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The Role of Pakistan-China People-to-People Relations
in Consolidating 'all Weather Friendship

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Executive Summary

People have taken the central stage in the practice of modern-day diplomacy. Along with political, economic and defence relations, diplomacy is now equally focused on culture, relations supporting People-to-People exchanges. Such exchanges are instrumental in nation-branding and improve the soft power of the respective countries. As a consequence, city diplomacy, gastro diplomacy, sports diplomacy, digital diplomacy, spiritual diplomacy has gained recognition in the contemporary discourse and practice of diplomacy. Pakistan-China relations must also be viewed in the context of growing focus on the people-centric approach in bilateral relations. The political leadership from both countries has repeatedly emphasized the importance of people in bilateral relations. As a result, a remarkable surge in the P-to-P exchanges has been observed in Pakistan-China relations for the past two decades. Keeping in view the evolution of Pakistan-China relations from an 'All-Weather Friendship' to an 'All Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership,' this study analyses the historical development, the present state of relations and the future trajectory of bilateral ties especially focusing on P-to-P bilateral relations.

Pakistan-China P-to-P Relations: Historical Significance

The history of relations between China and modern-day Pakistan dates back thousands of years, facilitated by trade, religion, culture, and artistic influences. The documented historical ties date back to the ancient 'Silk Route', which served as one of the essential corridors between China and Persia, and beyond West Asia connected through the Indus land.¹ Established during the Han dynasty around 200 BCE, the route serves as a potent reminder of connections that extend beyond economics to all aspects of civilizational exchange. Chinese master monks in the Eastern Jin Dynasty, such as Faxian (402 CE) and XuanZang, the great Monk in the Tang Dynasty, visited Gandhara (present-day Taxila, Swat, and Peshawar) between 629 and 645 CE to collect Buddhist texts.² They were among the early pilgrims, serving as goodwill ambassadors along the 'Silk Route'. The present-day Karakoram Highway, also known as the 'New Silk Route,' is not merely an economic connector, but also a route of knowledge, cultural, and spiritual diffusion with historical precedents.³

With the founding of modern states, Pakistan in 1947 and the People's Republic of China in 1949, these interactions—historical and informal—led to the establishment of official diplomatic relations on May 21, 1951. Later, Pakistani and Chinese leaders agreed during the Bandung Conference in 1955 to further

¹ Andrew Sherratt, "Envisioning Global Change: A Long-Term Perspective," in *A World System History: The Social Science of Long-Term Change*, ed. Robert Allen Denemark (London: Routledge, 2000), 125.

² Keeneth Pletcher, *Explorers of Antiquity: From Alexander the Great to Marco Polo*, (New York: Britannica Educational Publishers, 2013), 68.

³ Faiza Mazhar, "Geographical Development in the Context of History and Future Perspectives of 'New Silk Route'" in *Silk Route Footprints: Transnational Transmission of Sacred Thoughts and Historical Legacies*, ed. David W. Kims (Vernon Press: Wilmington, 2025), 168.

develop their relationship. The first historic visit by the Pakistani leadership to China was made by Prime Minister Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy in October 1956, followed by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai's visit to Pakistan in December of the same year.⁴ These visits laid the groundwork for a strong relationship between the two countries, which further expanded into broader cultural and P-to-P connections. China and Pakistan signed their first trade agreement in January 1963, followed by the first significant cultural exchange agreement, "Executive Agreement on Cultural Exchange" signed on March 26, 1965. This agreement laid the foundation for bilateral exchanges across education, arts, mass media, television, film, and other areas of P-to-P relations.⁵

In the following years, bilateral cultural exchanges among high officials continued from 1983 to 1999 to promote and strengthen cultural ties.⁶ Pakistan and China continued developing the groundwork for expanding their P-to-P relations. In 2015, during the 65th anniversary of their bilateral ties, a "Year of Friendly Exchanges" was declared.⁷ Arguably, the most profound impact on Pakistan-China relations was the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), signed during President Xi Jinping's historic visit to Pakistan in April 2015. It has elevated the friendship to a new level by declaring the relationship as an 'all-weather cooperative strategic partnership' in his address to the Pakistani parliament.⁸ Since the signing of the CPEC, both states have enhanced bilateral exchanges in economic, cultural and P-to-P levels.

The language of Friendship

It is essential to understand the gradual development of Pakistan-China relations through the language of friendship. The Bandung Conference laid the foundation for Pakistan-China friendship, as echoed in the slogan 'Pak-Cheeni Bhai Bhai'. One could recall the famous song released by Radio Pakistan in 1972, "Pak-Cheen Dosti Wang Woye Wang Woye" or "Pak-Cheen Dosti Zindabad, Zindabaad" written by Jamil-ud-Din Aali.⁹ Fast forward to the 70th anniversary of Pakistan-China diplomatic relations, Pakistani singer Ali Zafar and Chinese singer Xiang Minqi performed the song 'You have Stolen my Heart' to celebrate and showcase the strong bond and love between the two nations. In Confucian philosophy, the bond of friendship is essential for maintaining social harmony. In the Chinese

⁴ Hasan A. Kakar, "Non-Fiction: How We Became Friends," *Dawn*, June 25, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1341523>.

