

PAKISTAN AS CHINA'S STRATEGIC GATEWAY AND ALLY: A STUDY THROUGH RIMLAND THEORY AND OFFENSIVE REALISM

A Thesis

**Submitted to the Master's Study Program of Political Science at the Faculty of
Social Sciences in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of**

Master of Arts (M.A.)



by:

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UNIVERSITAS ISLAM INTERNASIONAL INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

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This study elucidates Pakistan's evolving role as a strategic gateway state for China within the context of regional and global geopolitics. Centered on the core research question, how do China's strategic and security interests make Pakistan a potential gateway state, and does the China-Pakistan alliance help China's power maximization? This research employs a qualitative methodology based on secondary sources. Bridging Nicholas Spykman's Rimland Theory and John Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism, the study explicates Pakistan's geostrategic importance in China's power maximization calculus. The findings indicate that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor exemplifies a strategic power-maximization alliance and a rimland strategy, driven by shared interests of power maximization and countering regional adversaries, particularly India and the US. The study maintains China-Pakistan's consistent cooperation and interdependence, despite Pakistan's historical ties with the West, which reflect a rational strategy that prioritizes security and economic stability. In a nutshell, the research concludes that Pakistan's geographical leverage as a rimland state and political alignment have made it an indispensable node in China's BRI, offering both nations strategic depth and regional influence in the broader Indo-Pacific contest.

Keywords: *Gateway State, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Alliance, Rimland Theory, Offensive Realism*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE	i
STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICITY	ii
ANTI-PLAGIARISM STATEMENT	iii
THESIS ATTESTATION.....	iv
THESIS DEFENSE APPROVAL.....	v
ABSTRACT	vi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	viii
LIST OF FIGURES	x
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xi
CHAPTER I.....	1
INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Background of the Study	1
1.2 Questions	7
1.3 Hypothesis	7
1.4 Significance of the Study.....	7
1.5 Methods	8
1.6 Strengths and Limitations	9
1.7 Structure of the Thesis	10
CHAPTER II.....	12
LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	12
2.1 Literature Review	12
2.2 Theoretical Framework.....	17
CHAPTER III	22
CHINA-PAKISTAN RELATIONS.....	22
3.1 Pakistan.....	22
3.2 China.....	23
3.3 A Historical View of Pakistan's Relations with China	25
CHAPTER IV	33

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.....	33
4.1 Introduction to Chapter.....	33
4.2 China’s Strategic Expansion in the IO.....	33
4.3 Pakistan as a Strategic Gateway State and China’s Strategic and Security Interests.....	39
4.6 Arms Transfers and Strategic Collaboration: CPEC, Buck-Passing, and the China-Pakistan Nexus	52
4.5 The Ukraine Case	60
CHAPTER V	64
CONCLUSION.....	64
REFERENCES	66

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 4.1 CPEC Map,.....	41
Figure 4.2 The Geography of Rimland,	42
Figure 4.3 Strategic Locations in the Indian Ocean,.....	43
Figure 4.4 Chokepoints and strategic locations in the Indian Ocean,.....	49
Figure 4.5 Indicate potential military hold (Follow the flags),.....	50

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CENTO	: <i>Central Treaty Organization</i>
CPEC	: <i>China-Pakistan Economic Corridor</i>
GDP	: <i>Gross Domestic Product</i>
IAEA	: <i>International Atomic Energy Agency</i>
IO	: <i>Indian Ocean</i>
IOR	: <i>Indian Ocean Region</i>
IR	: <i>International Relations</i>
ISI	: <i>Inter-Services Intelligence</i>
JF-17	: <i>Joint Fighter-17</i>
Mbpd	: <i>Millions of Barrels Per Day</i>
PAF	: <i>Pakistan Air Force</i>
PLA	: <i>People's Liberation Army</i>
PLAN	: <i>The People's Liberation Army Navy's</i>
PRC	: <i>People's Republic of China</i>
SCS	: <i>South China Sea</i>
SEATO	: <i>Southeast Asia Treaty Organization</i>
SIPRI	: <i>Stockholm International Peace Research Institute</i>
SLOCs	: <i>Sea Lines of Communications</i>
UN	: <i>United Nations</i>
UNHRC	: <i>United Nations Human Rights Council</i>
US	: <i>United States</i>

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Geopolitically, Pakistan is a crucial state for China. Pakistan serves as a gateway for China. It provides China with access to the Indian Ocean (IO). Colen (1991) described a gateway state in his writing that the concept of a gateway state emphasizes “small exchange states with qualified sovereignty that will spin off from existing national entities to help link the world system.” The idea of a gateway region was formed from a broader concept of a geostrategic region, which also reunites the meaning of a buffer zone or geopolitical region that promotes political and socioeconomic cooperation (Colen, 1991, p. 551). This term is also used by Chazziza (2016), who refers to Pakistan as a gateway for China. The author states that “Pakistan’s proximity to markets in the Middle East and Africa serves as a primary gateway for trade between China and these regions” (Chazziza, 2026, p. 4).

Colen (1991) describes his gateway state as historically unique cultural hearths, characterized by distinct languages, often differing religions or national churches, elevated levels of education, and advantageous connections to exterior regions via sea or land. Small in size and population, and generally positioned along critical access routes. Although they may have a specific natural or human resource that serves as an export foundation, they lack self-sufficiency and rely on the host state for raw materials and a significant market base. These will be economically specialized states that will facilitate the integration of the overall system and its diverse components. Distinct from conventional territorial unitary or federated states, which prioritize self-sufficiency and defense, these nations will function as mini-trading entities with qualified sovereignty.

According to Moisoiu (2017), a gateway state does not necessarily possess vast natural resources, strong military power, or a highly developed economy. Still, it holds strategic value due to its location and connectivity. Its strength lies in facilitating the movement and exchange of goods. Such a state often has access to or can channel the bulk transfer of resources, enjoys security through strategic alliances, and lies along major trade routes. Key properties of a gateway state include an accessible and strategically important geographical position, favorable climate, robust infrastructure, intermodal transport facilities, strategic military bases, and international alliance commitments. Rather than being born out of former buffer zones, gateway states emerge

due to their current geopolitical, economic, and strategic relevance. Their roles today include promoting economic integration with neighboring regions, offering shorter and more efficient trade routes, enabling access to natural resources, expanding export markets, and acting as a regional security pillar by fostering stable policies and cooperative relationships with both allies and rivals. Cohen (1991) explains this with an example. The author stated that in microelectronic circuits, gates allow currents to traverse arrays of transistors. Transistors are accelerated by a reduction in size, reducing the distance the current must traverse. This pertains to the capacity of gateway states to enhance the responsiveness of the global system. This means to shorten the time and distance between two regions.

Pakistan exemplifies the characteristics of a gateway state due to its strategic geographic location. The geostrategic location of Pakistan makes it a pivotal regional player, enhanced by initiatives such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which expands its economic and geopolitical importance. Bordering the Middle East, South Asia, and the IO, Pakistan is a strategically vital regional power due to its proximity to China, Iran, Afghanistan, and India. Pakistan connects South and Central Asia. This geography impacts trade, energy, and connectivity. CPEC links Kashgar to Gwadar Port, offering China access to the Arabian Sea and IO, and Pakistan an opportunity that can bring economic stability. Pakistan's location balances regional power and a vital energy and trade corridor. CPEC, a Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) part, boosts connectivity and economic integration with China, enhancing its geostrategic relevance. This vast infrastructure project, the "Economic Game Changer," would connect Gwadar Port to China's west by roads, trains, and pipelines. This corridor improves regional trade and energy mobility for Pakistan, its neighbors, and global partners with a coastline on the Arabian Sea (Abbas et al. 2024).

Gwadar port is reducing transportation expenses in commerce. Forecasts indicate a 70% decrease in transit duration for goods carried from Gwadar to China and Central Asia. The railway link from Gwadar to Kashgar will reduce the energy transit distance from the Middle East to China by 85%. This will diminish reliance on the IO and the Strait of Malacca, condensing the transit distance from 12,000 km to 2,395 km. The operational Gwadar port offers an alternative to the IO route by linking China to the Strait of Hormuz and the Oman Sea, so ensuring energy and commercial security (Rahman et al., 2022). Serving as a vital corridor, Pakistan facilitates regional connectivity through major infrastructure projects like the CPEC, which links Western China to the Arabian Sea via the port of Gwadar. This positioning enables Pakistan to offer shorter

and cost-effective trade routes for landlocked Central Asian states and enhances China's access to global markets. Although not a major economic power, but a middle military power, Pakistan's significance lies in its role as a potential transit hub for goods and energy, and its strategic alliances, particularly with China. Its potential for economic integration is supported by developing Special Economic Zones and transport infrastructure, while its cultural and civilizational diversity enables it to act as a bridge between distinct regions and traditions.

