](#), a key oil shipping route, and is being built in phases with [heavy Chinese investment](#). According to the [U.S. Energy Information Administration](#), the Strait of Hormuz, located between Oman and Iran, "is the world's most important oil chokepoint because of the large volumes of oil that flow through the strait." China's largest supplies of crude oil and natural gas come from the Middle East and are currently transported through this route by sea. Eventually, [it will be more economical for China to transport them from Gwadar to Western China](#), offering the [shortest path to the Middle East through the Arabian Sea](#). Additionally, Gwadar port promises China a significantly [shorter trade route to Europe and Africa and most of the Western hemisphere](#). In the long-term, [it is expected to become the economic gateway between China, the Middle East, and Africa](#).



Gwadar Port proximity to the Strait of Hormuz. June 30, 2020. Source: [Google Maps](#).

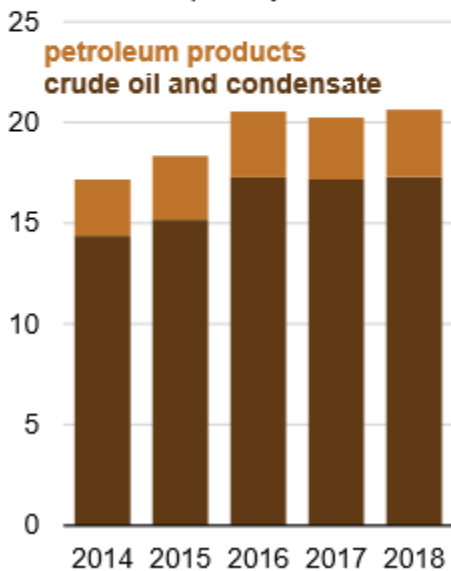
The Chinese Overseas Port Holdings Company (COPHC), a state-owned firm responsible for Gwadar Port's development, was granted its operational control in [2017 for 40 years](#) under a lease agreement. Control of the port is a testament to the success of Chinese soft power in acquiring access to the Indian Ocean while diversifying and securing its crude oil imports and getting the largest pieces of the economic pie. According to a Pakistani Minister, the COPHC "[has 91 percent share of revenue collection from gross revenue of terminal and marine operations and 85 per cent share from gross revenue of free zone operation](#)". In underscoring China's strategic advantage, Gwadar port gives it "[unremitting access](#)" to the Arabian Sea for energy imports through a much shorter and quicker road and rail corridor. It also provides the Chinese Navy the capability to monitor trade and oil routes, and land access for other activities in the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf.

JUNE 20, 2019

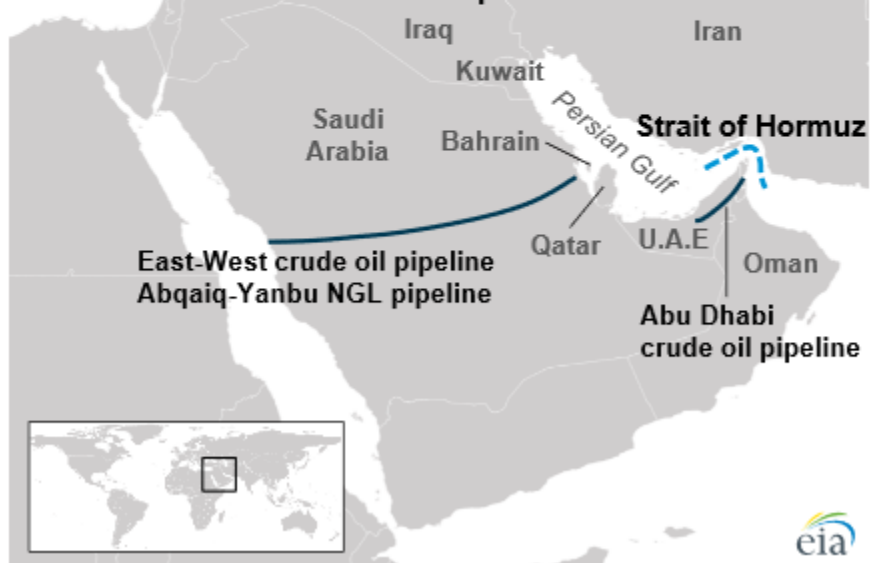
The Strait of Hormuz is the world's most important oil transit chokepoint

Crude oil, condensate, and petroleum products transported through the Strait of Hormuz

million barrels per day



Strait of Hormuz maritime chokepoint



Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration and ClipperData, Inc.

The Strait of Hormuz, the world's most important oil chokepoint. June 20, 2019.