⁵ *Pakistan Times*, March 27, 1965

⁶ "Survey on Pakistan-China Cultural Exchanges and Cooperation," *Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Pakistan*, January 17, 2005, https://pk.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zbgs/cultureservice/200501/t20050117_1270166.htm.

⁷ "Pakistan and China – 65 Years Diplomatic Relations," *Pakistan Embassy Beijing*, <https://www.pakbj.org/bilateralrelations/11.htm>.

⁸ "Joint Statement between the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the People's Republic of China on Establishing All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership," *MOFA, Government of Pakistan*, April 20, 2015. <https://mofa.gov.pk/joint-statement-between-the-islamic-republic-of-pakistan-and-the-peoples-republic-of-china-on-establishing-the-all-weather-strategic-cooperative-partnership>.

⁹ "Pak-Cheen Dosti Zindabad," *Pak Patriotic Library*, August 09, 2012, <https://pakpatrioticlibrary.blogspot.com/2012/08/pak-cheen-dosti-zindabad-pak-china.html>.

philosophy, friendship is one among the essential human values, which shows integrity, loyalty and the significance of common purpose.¹⁰ The cardinal human value is well reflected in Pakistan-China friendship, which has stood all the weathers, internal and external changes and turbulent times.

Pakistan-China friendship is embedded in the proverbs such as the 'all-weather', 'deeper than the deepest sea,' 'higher than the Himalaya,' 'time tested' and 'Iron Brothers'. This language shows a reciprocity and commitment towards each other, irrespective of changing national or international environment.¹¹ As the decades have passed these sentiments have become more profound. The political and military ties have become more structures especially with the signing of Pakistan-China Economic Corridor in 2015 and depend with the expanding cultural, educational, and other forms of P-to-P relations. The signing of the Pakistan- China 'Joint Action Plan 2025-2029' is a testimony to the enduring friendship.

Pakistan-China P-to-P Relations in the 'Joint Action Plan 2025-29'

Pakistan-China relations are widely regarded as unique, perhaps the only bilateral relationship of its own kind. With the unveiling of the Pakistan-China 'Joint Action Plan 2025-2029', this friendship has entered a new phase, one of a community for a shared future.¹² This plan aligns with President Xi Jinping's Global Civilization initiative, which aims to foster harmony and cultural coexistence. A key component of the Action Plan is to strengthen P-to-P ties between the two countries across various sectors, including education, vocational training, language, culture, tourism, media, and sports.¹³ The plans also include expanding collaboration on training and scientific research within the CPEC consortium of the University Union, China, to support youth development initiatives related to the BRI. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of deepening cultural and tourism ties through fairs and festivals, as well as promoting cooperation between media outlets and think tanks to organize events.¹⁴

The Action Plan emphasizes translating and publishing important historical texts in various languages to deepen understanding of history and literature, while also supporting the film and television industry.

¹⁰ Claus Emmeche, *Semiotics of Friendship: an Encyclopaedic Approach*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2025) 89.

¹¹ Li Qingyan "China-Pakistan Iron Brotherhood 70 Years: Hand in Hand," *China Institute of International Studies*, September 08, 2025, https://www.ciis.org.cn/english/COMMENTARIES/202109/t20210908_8122.html

¹² "China, Pakistan Issue Action Plan to Foster Closer Community with Shared Future," *CGTN*, September 04, 2025, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2025-09-04/China-Pakistan-issue-action-plan-to-foster-closer-ties-1Goyk4mR4Fa/p.html>.

¹³ "Action Plan to Foster an Even Closer China-Pakistan Community with a Shared Future in the New ERA between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2025-2029)" *Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives*, 17. accessed on October 10, 2025. <https://cpec.gov.pk/>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Likewise, sports are seen as a key area of cooperation, expanded through athlete and coach exchanges, as well as joint participation in international events. The plan also includes joint projects to preserve cultural heritage and build sister-city and subnational relationships.¹⁵

The next part of this essay will explore various aspects of Pakistan-China P-to-P relations.

a. Culture in Pakistan-China P-to-P Relations

Cultural relations are vital in Pakistan-China friendship. Leaders from both countries have consistently stressed the importance of strengthening cultural ties since establishing diplomatic relations. For China, cultural diplomacy is key to enhancing Chinese soft power, promoting the exchange of ideas through art, language, literature, heritage, and other tangible and intangible expressions. China strongly advocates for 'Cultural Soft Power,' as highlighted by President Xi Jinping during the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China.¹⁶ In his address to the Pakistani Parliament in 2015, President Xi emphasized that *"Our two countries share similar cultural traditions and values. We should enhance our exchanges to build lasting friendships. This year is the Year of China-Pakistan Friendly Exchanges. We should use the platforms of sister cities, cultural centers and media organizations to conduct diverse and colorful events of celebration."*¹⁷ During his 2025 address to the Second Golden Panda Awards International Culture Forum in Chengdu, President of Pakistan, Mr. Asif Zardari, highlighted the need *"to expand cultural exchanges, strengthen creative industries, and promote understanding and a culture of tolerance. Culture remains a vital bridge to peace, prosperity, and a shared future for humanity."*¹⁸ China's commitment to 'Peaceful Development,' peaceful coexistence, and building a win-win relationship based on mutual benefits¹⁹ in the neighbourhood has been reciprocated by Pakistan. Notable are the contribution of the respective Chinese people in Pakistan and Pakistani community in China and the Chinese cultural centers in Pakistan and Pakistani cultural centers playing a huge role in enhancing P-to-P relations. Moreover, private schools and Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in Pakistan have played a crucial role in promoting Chinese language learning by establishing Chinese language classrooms.