I use Pakistan as a strategic gateway for China, not merely in economic terms through initiatives like the CPEC, but more profoundly as part of China's broader strategy for military access and security maximization. This is a contribution to the gateway state concept, spinning it from the economic logic to a survival and power maximization strategy. Geographically, Pakistan provides China with overland access to the Arabian Sea, bypassing the vulnerable and US-influenced Strait of Malacca, a critical chokepoint in China's energy supply chain. This enhances China's strategic depth and ensures a more resilient trade and energy route. Militarily, Gwadar Port, constructed and operated by Chinese entities, offers the potential for dual-use infrastructure, giving China a foothold in the IO region and strengthening its maritime presence near key sea lanes.

Pakistan and China maintain a stable, amicable relationship without territorial conflicts, coercive pressures, and internal intervention. Historically, Pakistan has not faced significant risk from China, especially in the 21st century. Their foreign policy is collaborative, and there is no border dispute. Bilateral relations have remained unstrained, and neither side has sensed a threat from the other despite multiple interpersonal concerns relating to CPEC projects. First, despite significant national power differences, neither country is vulnerable to the other; the dominating partner does not pose dangers that need alignment to manage risk. Both nations have pledged not to interfere in each other's domestic affairs (Kalim et al., 2024). This makes Pakistan a favorable gateway state for China.

About 80 percent of China's oil imports occur through the IO and pass through the Malacca Strait to the South China Sea (SCS). India disrupts the IO, and the US is applying enormous pressure in the Malacca Strait and the SCS. China can satisfy its energy needs through the CPEC, avoiding pressure from the Indian Navy and the US in the IO (Afaqi & Askari, 2022). Pakistan serves as a gateway for China to the IO under CPEC, a flagship project of BRI. CPEC is a key project of the BRR. CPEC seeks to enhance commercial and infrastructural ties between Pakistan and China. The CPEC project connects Pakistan's Gwadar Seaport to China's Xinjiang

region by highways and trains, making Pakistan a gateway for imports and exports of China (Khan & Khan, 2019).

In addition to CPEC, China's investment in port infrastructure within the IO basin has led to the construction, refurbishment, and expansion of ports by Chinese companies, predominantly state-owned and financed, in Sri Lanka and Myanmar. These nodes, portrayed by Beijing as initiatives for enhancing connectivity and boosting trade, significantly highlight China's audacious objective to encircle India and establish a formidable marine presence in the IO (Panda, 2024). The IO is much closer to residents in far western China than the SCS. Through the "Irrawaddy Corridor," which runs from Yunnan to Myanmar's ports on the Bengal Bay, China also aims to get access to the IO through Myanmar (Snedden, 2016). Myanmar, due to its strategic geographical location, is also vital to the competitive strategies in the IO region for India and China. Consequently, Myanmar swiftly emerged as the focal point of power contention between these two entities in the IO. Myanmar has a pivotal role in China's BRI. Significant infrastructural initiatives, including the Kyaukpyu deep-water port, the railway of Kunming-Kyaukpyu, and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, are designed to link China to the IO via Myanmar. Myanmar's involvement in the BRI has strengthened China's economic and strategic dominance in the area (Binh et al., 2024). Moreover, in further developments, Bangladesh and China would be linked via the projected Kunming-Chittagong trade route. This route provides China with access to Bangladesh through Myanmar (Javaid, 2016).

China has suggested two solutions to its stagnant position in the Malacca Strait: enhancing its presence in the IO and establishing trade corridors and transcontinental energy corridors. Employing the "String of Pearls" approach. The term "String of Pearls" is employed by American analysts to describe China's maritime routes linking southern China to the IO, traversing the Malacca Strait and the Strait of Hormuz, along with other naval strategies including Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and the Maldives (Ashraf, 2017). The military base on Hainan Island, the container shipping terminal in Chittagong (Bangladesh), the deep-water port in Sittwe, the Kyaukpyu port, the Yangon port (Myanmar), the naval station in Gwadar (Pakistan), and the Sri Lankan port of Hambantota are collectively termed the "pearls." These "pearls" extend from the shores of mainland China to the beaches of the SCS, the Strait of Malacca, the IO, and the reefs of the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf. Each "pearl" in the "String of Pearls" represents China's geopolitical impact or military existence in the IO and other strategic maritime regions. China aims to leverage this strategy to expand its influence from the East China

Sea (Hainan) through the world's most trafficked maritime routes to the Persian Gulf. The principal aims are to constrain India, provide energy security, and retain dominance over vital marine routes (Nguyen et al., 2022).

In this study, I explore Pakistan as a potential gateway state for China over other potential options like Myanmar. Myanmar and Afghanistan, through Iran, have the potential to provide access to China to the IO. However, in this study, I aim to answer the puzzle of how Pakistan can be a potential gateway state for China despite those options. Through this study, I seek to understand how Pakistan facilitates China's strategic ambitions by providing a critical corridor for trade and energy routes, particularly through CPEC, a flagship project under BRI. This will investigate Chinese ambitions to control the rimland in the IO. Additionally, I explore how Pakistan's cooperation with China in different sectors makes it an invaluable partner, shedding light on the unique geopolitical and economic factors that shape this alliance. It also sheds light on how China tends to cooperate with Pakistan to curb the influence of the United States and India in the IO, eventually maximizing the power of China. This also explains the mutual benefit that both China and Pakistan derive from each other.

A comparative case that underscores the complexity of a gateway state is Ukraine. Ukraine is located in Central and Eastern Europe and is bordered by seven countries: Moldova, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Belarus, Russia, and Poland. Its coastline includes the beaches of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. Ukraine is one of the largest countries in Europe in terms of population, area, and natural resource potential. With a total size of 603,700 km square, it is the second largest territory in Europe following Russia and is more than 1.5 times larger than Germany, twice as large as Italy, and nearly 2.5 times larger than the UK. With a population of almost 40 million, Ukraine is Europe's sixth most populated country. Ukraine's strategic geography, extensive natural resources, and significant size and population make it a pivotal nation in Central and Eastern Europe (Kotlyar et al., 2020). Ukraine's strategic location as a gateway between East and West highlights its importance in regional geopolitics and Russia's post-Soviet influence. Russia moved hard to preserve its geopolitical dominance in the post-Soviet area. Significant factors include Ukraine's strategic location as a littoral state on the Black Sea bordering several EU member states, as well as its function as a gateway nation for Russian gas and oil. Before the Nord Stream pipeline's completion, roughly 80% of the Russian gas bound for Europe was transported through Ukraine (Girgin, 2015).

“Kyiv is the mother of Russian cities.” On March 18, 2014, Vladimir Putin delivered an address in the Kremlin to commemorate the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its acquisition of Crimea. We cannot survive without one another, and ancient Rus is our common source (Delwaide, 2011). Ukraine, situated on the western fringe of the Eurasian steppe along the civilizational fault line, developed into a center that connected East and West as well as Europe and Asia. For a long time, Ukraine has been considered the “Gate of Europe” and the main gateway between Russia and the West (Aftab et al., 2022). This further underscores the critical significance of preserving Russia’s geopolitical influence over Ukraine, which is vital for Moscow to establish dominance in the post-Soviet region and reassert its presence in Central and Eastern Europe. Ultimately, Ukraine serves as a bridge facilitating access to the territories of the former Warsaw Pact nations (Kondratenko, 2020).

Moreover, since the takeover of Crimea in 2014, the confrontation between Russia and Ukraine has continued. Still, it has gotten more intense because Ukraine has indicated that it aspires to join NATO. In reaction to Ukraine’s ambitions for NATO membership, Russia announced a unique military campaign in Ukraine on the 24th of February, 2022. Since that time, Ukrainian and Russian soldiers have been embroiled in conflict, leading to substantial casualties on both sides and precipitating one of the most extensive refugee crises in Europe since World War II. The conflict has resulted in the displacement of around 8 million individuals from Ukraine. The start of war presents a considerable risk to international commercial connections. The countries actively engaged in the war are the most affected, followed by those geographically close together and closely linked markets (Mishra et al., 2024).

Therefore, despite their shared roles as strategic gateways, Ukraine for Russia and Pakistan for China, both big powers with enough military and economic strength, experience vastly different outcomes regarding military conflict, sovereignty, economic dependency, and international alliances. While Ukraine faces recurring military conflicts and challenges to its sovereignty due to tensions with Russia and its Western-leaning aspirations, Pakistan has largely maintained its sovereignty and deepened its economic interdependence with China, notably through initiatives like CPEC.

