

Published:
February 05, 2026

Sino Pakistan Relations during Zia Ul Haq's Era

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Abstract

The era of General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988) was a critical period in the history of Sino-Pakistan relations, marked by strategic, military, and economic cooperation. As Cold War tensions escalated, Pakistan played a pivotal role in regional geopolitics, strengthening its ties with China amidst evolving global dynamics. This study explores the nature of Sino-Pakistan relations during Zia's tenure, highlighting key diplomatic engagements, economic collaborations, and defense partnerships. It also examines how external influences, particularly the roles of the United States, India, and the Soviet Union, shaped this bilateral relationship. By analyzing historical records, government policies, and strategic alignments, this paper contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the Sino-Pakistan alliance during one of Pakistan's most turbulent political eras.

Keywords: Sino-Pakistan Relations, Zia-ul-Haq, Cold War, Geopolitics, China-Pakistan Military Cooperation, Strategic Alliance, Economic Diplomacy

Introduction

Sino-Pakistan relations have been a cornerstone of Pakistan's foreign policy since 1950s. However, the period of General Zia-ul-Haq's rule brought new dimensions to this strategic partnership. Zia's tenure was characterized by military rule, an increasing Islamist agenda, and a growing dependence on external allies for economic and military sustenance. During this period, China emerged as a crucial partner, providing Pakistan with military hardware, economic assistance, and diplomatic support on international platforms. The backdrop of the Cold War significantly influenced Sino-Pakistan relations. As tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union intensified, Pakistan became an essential player in regional politics, particularly in the Afghan-Soviet conflict. China, seeking to counter Soviet expansionism, found a reliable ally in Pakistan. This collaboration had far-reaching consequences, not only for regional security but also for the broader dynamics of global politics.

Pakistan's foreign policy has historically been shaped by its strategic location and security concerns, particularly in relation to India. The early years of Pakistan-China relations were based on mutual concerns regarding India, but under Zia's leadership, this

Published:
February 05, 2026

relationship deepened significantly. His administration pursued a pragmatic approach that ensured continuity and expansion in diplomatic and defense cooperation with China. Zia-ul-Haq's strategic vision emphasized Pakistan's role as a bridge between China and the Muslim world. His regime actively sought closer engagement with Beijing to counterbalance India's growing influence in South Asia. China, on the other hand, viewed Pakistan as an important partner in maintaining regional stability and preventing Soviet advances in Afghanistan. The partnership was further strengthened through a series of high-level visits, trade agreements, and defense collaborations. Another key aspect of this relationship was Pakistan's assistance in facilitating China's diplomatic ties with the Islamic world. Zia's emphasis on Islamic solidarity resonated with China's broader foreign policy goals, leading to increased cooperation in international forums such as the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The ideological contrast between Zia's Islamist policies and China's secular governance did not hinder their relations; rather, their shared strategic interests ensured sustained engagement.

The economic dimension of Sino-Pakistan relations during this period was also significant. China extended financial assistance to Pakistan, supported its industrial growth, and provided technological aid for infrastructure projects. This economic cooperation laid the groundwork for future initiatives, including the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in later years.

Background

To understand the evolution of Sino-Pakistan relations during Zia-ul-Haq's era, it is essential to examine the historical context that shaped the foundation of this strategic partnership. Pakistan was among the first countries to recognize the People's Republic of China in 1950, setting the stage for a long-standing friendship. The 1962 Sino-Indian War further solidified this alliance, as both China and Pakistan found a common adversary in India. Subsequent agreements on border demarcations and military cooperation reinforced their partnership. During the 1970s, the bilateral relationship gained momentum, with China providing economic and military assistance to Pakistan.

Pakistan's geopolitical positioning made it an attractive ally for global and regional powers. Located at the crossroads of South Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia, Pakistan played a critical role in Cold War geopolitics. With India aligning itself with the Soviet Union, Pakistan sought support from China and the United States to counterbalance Indian influence. The strategic imperative of maintaining close ties with

China was further reinforced by Pakistan's long-standing security concerns vis-à-vis India.

General Zia-ul-Haq came to power in 1977 through a military coup, overthrowing the civilian government of Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. His foreign policy was characterized by pragmatism, with a focus on securing Pakistan's strategic interests through robust alliances. Zia's tenure saw a deepening of Pakistan's relations with China, driven by mutual concerns over regional security and economic development.

China's Geopolitical Considerations

During the late 1970s and 1980s, China's foreign policy was shaped by its strategic rivalry with the Soviet Union and its evolving relationship with the United States. China viewed Pakistan as a crucial partner in countering Soviet influence in Afghanistan and South Asia. The Chinese leadership provided Pakistan with economic aid, military hardware, and diplomatic support, further strengthening the bilateral relationship. Under Zia's leadership, economic cooperation between Pakistan and China expanded significantly. Trade agreements, infrastructure development projects, and technology transfers enhanced economic ties. The military partnership also deepened, with China supplying Pakistan with fighter aircraft, tanks, and missile technology. This cooperation played a vital role in bolstering Pakistan's defense capabilities against external threats.