b. Education in Pakistan-China P-to-P Relations

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ "China's Cultural Diplomacy," *Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in Lahore*, December 14, 2022, https://lahore.china-consulate.gov.cn/eng/zbqx/202408/t20240813_11471745.htm

¹⁷ "Full Text of President Xi Jinping's Speech to the Parliament in Pakistan," *ISSI*, April 21, 2015, https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Pak-China_Year_of_Friendly_Exchange_Doc-1.docx.pdf.

¹⁸ "President Zardari Highlights Role of Culture in Strengthening Pakistan-China Friendship," *The President of Pakistan*, September 13, 2025, <https://president.gov.pk/president-zardari-highlights-role-of-culture-in-strengthening-pakistan-china-friendship-2>.

¹⁹ Bilal Zubair, *Chinese Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in the United States* (Singapore: Palgrave MacMillan, 2023), 67.

Arguably, education is most impactful in fostering P-to-P exchanges and cultivating long-term relationships. Education provides a direct connection with people, culture, values, and society. Educational exchanges between Pakistan and China have transformed these ties into an unbreakable bond. Although students from Pakistan and China have been studying in each other's countries since the 1970s, the initial MoU on Scientific and Cultural Exchange in 1976, followed by the MoU on Educational Exchanges in 1983, laid the foundation for future educational collaboration.²⁰

Since 2003, the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan has been sending students to China for higher education. Each year, thousands of Pakistani students travel to China for undergraduate and graduate studies. In 2024, 26,000 Pakistani students studied in China and Pakistani students rank third among foreign students in China. Most of these students are enrolled in medical sciences, engineering, information technology, Chinese language, and vocational training.

Alongside educational exchanges, the establishment of Sister University partnerships provided a significant impetus for joint research and technical collaborations across various fields. The University of Sargodha (Pakistan) and Nakai University (China), as well as the University of Sahiwal (Pakistan) and Jiangxi University of Science and Technology (China), are among the many such collaborations. Additionally, many Pakistani and Chinese universities are part of the CPEC Consortium of Universities. Regarding P-to-P relations, such collaborations, joint research projects, faculty exchanges, and the sharing of best academic practices promote knowledge exchange and encourage open communication. Despite cultural differences, Pakistani students have adapted well to life in China. Through these educational exchanges, students have shared heartfelt stories about hospitality, safety, and rich cultural experiences. Another aspect involves adapting to Chinese cuisine and developing a taste for its delicacies, providing a unique culinary experience. More importantly, the intercultural exchange has led to meaningful personal growth, fostering a deeper understanding of the Chinese people and a change in perspective.²¹

Likewise, Chinese students in Pakistan have shared a sense of cultural awakening about how little they know about the country. They also talked about the strong bonds and lifelong friendships they've developed with their Pakistani friends.²² Chinese students studying Urdu have developed a strong affection for the language. Among their experiences, they highlight how their stay, research, and studies were crucial in fostering cultural exchange and connecting with Pakistan's historic Buddhist roots. These exchanges are not only academic but also serve as narratives that foster better communication and a deeper understanding between us. Academic bridges between Pakistan and China are crucial for

²⁰ Zamir Ahmed Awan, "Pakistan-China: a journey of Friendship (1950-2020)," *Global Times*, April 21, 2025, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1189007.shtml>.

²² Sana Jamal, "Fanfare as Chinese Students Graduate from Pakistan" *Gulf News*, May 04, 2019, <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/pakistan/fanfare-as-chinese-students-graduate-in-pakistan-1.63739400>.

fostering mutual understanding, respect, and friendships, as well as promoting cultural, economic, and scientific ties.

c. Role of Language Training in P-to-P Relations

Language is arguably the most crucial tool for understanding culture and its people. Regarding Pakistan-China P-to-P relations, language training has remained a primary focus. Chinese language training through the Confucius Institutes plays a significant role. With the increasing number of Chinese nationals working and visiting Pakistan, learning Urdu remains as crucial as learning Chinese. Presently, there are 24 Urdu language Centres and departments in major Chinese Universities.²³ Alongside, many Chinese students are enrolled in Urdu language studies in Pakistan. Tremendous growth in bilateral exchanges has encouraged Chinese nationals to enrol in Urdu classes. On the other hand, 94 Chinese language centres, including five Confucius Institutes (CI), play a crucial role in teaching Chinese to Pakistani students, professionals, and the business community.