This research examines how China can potentially translate the CPEC to its broader strategy of power maximization and survival and why Pakistan remains an indispensable partner for China. The study will also assess the broader implications of this partnership, including its impact on regional stability, great power competition in South Asia. Through this approach, I aim

to provide an understanding of Pakistan's evolving strategic position and its significance in China's broader geopolitical calculus. As discussed earlier, the deeper cooperation between China and Pakistan differs from that of Russia and Ukraine. Despite sharing history and culture, Ukraine and Russia are in constant war. However, Pakistan and China have had cordial relationships since their inception without military intervention. The time frame for this study is from 2013 to 2025.

1.2 Questions

1. How do China's strategic and security interests make Pakistan a potential gateway state?
2. How does the China-Pakistan Strategic Alliance function as an instrument of China's power maximization?

1.3 Hypothesis

1. China's strategic expansion in the IO reflects a deliberate pursuit of rimland dominance following Spykman's Rimland theory, driven by the logic of offensive realism to maximize power, secure trade routes, and establish maritime superiority, using Pakistan as a strategic gateway state to access the IO and influence key points along the rimland.
2. China leverages its strategic alliance with Pakistan as an instrument of power maximization in South Asia by constraining India's regional influence, projecting power into the IO, and countering the US-India strategic partnership.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study holds significant academic relevance as it offers an understanding of Pakistan's evolving role as a gateway state within China's broader geopolitical strategy, particularly under the framework of BRI. By critically analyzing CPEC and its strategic implications, the research contributes to the scholarly discourse on regional connectivity, power projection, mutual benefits, and alliance formation in South Asia.

The study provides theoretical value by applying Spykman's Rimland theory and the lens of offensive realism to explain China's motivations and Pakistan's strategic utility. It helps elucidate how geopolitical positioning, economic interdependence, and strategic alliances intersect to shape regional dynamics. The findings of this research are particularly relevant for scholars of international relations, security studies, and geopolitics, as well as for policymakers

seeking to understand the strategic calculations behind China's engagement with Pakistan amidst an intensifying power struggle in the Indo-Pacific region.

1.5 Methods

In this study, I employ a qualitative approach using secondary sources to examine Pakistan's role as a strategic gateway state for China. This analysis focuses on how Pakistan's geographical and strategic positioning serves China's regional interests, particularly in its long-standing rivalry with India and the growing presence of the United States in the SCS. Given Pakistan's geographical location, its strategic importance to China extends beyond bilateral relations, influencing regional security, economic connectivity, and geopolitical alignments.

Qualitative methods in political science have undergone a significant transformation, marked by a renewed focus on methodological rigor and interdisciplinary applications. Traditionally, qualitative research relied on interpretive, narrative, and comparative approaches. However, a "third generation" of qualitative methods has emerged, integrating more systematic methodologies and engaging with statistical and formal modeling techniques. A key strength of qualitative methods is their ability to generate and test theories through in-depth case studies, process tracing, and comparative analysis. These methods enable researchers to uncover causal mechanisms and develop nuanced theoretical frameworks. For instance, scholars use within-case and cross-case analyses, deviant case studies, and typological theories to refine concepts and hypotheses (Bennett & Elman, 2007).

Qualitative approaches in political science utilize non-comparable observations to examine many facets of a causal or descriptive inquiry. These methodologies are articulated in normal language and frequently utilize limited samples, concentrating on specific persons, events, and circumstances. Qualitative research is optimal for exploratory analysis, case studies, and comprehending intricate causal pathways. Qualitative approaches are especially advantageous when knowledge about a subject is limited, when the objective is to formulate new concepts or hypotheses, and when concentrating on a singular example or a few cases (Gerring, 2017).

This study is a qualitative descriptive analysis supported by process tracing using secondary data. Process tracing is an essential tool for qualitative analysis. Scholars who conduct within-case analysis using qualitative data typically use this approach. To restate, process tracing is an analytical technique that allows one to derive descriptive and causal conclusions from

diagnostic evidence that is frequently interpreted as a part of a temporal sequence of events or phenomena. Finding diagnostic data that serves as the foundation for both descriptive and causal inference is necessary for process tracing (Collier, 2011). In the late 1960s or early 1970s, the phrase "process tracing" first appeared in the American field of cognitive psychology. Process tracing, as employed in psychology, describes methods for looking at the intermediate phases in cognitive mental processes in order to gain a better understanding of the heuristics that people use when making judgments. Finding the causal chain, the intervening causal process, and the causal mechanism between an independent variable (or variables) and the dependent variable's outcome are the goals of the process-tracing approach. Given these concepts, historical explanation and process tracing are intimately related. A historical explanation uses theories to explain each significant step that leads to the end, rather than just providing a thorough account of a series of occurrences (Bennett & Checkel, 2015).

The process tracing unfolds the historical events that eventually led to the compatible China-Pakistan alliance by explaining secondary data. According to Kumar (2018), a secondary source is a source that is already published and available. Therefore, I use already published academic articles and news articles to answer the crafted questions and analyze the deep geostrategic connections. To avoid bias and improve validity, I include newspapers and opinions regardless of their origin.

This research primarily focuses on Pakistan, examining how geographic, strategic, and economic factors shape Pakistan's role as a gateway state and an ally in a broader power maximization strategy of China. However, given the evolving global geopolitical landscape, the study will also consider the broader role of major players, particularly the US and India, in influencing this dynamic. While China's engagement with Pakistan is central to the analysis, the research will also account for how the US and India's strategic partnership impact this relationship.

1.6 Strengths and Limitations

This thesis has some limitations and strengths. Its central inquiry, how Pakistan serves as a gateway state for China, is both timely and relevant to evolving geopolitical dynamics in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific. Framed by Nicholas Spykman's Rimland Theory and John Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism, the study applies theoretical rigor to empirical investigation, allowing for a structured interpretation of China's strategic motivations. The focus on the CPEC

under BRI adds practical relevance, demonstrating how geographic access translates into political influence and energy security. Historical context further strengthens the study, explaining the continuity of China-Pakistan relations and offering insights into alliance durability. The qualitative methodology, grounded in secondary data and descriptive case analysis, ensures analytical coherence. Additionally, the thesis briefly introduces alternative gateway candidates such as Myanmar and Ukraine, reinforcing Pakistan's unique strategic utility. These elements collectively enhance the study's contribution to both theoretical debates and policy frameworks related to regional power projection and maritime strategy.

However, several limitations must be acknowledged. The reliance on secondary sources limits empirical depth and may restrict original contributions, particularly in assessing current defense cooperation and strategic negotiations. The lack of primary data, such as fieldwork, expert interviews, or internal policy documents, reduces the thesis's potential for more critical insight. While Pakistan's strategic value is argued, opposing viewpoints, such as concerns about Pakistan's political instability, domestic politics, governance challenges, or economic vulnerability, are not fully explored, leaving gaps in assessing long-term alliance sustainability. The comparative reference to Myanmar and Ukraine remains underdeveloped, and a deeper analysis of gateway alternatives would strengthen the argument in future research. These limitations suggest that future research should incorporate mixed-method approaches and comparative case studies to further examine gateway dynamics in different geopolitical regions. Nonetheless, the study remains a valuable contribution to international relations scholarship, offering nuanced insight into China's strategic calculus and Pakistan's regional role as a gateway state.

1.7 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter I introduces Pakistan as a strategic gateway state within China's regional and global geopolitical strategy. It frames the central research questions concerning China's interests in Pakistan and the enduring nature of their bilateral cooperation. The background elaborates on Pakistan's strategic geography, particularly in the context of BRI and CPEC. It also outlines the research's significance for international relations scholarship and specifies the qualitative methodology used, based on secondary sources. Chapter II complements this by engaging with the existing literature on gateway states, strategic connectivity, and Sino-Pakistani relations. It identifies scholarly gaps and enforces the theoretical framework, demonstrating how both

Rimland Theory and Offensive Realism provide a compelling lens through which to examine Pakistan's strategic relevance.