Source: [U.S. Energy Information Administration and ClipperData, Inc.](#)

Sino-India Strategic Competition

[Gurmeet Kanwal](#) and other [Indian analysts](#) have argued that Chinese maritime ambitions draw on Alfred Mahan's sea power thesis postulating that, "whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia." Viewed from this lens, Gwadar port is considered a vital strategic asset in China's notional [String of Pearls strategy](#), the perceived encirclement of India through the expansion of Chinese commercial and military footprints in the Indian Ocean including in the Strait of Malacca, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Maldives, Myanmar, the Strait

of Hormuz, Somalia, Djibouti, and elsewhere. Gwadar's importance to China, as an [alternative to dependence on the Straits of Malacca](#), frequently patrolled by the United States and India, and the South China sea lines of communication is therefore significant. Its proximity to the Hormuz strait has also raised [Indian concerns](#) that in the long run, it may be used to accommodate naval warships and submarines and as a center for replenishing and maintaining weapons. That Gwadar may already be serving as a Chinese Naval base has also been a subject of much [speculation](#).



China's String of Pearls and Maritime Silk Road. December 23, 2017.

Source: [Strategic Front Research Foundation](#)

To counter China's increasing dominance in the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf, India has ramped up naval cooperation with Iran by [helping to develop Chahbahar port](#). The port is located in southeastern Iran, off the Gulf of Oman, [barely 50 miles away](#) from Gwadar port. The initiative is believed to be an aspect of India's response to perceived encirclement by China, through what has come to be known as India's Necklace of Diamonds strategy. The strategy pursues "[renewed engagement with Indian Ocean littoral countries](#)," including in Myanmar, Indonesia, Singapore, Seychelles, Oman, and Vietnam, among others. While India's economic interests in Chahbahar are evident in the trade links it opens up through Iran to Afghanistan and Central Asia; however, Indo-Iran naval cooperation within such proximity to Gwadar, renders the security environment in the region particularly perilous. India and Pakistan are nuclear archrivals and have been to war three times. [Tensions between the two countries have escalated](#) in recent years. China, too, is deeply entrenched in this complex regional security dilemma and views Pakistan as a counterweight against India's growing military footprint in the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea.

In the meantime, rapidly increasing U.S.-India defense cooperation is exacerbating Islamabad's perception of threat from its eastern neighbor and pushing a "[staunch American ally](#)" closer to China. [Inevitably, U.S.-India nuclear cooperation triggers nuclear cooperation between China and Pakistan](#), while also fueling the aggressive nuclear arms race in South Asia. Pakistan's increasing tilt toward China is partly driven by hardline strategic messaging on the part of the U.S. Predictably, this will further alienate Pakistan from the U.S. while helping China win enduring cooperation from its South Asian ally. The U.S., while preserving and nurturing its close ties with India, must be able to balance its relations between the two South Asian adversaries. To quote Daniel F. Runde, Senior Vice President and William A. Schreyer Chair at CSIS, the "[U.S. needs to build a relationship with Pakistan on a stand-alone basis, not a derivative of our relationship with some other country.](#)" It is sound advice and calls for a re-assessment of U.S. Pakistan bilateral ties. The primary irritants in the relationship need to be viewed from a pragmatic lens, one which recognizes that all states work in their national interests.

U.S.- Pakistan relations

While U.S.-Pakistan relations have seen an ebb and flow over the years, Pakistan's importance as a time-tested ally since its inception in 1947 should neither be underestimated nor forgotten. Pakistan was an active member of Cold War alliances in the 1950s and 1960s, including SEATO (South East Asia Treaty Organization) and CENTO (Central Treaty Organization). Its support to the U.S. as a proxy during the Cold War was instrumental in hastening the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the decade between 1979-1989, Pakistan provided training grounds for the Mujahideen (Afghan guerillas), serving as the conduit for nearly [2000 U.S.- made antiaircraft Stinger missiles](#), and helping the CIA funnel almost [\\$3 billion in covert aid](#) to Afghan resistance groups through its spy agency, the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) under the [largest U.S. covert aid program](#) since the Vietnam war. Pakistan also took in more than [4 million Afghan refugees during this period and remains host to more than 2.5 million today](#) primarily as a result of Great Power Competition and, subsequently, the War on Terrorism.