During the international conference titled “China-Pakistan Community with a Shared Future” organized by the Centre for International Peace and Stability (CIPS) at the National University of Science and Technology (NUST), visiting Chinese scholars pointed out that the lack of interest in learning Chinese is a significant obstacle for Pakistani students in understanding Chinese culture.²⁴ This highlights the importance of language as a cultural bridge between nations and emphasizes the significance of learning Chinese, given its increasing global importance often emphasized by the leadership of both countries.

d. Religious and Heritage Tourism in P-to-P relations

Pakistan and China designated the year 2023 as the year of Tourism. Given the China-Pakistan historical spiritual linkages, the significance of archaeological Buddhist, Gandhara and Mahargarh sites in Pakistan and mosques and tombs in China, spiritual tourism offers great potential of P-to-P exchanges. Its northern mountain ranges boast a breathtaking landscape with eight peaks over 8,000 meters across the Karakoram, Himalayas, and Hindu Kush. China’s popular tourist destinations include Xi'an, Chengdu, Guilin, and Sichuan.

Religious tourism offers a significant opportunity for enhancing people-to-people contact between China and Pakistan. While diplomatic relations between the two countries are strong, cultural and spiritual ties have not yet been fully realized. Religious tourism could strengthen bilateral partnerships and help Pakistan benefit from the rapidly growing global outbound travel economy. Despite Pakistan's

²³ “Pakistan Study Centers,” *Pakistan Embassy, Beijing*, <https://www.pakbj.org/pakistanstudycentresleft/index.htm> accessed October 13, 2025.

²⁴ “China-Pakistan Community with a Shared Future,” *Center for International Peace and Stability*, October 08, 2025,

wealth of cultural and religious heritage sites, religious tourism accounted for only \$0.9 million²⁵ of travel exports in 2022, just 1% of the total. This low figure stands in contrast to the global religious tourism market, which reached \$15.1 billion in 2023, up 10.2% from the previous year.²⁶

The history of both nations manifests the cultural assimilation and deep spiritual connections between them. The Gandhara civilization serves as a cradle of these cultural affinities and most of its sites such as Sahr-i-Bahlol, Taxila and Takht-i-Bahi are also recognized by UNESCO. Pakistan has yet to fully realize the Buddhist tourism potential of its 2,000 attractions.²⁷ According to a Gallup survey, of the 58 million global Buddhist tourists, 2.9 million identified Pakistan as their desired destination. Pakistan can generate around 30,000 jobs and \$62.9 million in revenue, equivalent to Rs. 16 billion, for the GDP, by focusing solely on this tapped sector.²⁸

Similarly, China hosts a significant number of Muslim cultural sites that could be potential destinations for Pakistani travellers. Ningxia province is not only a home to one-third of the Muslim population but also hosts more than 4,000 mosques with underlying historical significance.²⁹ Beijing's Niujie mosque is one of the oldest and iconic Islamic sites in East Asia. Similarly, China holds 60³⁰ UNESCO-recognized World Heritage sites make it a significant tourist attraction for travellers. With favourable trends, as Islam is the fastest-growing segment in the Chinese tourism market, accounting for nearly \$13.8 billion in just 2024 and predicted to rise to \$35 billion by 2030, Pakistan can enhance people-to-people contact by encouraging a large number of outbound travellers to China.³¹

By strengthening tourism ties with China, Pakistan can revitalize its underdeveloped spiritual tourism sector and increase people-to-people contact. Although this sector currently contributes less than 1% to the travel economy, it accounts for 2.8% of Pakistan's GDP.³² The connectivity projects like the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) can help in document and connect religious tourist sites. The

²⁵ "Promoting International Religious Tourism to Pakistan | Pakistan Business Council," *Pakistan Business Council* (Pakistan Business Council, 2022), <https://www.pbc.org.pk/research/promoting-international-religious-tourism-to-pakistan/>.

²⁶ "Promoting International Religious Tourism to Pakistan | Pakistan Business Council," *Pakistan Business Council*, 2022, <https://www.pbc.org.pk/research/promoting-international-religious-tourism-to-pakistan/>.

²⁷ Hadia Ibrar, "Religious Tourism and Its Potential in Pakistan," *Issra.pk* (ISSRA, 2024), <https://issra.pk/pub/insight/2024/Religious-Tourism-and-Its-Potential-in-Pakistan/Religious-Tourism-and-Its-Potential-in-Pakistan.html>.

²⁸ Tahir Saeed, Arshad Ullah, and Asad Ullah, "Religious Cultural Tourism in Pakistan: Significance, Opportunities and Its Role in the Socio-Economic Development," *Journal of Cultural and Religious Studies* 13, no. 05 (May 2025): 258, <https://doi.org/10.17265/2328-2177/2025.05.005>.

²⁹ Hadia Ibrar, "Religious Tourism and Its Potential in Pakistan," *ISSRA*, (2024), <https://issra.pk/pub/insight/2024/Religious-Tourism-and-Its-Potential-in-Pakistan/Religious-Tourism-and-Its-Potential-in-Pakistan.html>.

³⁰ CGTN, "From Xixia to the World: Chinese Wisdom behind 60 UNESCO Heritage Sites," *CGTN*, July 14, 2025), <http://news.cgtn.com/news/2025-07-14/From-Xixia-to-world-Chinese-wisdom-behind-60-UNESCO-heritage-sites-1F0deh93YB2/p.html>.