Chapter III explores China-Pakistan relations by tracing the strategic profiles of both states, examining their diplomatic history, and analyzing the durability of their cooperation. This sets the stage for Chapter IV, which delivers the core findings and discussion. It investigates China's rimland strategy and presence in the IO, the geostrategic utility of Pakistan through CPEC. A special focus is placed on the China-Pakistan military partnership, illustrating how defense cooperation serves China's rimland strategy and contributes to regional power projection. Finally, Chapter V concludes the insights drawn throughout the thesis, reaffirming Pakistan's strategic value as China's gateway in the Indo-Pacific region.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Literature Review

This review examines the existing academic discourse surrounding the concept of a “gateway state,” encompassing its multifaceted definitions, theoretical underpinnings, and empirical manifestations across various geopolitical contexts. It will delve into the attributes that distinguish a gateway state, such as strategic geographical position, robust infrastructure, and its pivotal role in facilitating international trade and cultural exchange, often without necessarily possessing vast natural resources or dominant military power (Moisoiu, 2017). Unlike the broader category of “gateway cities,” which focuses on command-and-control functions, gateway states are distinguished by their function as spatial intermediaries that enable global flows (Scholvin, 2021). This conceptualization updates earlier notions such as “buffer zones” or “shatterbelts,” which were primarily defined by their vulnerability to external pressures and often lacked agency (Moisoiu, 2017). The literature often highlights their distinct political and cultural identities, frequently characterized by unique languages, religions, or national churches, coupled with high educational attainment and advantageous access to external areas via sea or land routes (Kurecic & Kampmark, 2019).

Heldt’s (2023) study on the EU’s Global Gateway Initiative introduces the idea that modern gateway strategies are not limited to military dominance but extend to economic and infrastructure competition. The EU’s Global Gateway was launched as a counterweight to China’s BRI and represents the EU’s attempt to build spheres of influence through conditional infrastructure financing, promoting governance, sustainability, and democratic values. Heldt emphasizes that infrastructure investment is now a geopolitical tool, where gateway states are targets of influence projection. The EU’s approach focuses on blending public and private investment, contrasting with China’s state-centric model, and aims to create “connectivity alliances” that secure influence in Africa and beyond. This framing shifts the gateway state from a passive recipient to an arena of geopolitical competition.

The concept of the gateway state has evolved in contemporary geopolitical literature as an alternative to traditional buffer zones, reflecting a shift from passive containment to active facilitation of global flows. Scholars like Kurecic (2017) and Moisoiu (2017) describe gateway

states as geopolitically significant actors that enable economic, political, and strategic connectivity between larger powers or civilizations. Unlike buffer zones that absorb tensions, gateway states act as transit nodes, regions of qualified sovereignty that facilitate trade, energy, digital infrastructure, and diplomatic interactions. These states, such as Pakistan, Romania, and Turkey, often possess strategic geographic positioning, access to transport corridors, and links to global alliances, making them vital for international trade and power projection. According to Cohen's (1991) theory, gateways emerge from the overlap of political geography and economic necessity, becoming arenas where cooperation and contestation coexist. Their role in modern geopolitics, particularly under initiatives like China's BRI or the EU's Global Gateway, underscores their growing importance as instruments of influence and not just passive conduits. The stability and utility of a gateway state depend on its ability to offer security, infrastructure, and political alignment to competing global interests.

The literature on a gateway state is limited, and the concept itself is underdeveloped. Moreover, the concept in the literature is mostly related to the purely economic benefits of the gateway state to the beneficiary state. In modern geopolitics and competitive power politics. This concept needs to be revisited. Research is needed to study its strategic benefits in terms of power maximization, survival, and access to the sea. Such studies could be better explained with the help of offensive realism and rimland theory. The existing literature lacks studies of the gateway state concept through the lens of power maximization. Thus, I aim to study Pakistan as a gateway state through the lens of offensive realisms and rimland theory. The rimland theory helps to explain the geographic location, as illustrated by Spyksman, a key to controlling the Eurasian rimland.

A similar study underpins Romania as a potential strategic gateway in Southeastern Europe, positioned at the intersection of Eastern and Western geopolitical spheres. Crucially, Romania's gateway potential lies in its multi-modal transport capabilities, centered around the Port of Constanta, a key Black Sea maritime hub with extensive freight capacity. The envisioned interconnection through maritime, rail, road, and corridors could allow Romania to become a linchpin in East-West trade, especially as a land route bypassing potential chokepoints like the Bosphorus Strait. This positioning aligns with EU connectivity goals and enhances Romania's leverage in regional logistics and trade (Moisoiu, 2017). This study also falls under the economic logic of the gateway state, excluding the survival aspect. However, it does talk about its importance being a part of NATO.

Pakistan's geostrategic location, at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, has long attracted scholarly attention. From a traditional geopolitical perspective, early scholars emphasized the country's borderland dynamics with Afghanistan (Khan, 1980), its Cold War-era diplomacy (Rais, 2019), and its complex triangular relations with China and India (Hussain, 2017; Smith, 2013). Rehman and Faisal (2021) note that Pakistan's foreign policy behavior has consistently been shaped by its geographic constraints and strategic insecurities. These studies broadly align with Spykman's Rimland Theory, which identifies regions like Pakistan, situated along the Eurasian periphery, as critical to the global balance of power. Despite such geographic determinism, few scholars have explicitly applied Rimland theory to Pakistan's contemporary strategic choices.

From a geo-economic standpoint, recent scholarship has shifted focus from purely military-strategic analyses to the economic dimensions of statecraft. CPEC, a flagship project of China's BRI, is widely seen as a transformative initiative that redefines Pakistan's role as a gateway for regional trade and energy flows. According to Ullah (2022), CPEC exemplifies the fusion of geopolitical objectives with economic tools, aligning with what many scholars term "geo-economics." Shahzad (2022) describes CPEC as an economic gateway with potential for national integration and inclusive development, while Kousar et al. (2018) and Malik (2018) emphasize its capacity to modernize infrastructure and generate employment. However, this optimistic narrative is challenged by Mansoor and Sharif (2025), who warn that CPEC could evolve into a neo-colonial arrangement akin to a "New East India Company," thereby undermining Pakistan's autonomy. This suggests a duality in the literature between optimistic development narratives and critiques of asymmetric economic entanglement.

Concerning regional security implications, scholars such as Kuszewska and Nitza-Makowska (2021) highlight the ambiguous role of CPEC in stabilizing or destabilizing South Asia. Using neorealism and constructivism, they argue that the corridor enhances China's regional footprint but also intensifies tensions, particularly with India. Chazziza (2016) and Siddiq et al. (2019) explore Pakistan's function as a gateway for China's strategic entry into the Persian Gulf, suggesting that China's ambitions go beyond economics toward geopolitical influence. These analyses align with Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism, which holds that rising powers, like China, seek to maximize regional dominance through strategic partnerships, with Pakistan being a central player in that calculus.

Pakistan's relevance as a connectivity hub has also been discussed in terms of linking South Asia to Central Asia. Khetran and Khalid (2019) view CPEC as a pathway to broader regional integration, while Faisal (2019) and Hilali (2019) emphasize the challenges posed by regional rivalries and internal instability. While these studies underscore Pakistan's strategic utility, they often treat it as a conduit for external interests rather than an actor with its agenda. Multiple studies analyze how CPEC facilitates regional connectivity, linking China to Central Asia, the Middle East, and even Africa and Europe via land and maritime routes (Ali, 2022; Ghaffar & Khan, 2024). This broad network underscores Pakistan's role not just as a transit zone but as a hub for multidirectional regional integration. Khan (2024) also emphasizes China's efforts in soft power educational exchanges, media, and cultural diplomacy to cultivate long-term influence in Pakistan, reflecting a layered strategy of entrenchment.

In terms of comparative literature, similar geopolitical logic applies to Myanmar within the BRI. Htwe (2020) situates Myanmar within the frameworks of both Rimland and Heartland theories, highlighting its maritime importance and China's strategic efforts to bypass chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca. Yet, surprisingly, little work has applied these same theoretical lenses to Pakistan, despite its arguably more pivotal position.

Importantly, the existing literature rarely considers external counterarguments. While the benefits of CPEC are widely acknowledged, critics, particularly from India, the US, and Afghanistan, have raised concerns about strategic encirclement, sovereignty erosion, and the exacerbation of regional tensions (Faisal, 2019; Kuszewska & Nitza-Makowska, 2021). These opposing viewpoints are often underrepresented in Pakistani or Chinese scholarship, suggesting a gap in comprehensive evaluation.

A recurring theme in the literature is the strategic significance of CPEC, especially Gwadar Port, which offers China direct maritime access to the Arabian Sea and bypasses the vulnerable Strait of Malacca. Several scholars emphasize CPEC as a trunk line connecting China's western region to global trade routes (Javed & Ismail, 2021; Scholar & Khan, 2024). Gwadar is viewed as a keystone in China's ambition to secure energy supplies from the Middle East while enhancing its naval presence in the IO, a clear extension of Beijing's Rimland ambitions (Hussain et al., 2023; Khan, 2024).