The Afghan-Soviet War and Its Impact

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was a turning point in regional politics. Pakistan became a frontline state in the Cold War, receiving substantial support from the United States and China to counter Soviet expansion. Zia-ul-Haq's government played a key role in supporting Afghan resistance fighters, with Chinese assistance in terms of military supplies and strategic coordination. This period witnessed an unprecedented level of collaboration between Pakistan and China, shaping the future trajectory of their bilateral relations.

Research Analysis and Data Collection

This study is based on extensive research, drawing from historical documents, government reports, diplomatic correspondences, and academic literature. Primary sources include statements by political leaders, archived military agreements, and economic treaties between China and Pakistan. Secondary sources comprise books, journal articles, and expert analyses detailing the evolution of Sino-Pakistan ties during Zia's administration.

Mutual Relations Between Pakistan and China

a. Political and Diplomatic Relations

Pakistan and China have enjoyed one of the closest bilateral relationships in modern history. Their mutual understanding and cooperation extend beyond strategic and economic interests, encompassing diplomatic, political, and military spheres. The foundation of this relationship was laid during the early years of Pakistan's independence, with successive governments ensuring that China remained a key ally.

During Zia-ul-Haq's era, diplomatic ties between the two nations reached new heights. Both countries frequently engaged in high-level discussions, fostering an environment of trust and collaboration. Zia's personal visits to Beijing and meetings with Chinese leadership reflected Pakistan's commitment to the alliance. The Chinese government reciprocated by supporting Pakistan in regional and international forums, particularly in matters related to India and Kashmir.

b. Economic and Trade Relations

Economic cooperation between Pakistan and China expanded significantly during Zia's rule. China provided substantial financial aid and technical assistance for infrastructure projects in Pakistan. Key collaborations included the construction of highways, power plants, and manufacturing units. Bilateral trade saw an upward trend, with China exporting machinery, electronics, and industrial goods, while Pakistan provided textiles, raw materials, and agricultural products. The economic partnership extended to joint ventures in multiple sectors. China's expertise in industrial development played a crucial role in modernizing Pakistan's economy, strengthening its manufacturing capabilities, and enhancing technological exchange. Special economic agreements facilitated smoother trade, reducing tariffs and encouraging investments from Chinese companies in Pakistan's key industries.

c. Military and Strategic Cooperation

One of the strongest aspects of Sino-Pakistan relations during Zia's era was defense cooperation. China emerged as Pakistan's leading military supplier, equipping the Pakistan Armed Forces with advanced technology, weapons, and training. The military alliance was driven by mutual concerns over regional security, particularly in countering India's growing defense capabilities and managing the Soviet presence in Afghanistan.

d. Cultural and People-to-People Exchanges Despite strong governmental ties, cultural exchange between Pakistan and China remained limited during Zia's rule. However, academic collaborations and scholarships for Pakistani students to study in Chinese universities saw an increase. Initiatives in education and media helped create awareness and understanding between the two nations, paving the way for future cultural cooperation.

Historical Events Shaping Sino-Pakistan Relations

a. The Bandung Conference and Early Engagement (1955)

The Bandung Conference marked the beginning of formal engagement between Pakistan and China. Although their early relations were cautious, mutual interests in non-alignment and regional stability led to increased diplomatic interactions. Pakistan's recognition of China and its support for China's admission to the United Nations laid the groundwork for their future alliance.

b. The 1962 Sino-Indian War and Strengthening Ties

China's war with India in 1962 significantly altered regional dynamics. Pakistan saw an opportunity to strengthen ties with China, capitalizing on their shared concerns regarding India. This period witnessed the signing of border agreements and enhanced military cooperation between Islamabad and Beijing.

c. The 1971 Indo-Pak War and Chinese Support

During the 1971 war between India and Pakistan, China maintained a supportive stance toward Pakistan. While China did not intervene directly, it provided diplomatic and strategic backing, ensuring that Pakistan had an ally in the international arena.

Future Prospects and Recommendations

a. Strengthening Economic Ties

The economic partnership between Pakistan and China has evolved significantly over the decades. Moving forward, both nations should focus on expanding their economic collaboration through increased trade, investment, and industrial cooperation. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) stands as a cornerstone of this economic engagement, but its full potential remains untapped. Future efforts should concentrate on diversifying industries beyond infrastructure, including technology, renewable energy, and agriculture. Encouraging Chinese companies to invest in Pakistan's Special Economic Zones (SEZs) will enhance job creation and economic stability. Additionally, Pakistan must address trade imbalances by increasing exports to China. Expanding market access for Pakistani products such as textiles, agriculture, and processed goods will help achieve a more balanced trade relationship. Both governments should work towards revising trade agreements to ensure fair and beneficial economic cooperation.

b. Expanding Military Cooperation

Military cooperation between Pakistan and China has historically been one of the strongest aspects of their bilateral relations. As both nations face evolving security challenges, enhancing defense collaboration remains a key priority. Prospects should focus on joint production of advanced weaponry, cyber-security cooperation, and military