³¹ "China Religious Tourism Market Size & Outlook, 2030," *Grand View Research*, 2025, <https://www.grandviewresearch.com/horizon/outlook/religious-tourism-market/china>.

³² Ibid.

statistics show that only 25% of the total 480 cultural heritage sites are officially recognized in Pakistan. CPEC can also enhance blue tourism and revive the Islamic maritime heritage by connecting various coastal heritage zones. By taking such initiatives, both states can strengthen cultural ties and leverage the emerging opportunities in the global tourism economy. This will mutually benefit both states to benefit from the favorable trends of the global halal market, which is expected to grow from \$256.5 billion (2023) to \$410.9 billion by 2032.³³ Not only this, the forecast of up to \$230 billion growth in the Global Muslim Travel Index is another reason for the both nations to seize the opportunity.³⁴

Sports Ties in Pakistan-China P-to-P Relations

Sports exchanges play a vital role in fostering shared values and mutual respect through the practice of sportsmanship. Pakistan and China have a long history of sports exchanges. In 1956, a Pakistani football team visited China for the first time to compete in the Asia Cup.³⁵ The Chinese national football team was the first to visit in 1963, playing a four-match series in Pakistan.³⁶ These visits marked the beginning of bilateral sports relations. Although Pakistan and China have different sports traditions, many games are played in both countries. For instance, racket sports such as badminton and table tennis, as well as shooting, basketball, and contact sports including boxing and martial arts, are popular in both nations. China is ranked among the leading sports nations, with a budget exceeding \$3 billion, compared to Pakistan's \$45 million.³⁷ Despite various MoUs, sports cooperation is among the areas lacking tangible collaboration and is an area where people-to-people relations can excel. Especially in the Olympics, sports like Athletics and swimming are among those where Pakistani coaches and athletes could benefit from the excellent sports facilities, coaching and technical training.

Meanwhile, Pakistan can assist Chinese teams in traditional Pakistani sports, such as cricket, field hockey, and Kabaddi. In China, interest in field hockey is growing rapidly, with more than 12,000 players, and has performed reasonably well at the Asian level. Pakistan can offer training and coaching of Chinese field hockey team inside Pakistan. While the MoU of 2008 and 2022 on sports collaboration between Pakistan and China, offers significant collaborations, however, there is dire need of bilateral sports series between universities, colleges and federation level. To elevate the sports in Pakistan, China

³³ Faras Ghani, "Niche to Mainstream: Evolution of Halal Tourism in Global Travel Industry," *Al Jazeera*, February 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/2/1/niche-to-mainstream-evolution-of-halal-tourism-in-global-travel-industry>.

³⁴ "Mastercard-Crescent Rating Global Muslim Travel Index Reveals Trends Shaping the Future of Halal Travel," *Mastercard.com*, June 12, 2025, <https://www.mastercard.com/news/ap/en/newsroom/press-releases/en/2025/mastercard-crescentrating-global-muslim-travel-index-reveals-trends-shaping-the-future-of-halal-travel/>.

³⁵ Ali Ahsen, "A History of Football in Pakistan, Part I," December 21, 2010, *Dawn*, <https://www.dawn.com/news/593095/a-history-of-football-in-pakistan-part-i>.

³⁶ Ali Ahsen, "A History of Football in Pakistan, Part II," December 23, 2010, *Dawn*, <https://www.dawn.com/news/593096/a-history-of-football-in-pakistan-part-ii>.

³⁷ "Sports Gets 13.5 billion," *Dawn*, June 14, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1839722>.

can initiate the development of the sports university in Islamabad envisioned in the 2022 MoU.³⁸ Sports can be vital in drawing talent in wide-ranging sports and improve the P-to-P relations.

e. *E-Games in Pakistan-China P-to-P Relations*

Similarly, e-games have significant potential to enhance people-to-people relations. The e-game scene in China is massive, with over 6000 professional players and more than 660 million gamers. China has numerous Dota 2 and League of Legends world champions. *PUBG* is just as popular among Chinese players as other sports.³⁹ In Pakistan, the e-sports ecosystem has continued to expand each year over the past decades. With the success of Pakistani e-gaming players at the international level, young kids aspire to become professional players. As highlighted by the success of Arsalan Ash and Atif Butt in Tekken 7 and 8. Arsalan Ash, after winning the Evolution Championship Series (EVO) in Japan and Las Vegas, was also named the ESPN Esports Player of the Year in 2019.⁴⁰

Alongside Tekken, *PUBG* and *Mortal Kombat* are very popular among Pakistan's E-gaming community. Recognizing the potential and expanding landscape of E-games, the new generation of both communities can connect through online and offline tournaments. Observing the success of Pakistani Tekken players, South Korean gamers like Knee, Ulsan, and Chanel have visited Pakistan to train with and play exhibition matches against Pakistani players in Lahore. In the spirit of enhancing P-to-P relations, e-gaming can play an important role. Pakistani and Chinese e-players can exchange their expertise and playing styles through exhibition matches and tournaments. The younger generation like the Gen Alpha and Gen Z could connect through the digital platforms to play and share their expertise in E-games and foster the P-to-P relations in the younger generations. Recently, the E-Sports association in Beijing have shown interest in collaboration with associations accross Pakistan.⁴¹ Such initiatives would be instrumental in helping the E-gaming community across the border and help Pakistani players to benefit from China's \$ 40 billion sports industry.