From the lens of Offensive Realism, China's strategic calculus becomes evident. The literature reveals how China is using Pakistan to counterbalance India and, by extension, the United States (Ali & Khan, 2025; Aman & Yaseen, 2025). The formalization of US-India strategic

partnerships, especially under the Indo-Pacific framework, has heightened Beijing's interest in securing Pakistan as an enduring ally. In response, India has sought to offset CPEC through initiatives like the Chabahar Port with Iran and Afghanistan (Hussain & Jamali, 2019), signaling regional balancing behavior consistent with realist theory. However, the article excludes survival and power maximization, the essential elements of offensive realism theory. Moreover, China's engagement with Pakistan extends beyond economic ventures. Shared counterterrorism efforts, joint military exercises, and defense transfers reveal a deepening military partnership (Khan, 2024). Ali and Khan (2025) highlight that nuclear and defense cooperation between the two nations strengthens their deterrent capabilities, especially against India. This security alignment reinforces China's broader strategy of maintaining a buffer and projecting hard power along its southwestern flank. However, it lacks critical discussion on buck-passing and the arm transfer to Pakistan as a part of power maximization.

While economic narratives around CPEC emphasize development, scholars also underscore potential vulnerabilities for Pakistan. Economic interdependence may morph into asymmetrical dependence, raising concerns about sovereignty and debt (Muhammadi et al., 2022; Shahzad, 2022). Yet, others argue CPEC presents a transformational opportunity for Pakistan's economy and regional standing (Ali, 2022; Hussain et al., 2023), making it a classic case of geo-economic leverage serving geostrategic goals. The literature also addresses the triangular dynamics involving the US, China, and Pakistan. As Hassan (2022) shows, Pakistan's alignment with China intensifies its strategic dilemma, particularly given the growing US-India nexus. This raises questions about Islamabad's hedging strategies and its capacity to navigate pressures from both Beijing and Washington. While Pakistan continues to emphasize a shift toward geo-economics in its national policy, its geostrategic reality often pulls it back into a security-dominated framework (Iqbal, 2025).

The reviewed literature provides a comprehensive understanding of the economic logic behind the particular in terms of regional trade, infrastructure development, and energy security. These studies highlight how CPEC serves mutual development goals and strengthens economic interdependence between China and Pakistan. However, there remains a noticeable gap in analyzing CPEC through the lens of power maximization and strategic survival, key elements of offensive realism. Moreover, while Pakistan is identified as a gateway state in some literature, it is largely framed as a mere transit corridor connecting China to the Arabian Sea or broader markets in the Middle East and Africa without explaining the logic of a gateway state. What is

missing is a deeper exploration of Pakistan's strategic agency and its role as more than a passive conduit. The research is needed to examine Pakistan's functions not only as a logistical route but as an active player in China's broader rimland strategy and power projection efforts, especially in the context of regional security competition with India and the United States.

Despite rich empirical studies, the literature falls short in applying classical geopolitical theories to Pakistan's evolving role. Only a few indirectly frame China's use of Pakistan within Spykman's Rimland theory or Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism. While scholars like Iftikhar and Zhan (2020) provide insights into China's global port strategies, theoretical frameworks are largely underutilized. This leaves room for further research to bridge empirical developments with strategic theory, especially to understand how Pakistan's geography is being operationalized by China to achieve hegemonic goals.

In sum, the existing literature provides a robust empirical foundation on Pakistan's geopolitical and geo-economic significance, particularly through CPEC. However, there remains a notable absence of theoretical engagement with Pakistan as a strategic gateway within the broader frameworks of Spykman's rimland theory and Mearsheimer's offensive realism. These theories offer critical insights into how China's power-maximization strategy involves securing access to the IO through Pakistan, and how Pakistan's location shapes both its strategic utility and vulnerability. Addressing this theoretical gap can illuminate Pakistan's evolving role in the great power competition and offer a more structured understanding of its strategic choices.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study will explore this intricate relationship through the geopolitical theory of Spykman and neorealism (offensive realism). Geopolitical theories incorporate how geographical factors influence international relations and state behavior. It serves as a methodological framework for understanding the changing aspects of power, hegemony, and the strategic interests of states. This theory has evolved to incorporate modern challenges, including information warfare and the impact of technology on geopolitical strategies (Oksana et al., 2022). The geopolitical theories explain power dynamics and state behavior concerning geography, emphasizing the importance of territorial control, strategic interests, and economic and political factors in shaping international relations and conflicts, particularly in the context of great powers (Sabet, 2015).

Formulated in 1904, Sir Halford Mackinder's Heartland Theory sought to elucidate the evolving dynamics of global power management in light of technical advancements that impacted territorial control, particularly in warfare. He asserted that the world could be divided into discrete strategic regions, with the Heartland of central Eurasia being the most critical. Eastern European continent. He stated, "Whoever governs East Europe governs the Heartland; whoever governs the Heartland governs the World Island; and whoever governs the World Island governs the world." This assertion encapsulates Mackinder's perspective that dominion over this 'heartland' equates to 'command over the world' and, by extension, a substantial piece of it (Kumar, 2024, p.13).

Mackinder posited the Heartland as the geographical center of global dominance. In response to Mackinder's theory, Spykman contended that the true strategic boundary was the Rimland, the coastal fringe of the Eurasian landmass. Spykman forcefully contended that Mackinder's statement about the heartland should be changed to "Who controls the rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world." Spykman stated that Rimland is the paramount location for global power distribution due to its adjacency to continents and maritime areas. The Rimland served as a mediating arena between the Heartland, characterized by its distinct physical features, and the coastal and island governments possessing contemporary naval might (Spyksman, 2017, p. 27). Spykman contended that the maritime-centric Rimland countries possess the benefit of unrestricted access to the sea and greater exposure to external influences. Consequently, the dominance of land-centric heartland power may be restrained by the periphery Rimlanders. The Heartland has always remained under Russia's area of influence. However, Hitler, despite his power over Eastern Europe, failed to solidify his position in the Heartland, as prophesied by Mackinder. This validated Spykman's Rimland theory (Mirza & Ayub, 2022). As Pakistan has a coastline in the Eurasian region, I chose the Rimland theory to analyze China's ambition to expand its influence using Pakistan as a gateway state through cooperation instead of using force.

Nicholas Spykman's Rimland Theory is the most pertinent framework for comprehending contemporary geopolitics. The Rimland, located around the coastal edges of Eurasia, connects terrestrial and marine dominance, incorporating vital maritime chokepoints, vibrant economies, and substantial populations. Spykman contended that dominion over the Rimland was crucial for achieving supremacy in Eurasia and, consequently, the globe. In 21st-century geopolitics, the Rimland is the critical battleground for the contestation of global power. The Rimland, including the coastal areas of Eurasia, signifies the convergence of terrestrial and

maritime power, amalgamating their strategic strengths and weaknesses. It has vital marine chokepoints, such as the Strait of Malacca and Hormuz, which are crucial for international trade and energy transportation. Concurrently, it grants access to the Heartland, enabling terrestrial forces to extend their influence outside. The Rimland's twin purpose establishes it as the pivotal battleground for determining control over global resources, trade, and influence (Anwar, 2024).

The economic and military ascendance of nations such as China and India has transformed the Asian segment of the Rimland into a geopolitical focal point. Their expanding impact contests the current global order and generates new dynamics within the area. The revitalized rivalry among major countries, especially the US, China, and Russia, has positioned the Rimland at the forefront of geopolitical contention. These powers are competing for influence through economic investments, military presence, and diplomatic interactions. The Rimland has several vital trade routes and commercial hubs globally. Global economic trends, exemplified by China's BRI, are transforming the region's economic environment (Lee, 2025).

Moreover, Neorealism asserts that elites act self-interestedly, frequently characterized by the desire to maintain power. The enhancement of power is secondary to the preservation of power. This perspective fosters a prudent skepticism regarding assertions that nations would collapse due to the triumphs of proximate threatening powers or that elites will be influenced by ideology to relinquish their autonomy (Keohane, 1988). Neorealism explains that states are egoistic value maximizers driven by national security and survival. Systemic constraints shape their behavior, leading to conflict in competitive environments, while cooperation occurs when mutual interests align (Ogunbanjo, 2021).

In this study, I emphasize offensive realism. Neorealism emphasizes the interactions between states, highlighting how the international system shapes these relations through shared interests such as alliance formation, security dilemmas, and the maintenance of power and threat balances to achieve the primary objective of ensuring security. Geopolitical dynamics since the Cold War have significantly affected Pakistan and China, resulting in the fortification of their bilateral relations. The 1962 China-India conflict, fluctuations in Pak-US ties, Pak-India relations, and the dynamics of China-US and China-Russia relations exemplify the theoretical impact of Neorealism on Pak-China relations within the broader global and regional geopolitical context (Khan & Kasi, 2017).