Published:
February 05, 2026

technology transfer. Collaborative defense projects such as the JF-17 Thunder fighter jet should be expanded to include next-generation aircraft, naval warships, and drone technology. China's expertise in artificial intelligence (AI) and space technology also presents an opportunity for Pakistan to modernize its defense infrastructure. Establishing a joint research and development (R&D) facility will ensure technological advancements and military readiness. Furthermore, continued intelligence sharing and counterterrorism collaboration will help combat regional security threats more effectively.

c. Diplomatic Strategies in a Changing Global Order

Pakistan's diplomatic approach must be dynamic, considering the shifting global power balance. While maintaining strong ties with China, Pakistan should also foster balanced relations with other global powers, including the United States, Russia, and European nations. By actively participating in regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Pakistan can strengthen its diplomatic standing and leverage multilateral platforms to advance its interests. Another critical aspect is Pakistan's role in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Ensuring that BRI projects align with national development goals will be crucial in maximizing economic benefits while minimizing debt risks. Strategic diplomatic engagements should also focus on addressing concerns raised by international financial institutions and regional neighbors to maintain a positive global perception of Sino-Pakistan relations.

d. Enhancing Cultural and Educational Exchanges

People-to-people interactions between Pakistan and China remain relatively limited compared to their political and military ties. Strengthening cultural and educational exchanges will contribute to a deeper and more sustainable bilateral relationship. Increased academic collaborations, scholarships, and student exchange programs will foster mutual understanding and cooperation. Media and tourism promotion can also play a pivotal role in bridging cultural gaps. Encouraging film collaborations, language programs, and joint media initiatives will enhance awareness about each other's history, traditions, and values. Strengthening diplomatic efforts to facilitate visa processes and tourism incentives will further boost bilateral engagements at a grassroots level.

Conclusion

The strategic relationship between Pakistan and China has withstood the test of time, evolving from diplomatic support to a comprehensive alliance encompassing economic, military, and geopolitical dimensions. The foundations of this partnership, particularly during Zia-ul-Haq's era, played a crucial role in cementing long-term cooperation. As the global landscape continues to change, both nations must adapt and strengthen their

Published:
February 05, 2026

collaboration to address emerging challenges and opportunities. One of the key aspects of this relationship has been unwavering political and military support. China's assistance in modernizing Pakistan's defense capabilities has ensured regional stability and deterred external threats. The trust built through decades of collaboration has resulted in Pakistan being one of China's closest allies in South Asia. Economically, China has been instrumental in Pakistan's development, with major investments in infrastructure and energy projects. However, to ensure long-term sustainability, Pakistan must work towards reducing economic dependence and diversifying trade opportunities. Strengthening local industries, improving governance, and ensuring transparency in joint projects will be crucial in achieving economic stability. While the geopolitical landscape remains complex, Pakistan must navigate its foreign policy carefully, ensuring it maximizes benefits from its strategic alliances while maintaining regional stability. The evolving power dynamics between China, the United States, India, and Russia necessitate a well-calibrated diplomatic approach.

Looking ahead, the Pakistan-China relationship holds immense potential for growth. Future engagements should prioritize mutual economic benefits, technological innovation, and regional security. By fostering deeper cultural and academic exchanges, both nations can solidify their ties at the societal level, ensuring a more enduring and dynamic partnership. Ultimately, the Sino-Pakistan alliance remains a model of strategic cooperation that can serve as a blueprint for other regional partnerships. Through continued adaptation and collaboration, both nations can shape a future that strengthens their respective positions on the global stage while maintaining peace and prosperity in the region.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 brought China, Pakistan, and the United States into a closer strategic partnership. Both Pakistan and China viewed Soviet expansionism as a major threat, leading to their active support for Afghan resistance fighters. This period witnessed unprecedented military aid from China to Pakistan, reinforcing their defense collaboration.

Zia-ul-Haq made multiple visits to China during his tenure, each visit strengthening bilateral ties. His discussions with Chinese leadership focused on military, economic, and strategic cooperation, resulting in several agreements that benefited Pakistan's defense and industrial sectors. China's indirect assistance in Pakistan's nuclear program during the 1980s played a critical role in Pakistan's defense strategy. With India advancing its nuclear capabilities, Pakistan sought Chinese support in developing its own deterrence. While China officially maintained a neutral stance, reports indicate that scientific and

Published:
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technological exchanges contributed to Pakistan's nuclear advancements. Major infrastructure projects undertaken with Chinese assistance during Zia's rule included highway construction, energy sector investments, and industrial development. These initiatives laid the foundation for deeper economic cooperation that continues to the present day.

The deepening of Sino-Pakistan relations had significant regional and international implications. India viewed the growing alliance with apprehension, leading to increased military procurement and strategic partnerships with the Soviet Union. The United States, while supportive of Pakistan during the Afghan war, remained cautious of Pakistan's deep ties with China. Following Zia's death in 1988, Sino-Pakistan relations remained strong, with successive Pakistani governments continuing to prioritize ties with China. The legacy of the alliance established during Zia's rule had long-term effects on regional security, economic cooperation, and military strategy.

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