f. *Role of Media and Social Media Platforms in P-to-P Relations*

The mediated channels of communication like the media and social media have taken a key position in building connections among people. The growing importance of these platforms has enabled a larger presence of Chinese media in Pakistan. Chinese media including the Chinese Global Television Network (CGTN) previously known as CCTV, Xinhua News, China Radio Internation (CRI) and others

³⁸ "Memorandum of Understandings," Pakistan Sports Board, Islamabad, <https://www.sports.gov.pk/Detail/Mzg3MjU0MzktYzFmMC00Y2VmLTlhODUtYmlwMTExNzg2MDk4>. Accessed on September 30, 2025.

³⁹ "China: a Powerhouse with Global Ambitions and International Rivalries," *E Sports World Cup*, July 25, 2025. <https://esportsworldcup.com/en/news/china-a-powerhouse-with-global-ambitions-and-international-rivalries>.

⁴⁰ "2019 ESPN E-Sports Awards," *ESPN*, December 19, 2019, https://www.espn.com/gaming/story/_/id/28240009/2019-espn-esports-awards.

⁴¹ "China's E-Sports Industry Eager to Coordinate with Pakistan," *Daily Times*, February 25, 2021 <https://dailytimes.com.pk/727721/chinas-e-sports-association-eager-for-collaboration-with-pakistan/>

have made significant contribution in bridging the cross-cultural communication gap between the people of both countries.⁴² With a focus to tell the Chinese developmental story to the Pakistani people, these outlets have shown the remarkable journey and resilience of Chinese people to their friends in Pakistan. News and documentaries focused on China Pakistan Economic Corridor CPEC, and enabled ordinary Pakistanis to understand China's investment portfolio in Pakistan.

On December 19, 2016, CRI, in partnership with Radio Pakistan, launched Dosti FM-98 to foster cultural connections, encourage Chinese language learning, share knowledge, and spread information about development initiatives.⁴³ Consequently, interest in the Chinese language and culture is quickly growing throughout Pakistan. Media coverage about China has encouraged around 20,000 Pakistani citizens to learn Chinese at various Chinese language centres established in the country.⁴⁴

Over the past decade, Pakistan and China have also begun media cooperation as part of their strategic partnership. In 2019, China's Xinhua News Agency began broadcasting its Urdu channel across Pakistan.⁴⁵ In 2023, Pakistan launched a Chinese-language news service on government-backed media outlets.⁴⁶ Similarly, in 2025, PTV launched a five-minute segment to cover Chinese politics, culture, and technological development, promoting awareness about China among the Pakistani public.⁴⁷ In July 2025, officials from both states agreed on joint broadcasting initiatives to combat the growing spread of misinformation. Pakistan's Minister for Information and Communication, Atta Tarar, has suggested a joint anti-disinformation training with his Chinese counterpart, involving personnel from Pakistan Television and China Central Television.⁴⁸ Under media diplomacy, such joint projects will also strengthen P-to-P relations by boosting information flow and reducing communication barriers.

Apart from traditional communication methods, social media-based communication is strengthening Pakistan-China ties. Because many Chinese and Pakistanis live across the border, the use of the popular

⁴² Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, "Islamabad-based Foreign Media," Accessed October 25, 2025. <https://epwing.gov.pk/Detail/OThkYTlIM2MtY2NkOS00NDVhLWFmOGMtMzg2OGNIMmQ1MjBl>

⁴³ Radio Pakistan, "China Radio International, in collaboration with Radio Pakistan, launches Dosti Channel FM-98 in Lahore," Accessed October 15, 2025. <https://www.radio.gov.pk/15-11-2017/china-radio-international-in-collaboration-with-radio-pakistan-launches-dosti-channel-fm-98-in-lahore>.

⁴⁴ Qazi S. Waheed, "CPEC As A Cultural Bridge: Exploring Chinese Influence in Pakistan," *The Friday Times*, December 17, 2024, <https://www.thefridaytimes.com/17-Dec-2024/cpec-as-a-cultural-bridge-exploring-chinese-influence-in-pakistan#:~:text=There%20are%20four%20functioning%20Confucius,20%2C000%20Pakistanis%20currently%20learning%20Chinese>.

⁴⁵ Huaxia, "Interview: Media Cooperation Key to Enhancing Mutual Understanding Among SCO Countries, Says Pakistani Media Leader," *Xinhua*, Accessed October 15, 2025. <https://english.news.cn/20250727/17c47cf3a78f47988db4ab964a313633/c.html#:~:text=Media%20cooperation%20between%20Pakistan%20and,ad%20cooperation%20agreement%20in%202024>.

⁴⁶ Huaxia, "Asia Album: Pakistani State News Agency Launches Chinese News Service," *Xinhua*, Accessed October 15, 2025. <https://english.news.cn/20230806/ad30914633cd4808a17bfl d855bdf0a5/c.html>.