John Mearsheimer's offensive realism in a nutshell rests on five core assumptions about the international system, each feeding into his broader view that great powers are compelled to

seek dominance. First, he assumes that the international system is anarchic; there's no central authority to enforce rules or protect states. Second, all states inherently possess some offensive military capability, meaning they can inflict harm on others. Third, no state can ever be certain about another's intentions, especially regarding aggression. Fourth, the primary goal of states is survival, which drives them to prioritize security above all else. Finally, states are rational actors; they strategize effectively within constraints to maximize their chances of survival and success. Taken together, these assumptions suggest that power accumulation isn't merely a choice, but a necessity driven by uncertainty and the structure of the global order (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Offensive realism posits that nations are inclined towards rivalry and conflict due to their self-interest, pursuit of power, and apprehension of other states. Furthermore, it contends that governments are compelled to act in this manner since it enhances their survival within the international system (Johnson et al., 2016). Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism explains that relations between great powers are inherently conflictual due to the structure of international politics. He builds on the idea that the international system is anarchical, meaning there is no principal authority to impose rules or uphold order. States cannot fully trust one another and constantly face uncertainty about each other's intentions, which may shift rapidly. The primary motivation of states is survival, and they act rationally to maximize their power to ensure security. Since all states possess military capabilities, this leads to a relentless competition for power, as each state aims to become the strongest or hegemon. In this anarchic system, only one state can achieve dominance, causing continuous rivalry and conflict. Thus, states strive to increase their relative power to secure survival, making the international arena prone to security competition (Toft, 2005).

Mearsheimer stated that "in international politics, God helps those who help themselves. This emphasis on self-help does not preclude states from forming alliances. But alliances are only temporary marriages of convenience: today's alliance partner might be tomorrow's enemy, and today's enemy might be tomorrow's alliance partner" (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 34). When major nations face a significant danger, they prioritize pragmatic alliances over ideological considerations. The logic of the balance of power frequently compels big nations to establish alliances and collaborate against shared adversaries. The United Kingdom, France, and Russia were allies opposing Germany before and during World War I. States may collaborate to conspire against a third state, as Germany and the Soviet Union did against Poland in 1939 (Mearsheimer,

2001). Through these arguments, I seek to understand the choice China made to make Pakistan a long-term ally.

Offensive realism, advocated by John Mearsheimer, proposes that states continually seek to expand their power and pursue hegemony over others. Mearsheimer contends that nations endeavor to maximize power owing to systemic instability and unpredictability. He distinguishes between “real powers” and “potential powers,” focusing on their military strength, resources, and number of citizens. While defensive realists like Waltz advocate for balancing against excessively powerful powers, Mearsheimer asserts that realignment is rare and that maintaining hegemony is fraught with structural difficulties (Khatoun et al., 2024). All states confront the persistent danger that other nations may employ force to inflict harm or achieve domination. Survival is the paramount purpose of the state. This necessitates enhancements in their relative authority through military expansions, unilateral diplomatic efforts, and mercantile international economic strategies. The stronger a state’s power relative to others, the higher its likelihood of survival (Karagiannis, 2013).

Therefore, the geopolitical theory of Spykman will provide a framework for understanding how geographical factors shape China’s strategic choices and interactions with its gateway state, which provides it with access to the most important regions in the world. It will examine the role of territorial control, strategic interests, and economic partnerships in fostering stability or conflict, explaining Pakistan’s relations with China. Offensive realism will further elucidate the systemic constraints of the international order, emphasizing how the anarchic nature of global politics shapes state behavior. The theory will explain how Pakistan, being an ally of the West in the past, maintained strategic cooperation with China. This will also explore how the existence of India as a rival of both China and Pakistan fosters this collaboration.

From a perspective of maximization of power, offensive realism will explain what are the motives of China trusting Pakistan more than any other country. This will explain whether Pakistan can provide the maximum security to China in South Asia as an ally. By integrating these theories, the study will dissect the variation in outcomes driven by Pakistan’s geopolitical role and alliances, demonstrating the interplay of geography, power dynamics, and systemic pressures in shaping its international relations.

CHAPTER III

CHINA-PAKISTAN RELATIONS

In this chapter, I shed light on the evolving profile of China and Pakistan and their enduring relationship, tracing the historical roots and strategic milestones that have shaped their bilateral ties. The chapter begins by discussing the general profile of countries. It then explores the historical trajectory of China-Pakistan relations, from early diplomatic engagement in the 1950s to the consolidation of their strategic partnership in recent decades. By examining key moments of cooperation and mutual support, this chapter aims to lay the foundation for understanding the broader geopolitical and security dynamics that are further analyzed in the subsequent sections of this study.

3.1 Pakistan

The emergence of new geographical realities in the subcontinent led to the formation of Pakistan on August 14, 1947, situated in the westernmost region of South Asia (Allauddin et al., 2020). Pakistan is a South Asian nation that covers the Himalayas and the Arabian Sea. It has borders with four sovereign nations: China in the Northeast, India in the East, Afghanistan in the West and North, and Iran in the Southwest (Kotlyar et al., 2020). Bordering South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, Pakistan is a strategically vital regional power due to its closeness to Afghanistan, Iran, China, and India. Pakistan connects South and Central Asia (Abbas et al. 2024). The land of present-day Pakistan, formed from British India, includes the ancient Indus Valley civilization, with a history spanning 5000 years (Bengali, 2020).

Formally designated as the “Islamic Republic of Pakistan,” Pakistan is a federal republic comprising four provinces: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab, Baluchistan, and Sindh, along with a Federal Capital Territory, Islamabad. The area and population of the component units are provided below. Pakistan, including a territory of 796,096 km² and a population of almost 241 million (2023), is the second biggest nation in South Asia by both area and population, and fifth most populated country globally, behind China, India, the USA, and Indonesia, and is the second most populous Islamic country, surpassed only by Indonesia (Dikshit & Dikshit, 2025).

The establishment of Pakistan in 1947 was a significant occurrence in global history, characterized by the partition of British India into two independent nations, India and Pakistan. This split was influenced by a multifaceted interaction of political, cultural, and religious elements, primarily aimed at creating a distinct homeland for Muslims in South Asia. The Two-Nation Theory was fundamental to the establishment of Pakistan, asserting that Muslims and Hindus in India constituted separate nations with unique identities and entitlements to self-determination. This ideology was crucial in promoting the establishment of a distinct Muslim state, highlighting the necessity of safeguarding Muslim cultural identity and political power amid Hindu majority governance (Virdee, 2021).

Pakistan operates as a Parliamentary Democracy, regulated by a constitution that establishes a bicameral legislature, a government led by the Prime Minister, a President serving as the head of State, and a Judiciary overseen by the Supreme Court of Pakistan as the highest authority (Dikshit & Dikshit, 2025). The economy of Pakistan expanded to \$410.96 billion in the fiscal year 25 from \$371.66 billion in fiscal year 24, mostly propelled by development in the services sector, followed by industry and livestock. Increased investments from both public and private sectors, stable exchange rates, reduced inflation, and growing per capita income facilitated growth (Khan, 2025). In terms of military, Global Firepower's 2025 military strength rankings position Pakistan as the 12th strongest military force. In 2024, Pakistan allocated \$10.2 billion, equivalent to 2.7 percent of its GDP, on military expenditures. The military of Pakistan comprises the Army, Air Force, and Navy. Pakistan is a nuclear power that conducted its inaugural nuclear tests immediately after India in 1998, therefore formally establishing itself as a nuclear weapons state (Chughtai, 2025).

3.2 China

China possesses one of the longest histories globally. The diverse ethnicities in China have collaboratively established a remarkable culture and possess a distinguished revolutionary heritage. Post-1840, Feudal China progressively diminished into a semi-colonial and semi-feudal state. The Chinese populace engaged in successive heroic endeavors for national independence, liberty, democracy, and freedom. Significant and transformative historical developments occurred in China throughout the 20th century. The 1911 Revolution, spearheaded by Dr. Sun Yat-sen, dismantled the feudal dynasty and established the Republic of China. However, the Chinese populace had not yet accomplished their historical objective of dismantling imperialism and

feudalism. Following arduous, prolonged, and complex struggles, both armed and unarmed, the Chinese populace of diverse nationalities, under the leadership of the Communist Party of China and Chairman Mao Zedong, eventually toppled the dominion of imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism in 1949, achieving a significant victory in the new-democratic revolution and establishing the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Chinese populace seized governmental authority and became the sovereign rulers of the nation (Saich, 19830).

China is the most populous country globally, with a projected population of more than 1.3 billion, constituting 19.35% of the world's population. In 1978, the country embarked on a remarkable economic development trajectory, abandoning Mao Zedong's Communist goal of a planned economy in favor of a mixed economic system termed "market socialism." They relaxed its control over residents' lives, dismantled the agricultural commune system, and implemented market-oriented concepts in the economy (Westhuysen, 2011). China has a total area of 9.6 million km² (3.7 million square miles), with a land mass of 9.3 million km², making it the fourth biggest country globally in terms of area, behind Russia, Canada, and the US. The laws of the PRC specify that four territories fall under its control. These include mainland China, the predominantly self-governing Hong Kong, the Macau Special Administrative Region (SAR), and Taiwan (Li Liu et al., 2012).