Developments in the wake of 9/11 have tested U.S-Pakistan relations on many levels. While Pakistan was designated a Major Non-NATO Ally for its frontline role in the War on Terror, it has generally been viewed as playing a duplicitous game in Afghanistan. In response, Pakistan has drawn attention to its [security challenges, responses, and sacrifices](#) amounting to [75,000 casualties and over \\$123 billion in economic losses](#), a consequence of the U-turn on its alliance with the Taliban who had been at the helm of affairs in post-Cold War Afghanistan. Pakistan's position is indeed fraught with complexities – on the one hand, it is scapegoated for supporting Afghan insurgents, and on the other, it has been destabilized by the fallout of the protracted violence next door, including amongst [the highest rates of terrorism](#) in the world, a [ranking attributable to the post 9/11 context](#). To be sure, peace and stability in Pakistan depend on a peaceful environment in Afghanistan. While Pakistan continues to be blamed for maintaining ties with Afghan Taliban groups, the U.S. recognizes that engagement is critical and necessary for a political solution, recently itself having signed a fragile [peace deal](#) with some of them. There are many intricate layers to the Afghan conundrum - both Washington and Islamabad can ill-afford to alienate these powerful non-state actors. They were political entities in Afghanistan prior to the War on Terrorism and still wield immense influence. In working toward an enduring political solution for Afghanistan, these ground realities cannot be overlooked. It must also be emphasized that in recent months, Pakistan has taken concrete steps to address related international concerns, including India's, through the conviction of a number of non-state actors charged with [orchestrating terrorist attacks and terror financing](#). These positive developments need to be acknowledged and encouraged by Washington.

The U.S. must also bear in mind that while China-Pakistan relations are strong, all that glitters is not gold in their cooperation on CPEC. Pakistani public opinion shows signs of increasing [skepticism about the lack of transparency](#) of CPEC projects, about the concessions being granted to Chinese firms at the expense

of domestic industries, and employment of Chinese labor at the expense of local jobs. The Pakistan Planning Commission, the government's top planning department, has also raised objections about disparities in salary structures where Chinese labor in some cases are receiving [1300%](#) higher remuneration than local labor.

Finally, in assessing Pakistan's unique value as a U.S. ally, its role in a watershed moment in history as the [key intermediary between the U.S. and China](#) in the 1970s should also be highlighted. Pakistan's assistance with Sino-U.S. rapprochement helped to further U.S. interests in undermining the Soviet Union's Communist alliances in Asia and isolating North Vietnam. Once part of the anti-Russia camp, the increasing vacuum in the U.S. Pakistan relationship in recent years has also created the space for [Pakistan and Russia military cooperation](#), a new beginning, and an indicator of shifting alliances, under a new international order. It is high time for a renewal of U.S. Pakistan relations. A meaningful reset would entail, beginning with a genuine effort to understand each other and to narrow the deep-seated trust deficit. This would involve helping Pakistan have ["a more comprehensive vision of its own role in the world."](#) Empowering Pakistan to help the U.S. accomplish its own goals would follow next.

Global leadership: Will China supplant the United States?

Carnegie -Tsinghua Center for Global Policy recommends a ["Smarter U.S. Policy"](#) on Pakistan, one that is cognizant of China's impact on regional stability. Such a policy would be less ["heavy-handed"](#) and more in tune with ["political and diplomatic exigencies facing Pakistan's civilian and military leaders."](#) Building on this, a smarter U.S. policy would also embrace an understanding of the U.S. impact on regional stability, through a reaffirmation of its neutrality and integrity as a Great Power. In order to stay ahead of and above China, and in exercising its [soft power](#), the U.S. should seek opportunities to play the role of an arbiter of enduring peace in the region. On a [number of occasions in the past](#), the U.S. has been instrumental in helping to defuse tensions between India and Pakistan and could potentially influence both countries to settle their unresolved core disputes, including [Kashmir](#), which will remain a nuclear flashpoint until such time. Relations between the two have been [steadily deteriorating](#), and the [danger of war is clear and present](#). A conciliatory role would demonstrate in unequivocal terms that U.S. commitment to regional peace and stability is consistent and unwavering. Conflict dynamics between the nuclear protagonists in South Asia, further complicated by the [China factor](#), call for diplomatic acumen and strategic insight, a role befitting Washington, and an opportunity to model global leadership. Importantly, it will be an opportunity to signal that unlike China, the U.S. is positioned as a problem-solver. Moving forward, the U.S. would be well-advised to deploy and multiply its soft power in the Indo-Pacific, crafting a narrative highlighting its commitment to building resilient states and advancing regional stability. Undergirding these efforts would be a focus on international cooperation, human rights, democracy, and the rule of law - promoting a vision for a world order shaped by American norms and values.

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