⁴⁷ "PTV Launches Five-Minute News Bulletin Covering China," *PTV World*, March 04, 2025. <https://ptv.com.pk/ptvworld/newsdetail/2980>.

⁴⁸ "Pakistan, China agree on joint media cooperation against fake news," *Dawn*, October 15, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1923261#:~:text=Per%20the%20report%2C%20Tarar%20said,and%20news%20reports%20in%20Urdu>.

Chinese social media app *WeChat* is growing in Pakistan. To facilitate this, in August 2022, WeChat was registered and authorized by the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SECP). This made SECP the first public sector organization to permit WeChat to offer services. The number of WeChat users in Pakistan has increased due to rising business, financial transactions, and cross-border communication. Another Chinese social media app, TikTok, is the most popular and downloaded app in Pakistan. By early 2024, it had about 54.4 million Pakistani users and experienced a 229% increase in reach since 2023.⁴⁹ These technological connections are fostering a generation that is fluent in each other's language, and the digital platform ensures that media diplomacy and P-to-P ties work in tandem.

g. *Dramas and Film in Pakistan-China P-to-P Relations*

Pakistan and China share a fascinating history of joint drama productions. In 1984, the first co-production between Pakistan Television (PTV) and China Central Television Network (CCTV) was 'Paiman-e-Wafa' (Promise of Allegiance), based on the story of a Chinese field hockey player, Shao, who visited Pakistan for training and formed an unbreakable bond of friendship with Pakistani players.⁵⁰

Another co-produced drama, 'Rishtay and Rastay' (Relationships and Highways), aired in 1986. It is a love story that focuses on the building of the Karakorum Highway and honors the many Chinese and Pakistani workers who lost their lives during its construction.⁵¹ While the 1980s were indeed the heydays of Pakistan-China drama co-production, Pakistani films made their mark in the Chinese market in the 1950s. So far, 12 Pakistani films have been aired in China since 1956, when the first movie, *Baghi*, was shown, receiving immense appreciation.⁵² However, after a 45-year break, the Pakistani film *Parwaz hai Zanoon* was released in China in 2020. In a market otherwise dominated by Indian movies and songs, the viewers enjoyed the Pakistani film, the cinematography and the story.⁵³ The majority of the viewers were of the view that more Pakistani movies resonating with bilateral issues and common interests should be shown on Chinese screens.

In 2025, for the first time, a Chinese animated film, *Ne Zha 2*, was imported and distributed in Pakistan, marking a new chapter in bilateral cinematic collaboration. A globally popular movie, *Ne Zha*, which is deeply rooted in Chinese folklore, will be screened in major cities across Pakistan.⁵⁴ The Pakistani audience looks forward to more Chinese films being screened in Pakistan. Meanwhile, collaboration in

⁴⁹ Simon Kemp, "Digital 2024: Pakistan," *Data Reportal*, February 23, 2024. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-pakistan#:~:text=TikTok%20user%20growth%20in%20Pakistan>

⁵⁰ Haroon Shuaib, Pakistan and China Co-Productions of Television Dramas," *Youlin Magazine*, February 28, 2023, <https://www.youlinmagazine.com/story/pakistan-and-china-co-productions-of-television-dramas/MjQ2OA>.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² "Timeline" *Pakistan Film Magazine*, Accessed on October 10, 2025, https://pakmag.net/film/timeline.php?pid=35#google_vignette.

⁵³ Jin Qiang and Jun Danyang, "Crossing, Leaping and Transcendence: Analysis of Pakistani Films and Dramas Released in China," *Pacific International Journal*, 05, no. 02 (June 2022): 24-25.

⁵⁴ "Ne Zha 2 Lands in Pakistan" *Daily Times*, October 28, 2025, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/1390724/ne-zha-2-lands-in-pakistan/>.

joint drama and animated productions is growing between Pakistan and China. The co-produced dramas *"Ba'tie Girl"* in 2019 and *"Amity Along the Orange Line"* in 2020, as well as the animated movie *"Allahyar and the Legend of Markhoor"* in 2018, are among the joint dramas and films produced in recent years.

While a whole generation of Pakistanis grew up watching Chinese kung fu and karate movies, with Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan being household names in Pakistan, the popularity of Pakistani film in China is significantly lower. The two-way exchange of cinema is a vital cultural bridge, enabling people to gain cultural insights through the medium of the screen. Cinema is also an essential tool in breaking down communication barriers and facilitating cross-cultural understanding. Not only does it communicate cultural sensitivities, but it also conveys important political, religious, and economic issues. The nature of all-weather friendship necessitates open communication about the most pressing problems, and cinema and television can play a vital role.

h. Cuisine in Pakistan-China P-to-P Relations

Food has a powerful way of bringing people together. It also serves as a strong tool for cultural exchange and plays a key role in gastrodiploamacy. Traditionally, Chinese food has been very popular among Pakistanis. Even before the partition of India, the ABC restaurant was established in Karachi in 1930 and reportedly was visited by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai during his visit in 1964.⁵⁵ Over the decades, Chinese cuisine infused with Pakistani flavours has led to the development of Pakistani-Chinese cuisine, which is very popular among the Pakistani people.