China, with a continuous culture spanning approximately 4,000 years, has been a prominent civilization across several ages of economic success and vibrant cultural and scientific advancement. The invention of paper, gunpowder, tea manufacturing, and movable type in China, together with its writing system, artistic culture, and philosophy, has had a lasting impact on the globe. China's history during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been marked by turmoil, characterized by foreign occupation, civil strife, and the disintegration of the long-standing hereditary dynasty structure. China has confronted the persistent issue of accommodating a large and varied population while reconciling its enduring culture with the pressures of industrialization and Western influences (Zhang, 2019).

In 2024, China's GDP attained US\$18.80 trillion, locking its status as the world's second-largest economy, trailing only the United States, which is anticipated to have a GDP of around US\$29 trillion (Zhou & Interesse, 2025). In terms of military, NDTV reports that China's military strength is significantly larger and more technologically advanced. China maintains a massive force of approximately 2.03 million active personnel, making it one of the largest standing militaries in the world. The Chinese military, officially known as the People's Liberation Army

(PLA), includes its Ground Force, Navy (PLAN), and Air Force (PLAAF), and is undergoing rapid modernization aimed at transforming it into a world-class force by 2049. In terms of defense expenditure, China allocated US\$229 billion for the 2023–2024 fiscal year, which is second second-highest defense spending after the US (Sharma, 2024).

3.3 A Historical View of Pakistan's Relations with China

Following the establishment of the PRC on 1 October 1949, Pakistan became the first Muslim nation to recognize China and the Communist government under Mao Zedong (Allauddin et al., 2020). Since their inception, Pakistan and China have maintained enduring amicable relations, mostly collaborating in political and military domains. Both nations have broadened their connection to encompass comprehensive social, economic, and cultural exchanges (Khan & Kasi, 2017). The subsequent paragraphs examine the characteristics of their relationship and how they have maintained it.

Pakistan recognized the newly formed PRC and inaugurated its diplomatic mission in Beijing one year later. After ten years of cautious relations marked by suspicion rather than animosity, the two countries commenced the development of a strong understanding that has remained notably stable despite the fluctuations of international politics, significant shifts in the international political landscape two decades prior, alterations in domestic circumstances, and a series of governmental changes (Khan, 2011). Pakistan and China are cooperating in several industries, particularly in the military, trade, development, and energy. Since the 1960s, China has served as Pakistan's primary supplier of military equipment. The JF-17 Thunder epitomizes this defense collaboration. Additionally, both nations have cooperated in the establishment of munitions factories, with China offering technical support to enhance and modernize existing facilities. The two nations have collaborated in the nuclear energy domain and conducted cooperative military exercises, with personnel from both countries participating in training programs at military institutions (Zeb, 2020).

The Sino-Pak connection exemplifies enduring friendships despite differing ideas, cultures, and social systems. Pakistan was the inaugural Muslim state to recognize China in 1950, with diplomatic ties commencing in 1951. The Sino-Pak relationship has resulted in several accords in strategic, diplomatic, and economic domains, with both nations providing mutual assistance in international forums. Previously, the relationship was primarily diplomatic and

military; however, in the twenty-first century, both nations have fortified their economic ties following the 2007 free trade agreement and the 2015 CPEC (Hussain et al., 2020).

The relationship with China has consistently been a fundamental aspect of Pakistan's foreign policy. Furthermore, Pakistan's geographical position has been at the intersection of the rivalries and politics of major and minor nations. Moreover, the existing multifaceted relationship between Pakistan and China has not emerged suddenly; it has undergone several challenges in its growth into today's more seamless, robust, profound, and continually increasing alliance (Javaid & Jahangir, 2015). Following Pakistan's accession to the US-led Western alliances, Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), diplomatic ties deteriorated gradually due to these alliances' opposition to the Communist bloc, particularly the USSR and China. The Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mr. Bogra, stated that we have no hostile intentions towards China and, as a member of SEATO and CENTO, maintain a cautious stance against India. The Chinese leadership acknowledged this position. Subsequently, the Premiers of Pakistan and China, Hussain Suhrawardy and Zhou Enlai, visited each other's countries in October and December 1956, respectively. Nevertheless, following the 1957 visit of Pakistani Prime Minister Suhrawardy to the United States, the bilateral relations between the two nations deteriorated in 1959. Furthermore, the border clashes commenced along the Hunza borderline in September 1959. The Chinese MIG aircraft intruded into Pakistani airspace. In November 1959, President Ayub Khan stationed the Gilgit Scouts in Hunza along the Xinjiang border and proposed a collective defense alliance with India against China. The Indian Prime Minister Nehru declined this proposal (Hussain et al., 2020).

During its pro-Western policies, Pakistan intervened in China's domestic affairs amid China's actions in Tibet. It also repudiated China's sovereignty over Taiwan and neighboring islands, and enthusiastically welcomed the Taiwanese Haji Mission in Karachi in 1959. Similarly, Ayub stated in an interview that the subcontinent would be susceptible to assault within five years. The Chinese control of Tibet and road development endeavors in Afghanistan present a significant danger from the north. It is a peril that cannot be dismissed by optimistic delusion. Consequently, such anti-Chinese conduct from Pakistan irritated China, prompting explicit criticism of Pakistani actions. Nonetheless, Ayub's policy move underwent rigorous scrutiny domestically. Moreover, Zulfikar Bhutto cautioned President Ayub that the relations between Pakistan and China would deteriorate. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Secretary of External Affairs, S.K. Delvi, urged Ayub to pursue reconciliation with China and to temper relations with the US, which was secretly assisting

India in enhancing its military capabilities. They articulated their grave apprehensions that these US-provided armaments would be employed against Pakistan (Javaid & Jahangir, 2015).

Two policy documents from the early 1960s merit consideration in this special edition of *Pakistan Horizon*. The additional secretary in the Pakistan Foreign Office, Agha Shahi, initiated an early note advocating for a new policy aimed at fostering closer relations with China in mid-1963. Before its submission to the president, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the then foreign minister, added a visionary remark stating that “in the vastness of Asia, buffeted by currents of history,” Pakistan and China seemed poised to establish a partnership akin to that of India and the Soviet Union. In early 1962, Pakistan publicly offered discussions for a border deal with China through an exchange of notes (Khan, 2011). During the meeting between the Chinese envoy and Ayub Khan, the ambassador proposed that China’s admission to the United Nations (UN) should be determined by a simple majority instead of a two-thirds majority. Ayub Khan informed him that “while border demarcation is a highly intricate issue, China’s accession to the UN is even more complex.” Both nations opted to commence discussions on October 12, 1962, “nine days before the initial Sino-Indian border clash, undertaken in a cordial atmosphere of mutual accommodation.” India aspired to emerge as a dominant force in Asia with the assistance of the United States and the Soviet Union. It was evident that this could not be achieved by surpassing China, the largest developing economic force globally (Farooq, 2017).

Throughout the 1971 crisis, Sino-Pakistani ties remained strong. China provided unequivocal diplomatic support to Pakistan throughout the conflict, having supplied significant military weapons in the months prior. Chinese assistance was amicable, although cautious during the first phase of the conflict. Moreover, China has always advocated for discussions and a peaceful resolution to the problem in East Pakistan and the associated Indo-Pakistani conflict. In November 1971, during Bhutto’s visit to Peking, Acting Foreign Minister Chi Peng-Fei asserted that disputes between states should be resolved through consultations rather than through the use of force (Hyder, 1972). In February 1971, during the visit of the then-president of Pakistan to China, China consented to transform four prior loans for economic aid, totaling \$110 million, into grants and to postpone the payback time of the 1970 loan of \$200 million for 20 years. During a meeting with the Pakistani leader, Chinese Premier Chou En-lai articulated his comprehension and respect for Pakistan’s position that future relations with its former eastern wing should be determined through bilateral negotiations, free from foreign interference or influence (Ahmad, 1981).

During Deng's leadership, China commenced enhancing its relations with India. During Deng's leadership, China maintained a neutral position on the South Asian area, particularly concerning Indo-Pakistani hostilities. Beijing has moderated its outspoken endorsement of Pakistan on the Kashmir problem, transitioning from advocating for the right to self-determination for the Kashmiri populace to endorsing a peaceful resolution of the matter. In 1979, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the then Foreign Minister of India, visited China. The successful visit led to further exchanges between the two nations. Nevertheless, it required an additional nine years for the former Indian Prime Minister, the late Rajiv Gandhi, to visit China in December 1998 (Zeb, 20120).