In recent times, Chinese food culture has gained increasing popularity in Pakistan due to the growing presence of Chinese communities across the country. Additionally, more Pakistanis studying or doing business in China are contributing to this cultural aspect of food. As a result, the number of authentic Chinese restaurants has increased to thousands. Moreover, dishes such as Lanzhou Beef Noodles and dumplings, along with other delicacies, enhance the traditional Pakistani-influenced cuisine. While China has a rich tradition of Muslim cuisine, Pakistani dishes are also gaining popularity among the Chinese. The growing number of Pakistani students and businesspeople in China has facilitated the expansion of Pakistani restaurants, which serve dishes such as biryani, curries, and kebabs. These dishes are gaining popularity among the Chinese, leading to the establishment of Chinese restaurants such as Khan Baba, Shalimar, Sultan Pakistan, and Zam Zam Restaurant.

In an effort to promote gastro diplomacy, Pakistani Ambassador Khalil Qureshi officially launched the Ambassador's Kitchen in Xian during the 'Euro-Asia Economic Forum 2025.' The goal was to highlight

⁵⁵ Mahnoor Fatima, "A Most Delicious Friendship: A Short History of Pakistani-Chinese Cuisine," *Youlin Magazine*, July 24, 2020, <https://www.youlinmagazine.com/article/a-most-delicious-friendship-a-short-history-of-pakistani-chinese-cuisine/MTc5Mg==>.

Pakistani culinary heritage to the Chinese audience.⁵⁶ Similarly, Pakistani students in Chinese Universities are active in promoting Pakistani cuisine. In August 2025, the Pakistan Embassy hosted a mango festival titled ‘Golden Silk Road Mangoes: A True Oriental Treasure’ to promote the world-renowned Pakistani mangoes in China. During the 7th International Cultural Festival of Dalian University of Technology (DUT), attended by 10,000 students and faculty, Pakistani students set up food stalls showcasing Pakistani cuisine. Cuisine plays a role in organizing festivals, involving hospitality, respect, love, and communication. It also acts as a cultural agent at the grassroots level, fostering intercultural exchanges and deepening relationships.

Conclusion

P-to-P relations have evolved as a cardinal feature of Pakistan-China bilateral relations. In the relational diplomacy P-to-P relations require sustainable efforts and investment. Such efforts must recognize the core values, cultural sensitivities and social norms to understand the social context in which such relations can flourish. In the case of Pakistan-China relations the bilateral friendship has flourished as it recognized the potential and need for a broad-based relation. The geographical proximity, history, culture and innate affection towards each other provided a recipe to expand this relation further. For this reason, the relationship has thrived from the highest level to the grass-root levels. The diversification of the bilateral relations to the people in the form of cultural and educational exchanges, coproduction of dramas and films and growing desire to engage in festival and cultural events is testimony of expanding cross-cultural interaction. A big enabler in this bilateral cultural transformation has been played by the digital connectivity which has expedited cross-cultural communications. There is even more space to unlock the true potential of these digital platforms to develop Pakistan-China ‘Digital Silk Route’ focused on harnessing the P-to-P relations to the fullest.

Recommendations to Improve Pakistan-China P-to-P Relations

- a. To promote cultural events, the respective embassies of Pakistan and China should keep updating their website and post upcoming events so that more people can attend.
- b. There is a huge potential for the joint production of dramas, documentaries mainly focusing on the lives of Chinese students in Pakistan and Pakistani students in China and their experience in each other’s countries. Similarly, coproduction on the lives of the Chinese diaspora living in Pakistan can generate strong interest among the viewers.
- c. There is a provision to start bilingual podcasts focusing on the communities and lives of common Chinese and Pakistanis and their stories.

⁵⁶ “Ambassador Khalil Hashmir Launched Ambassador’s Kitchen in Xi’an,” September 27, 2025, *Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of Pakistan*, https://pid.gov.pk/site/press_detail/30476#:~:text=Beijing:%20September%2027%2C%202025,%2C%20food%20processing%2C%20and%20trade.

- d. Recollection of memories from the elders who have spent their lives in each other's countries, and formed decades-long friendships. The ambassadors, students, sportsmen, military officials and ordinary people can be included in this effort.
- e. During the major cultural events, exhibitions and exchanges, digital platforms can be utilized for live broadcast.
- f. Alumni of the Pakistan-China educational institutions should actively engage in promoting alumni exchanges to promote P-to-P relations.
- g. To promote tourism, direct flights can be introduced to tourist destinations like Skardu and Peshawar in Pakistan and cities like Chengdu, Xi'an and Guilian, among others.⁵⁷
- h. Joint working groups of the joint community-based learning groups to share skills like small businesses, farming, cooking, which are supportive of the livelihood.
- i. One such initiative can be the introduction of Chinese History in the Central Superior Services (CSS) exams to introduce the upcoming officers to understand the significance of Chinese history and culture.

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⁵⁷ Bilal Zubair, "Significance of Public Diplomacy in Pakistan-China Relations," in *Pakistan and China: Connecting at People's level*, ed. Talat Shabbir (Islamabad: China Pakistan Study Center, ISSI, 2025), 52.



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