In 1982, Pakistan and China formed a Joint Committee for Economy, Trade, and Technology. The alliance remained robust, and even during the dissolution of the USSR and the conclusion of the Cold War, both nations persisted as powerful friends. In 1996, Chinese President Jiang Zemin conducted an official visit to Pakistan, during which both nations resolved to forge a comprehensive friendship. By the conclusion of the preceding century, the Pakistan-China connection was firmly entrenched and characterized as surpassing mountains in height and oceans in depth. Numerous Western analysts have drawn parallels between it and the US-Israel relationship (Zeb, 20120). Sino-Pakistani ties were somewhat strained due to China's neutral position over the Kashmir dispute. Conflicts undermined peace in South Asia by increasing the likelihood of hostilities between India and Pakistan on one front and India and China on another. Beijing reiterated its commitment to provide comprehensive help to Pakistan (Javaid & Jahangir, 2015).

The 1980s witnessed ongoing trade missions between Chinese and Pakistani leaders, along with enhanced collaboration and development of amicable relations and cooperation between the two nations. India, as Pakistan's adversary, consistently exhibited discontent over development endeavors in Pakistan facilitated by the Chinese government (Aslam et al., 2022). During the 1980s, Pakistan and China underwent significant economic reforms. The two amicable neighbors have enhanced high-level political interactions and supported one another in the economic reform process, establishing a basis for the advancement of bilateral ties (Xuyang, 2023).

Additionally, a significant advancement occurred in 1980 when Zia-ul Haq visited China. Upon Head Zhao Ziyang's arrival in Pakistan in 1981, the response from them was once again favorable. The two nations celebrated the agreement on the first Pass of Khunjerab along the

shared border in August 1982. In October of that year, President Zia-ul Haq revisited China. The exchange of heads persisted swiftly during Zia's tenure. In the spring of 1984, President Li Xiannian visited Pakistan. In November 1985, the newly elected Prime Minister, Junejo, visited China. In June 1987, Chief Zhao Zhiyang returned to Pakistan. In May 1988, Head Administrator M.K. Junejo undertook an extra visit to China. Moreover, in February 1989, Benazir Bhutto, the head of the government, visited China; this visit was notable and remarkable in the context of the resurgence of Pakistan's democratic process. In November of the same year, Chief Li Peng landed in Pakistan (Aslam et al., 2022).

The assistance of the PRC in the energy sector was substantial. It facilitated support for the transmission line from Tarbella and a thermal power facility at Gaddu. In 1987, China consented to provide three 210 MW thermal power units for the Jamshoro thermal project. In 1989, it consented to supply a nuclear power plant utilizing the Qinshan design. The project has encountered safety-related issues that Pakistan seeks to resolve, along with supply challenges from various Western nations apprehensive about the ramifications of Sino-Pak nuclear collaboration, despite the oversight of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards (Dutta, 1994).

The 1990s were a pivotal era in the progression of China-Pakistan ties, defined by a "proven and enduring development phase" amid worldwide geopolitical transformations. This period witnessed the fortification of diplomatic, economic, and military relations between the two states, establishing the groundwork for their strategic alliance in the 21st century. In the early 1990s, China consented to the construction of Chashma-1, a 325 MW nuclear power facility, which commenced operations in 2000 upon completion. China confirmed its participation in approximately six nuclear power projects in Pakistan and anticipates exporting additional reactors, indicating that civilian nuclear cooperation between Pakistan and China will advance despite apprehensions from various nations at both regional and international levels (Khan & Kais, 2017). In addition to this, Pakistan conducted a nuclear test in May 1998 in reaction to India's nuclear explosion. China offered comprehensive support to Pakistan's nuclear program, facilitating its emergence as a nuclear state. However, China did not veto the UN Security Council decision. The resolution condemned the nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan (Shamsi et al., 2019).

In the 1980s and 1990s, China helped Pakistan build a ballistic missile plant and develop the Shaheen I ballistic missile, modernizing its military. The most major military collaboration

began in 1992 when China gave Pakistan M-11 short-range ballistic missiles. Since then, Pakistan's main military equipment supplier is China. Pakistan received T-96 frontline tanks and F-7 fighter planes from China (Allaudin et al., 2020). The 1980s and 1990s saw a rise in Chinese backing for Pakistan's nuclear development, which has affected their Strategic Partnership. This support showed in commerce, technology, defense, and economic partnership. The 2000s enhanced ties between the two states. Rakisits (2012) claimed that in early 2006, the two nations adopted a five-year Development Program on Economic and Trade Cooperation defining their main economic and trade cooperation areas. The commercial relationship was strengthened in November 2007 when Chinese President Hu Jintao visited Pakistan and signed a free trade treaty that took effect on July 1. That year, leaders agreed to boost bilateral trade from US\$5.2 billion to US\$15 billion by 2010. Bilateral commerce grew 444 percent from US\$964 million in 1996, but their goal was too ambitious, reaching just US\$9 billion by 2010. On Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's 2010 visit to Pakistan, the two countries altered their target date and agreed to aim for US\$15-18 billion by 2015.

The 21st Century has emerged as a highly productive period for Pakistan-China ties across all domains, particularly in the military, economics, and strategy. The military regime led by General Pervez Musharraf has shown greater cooperation than its predecessors. He visited China many times, and Chinese officials also traveled to Islamabad. The year 2001 marked the 50th anniversary of the Pakistan-China friendship, which was commemorated with much enthusiasm in both nations. Chinese and Pakistani officials visited Beijing and Islamabad. The significant efforts undertaken by Musharraf were the transfer of operational control of the Gwadar Deep Sea Port to China. In 2002, Chinese Premier Wu Bangguo visited Pakistan to attend the groundbreaking ceremony of the Gwadar deep-sea port. China financed 80% of the first phase of the Gwadar project. The entire cost of the project was about \$248 million (Fani, 2009). In the fiscal year 2002, bilateral commerce between Islamabad and Beijing amounted to \$1.8 billion (Shamsi et al., 2019). Moreover, the JF-17 Thunder combat aircraft represents a significant milestone in Pak-China relations, a collaborative development initiative between “all-weather” allies. The JF-17 Thunder is a premier fighter aircraft. This is a highly capable, economical, and versatile fighter aircraft, equipped to confront present and future air power challenges. The JF-17 is a cost-effective aircraft. The inaugural prototype aircraft had its maiden flight in August 2003 (Khan & Kasi, 2017).

Commencing in 2001, the two nations collaborated on the building of Gwadar port, which was finalized in July 2013 following the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding about the CPEC. On April 20, 2015, the countries formalized an agreement to initiate a development project in Pakistan worth US\$46 billion (Kosar, 2021). This was an important step towards mutual interdependence in the 2010s. This extensive initiative, often referred to as a ‘Game Changer,’ encompasses a series of initiatives aimed at enhancing and constructing infrastructure in underprivileged regions of Pakistan, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan. The projected investment for this project is around 46 billion US dollars at inception and is escalating daily. The primary objective is to link China with Gwadar port while facilitating a swift transformation of Pakistan’s transportation infrastructure, modernizing the economy, and offering contemporary amenities to the residents of these regions (Muhammad et al., 2020).

China is Pakistan’s primary trading partner and a substantial investor, especially in the energy and infrastructure domains. In 2018, the bilateral trade between the two countries amounted to 18 billion dollars. In 2018, substantial alterations occurred in Sino-Pakistani ties, underscoring China’s crucial influence in the Pakistani elections and other key events of that year. In July 2019, Pakistan was one of over fifty countries that supported China’s policies concerning Xinjiang and co-signed a letter to the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) commending China’s “notable human rights accomplishments,” claiming that “stability and protection have been restored in Xinjiang, and adequate measures are implemented to safeguard the fundamental human rights of individuals from all ethnic groups.” In November 2019, Pakistan was one of 54 countries that approved a unified declaration in favor of China’s stance in Xinjiang. In June 2020, Pakistan was one of the 53 countries that endorsed national security laws in Hong Kong at the UN (Khalid & Rashid, 2021). Moreover, in 2021, the principal exports from China to Pakistan included broadcasting equipment (\$1.7 billion), refined petroleum (\$1.51 billion), and vaccines, blood, antisera, poisons, and culture (\$1.48 billion) (Afzal et al., 2023).

In 2021, Washington significantly diminished its connections with Pakistan, concurrent with its disengagement from the Afghanistan conflict. This, along with US initiatives to include India in its alliance network in the Indo-Pacific, has compelled Pakistan to align more closely with China. Pakistan now has stronger defense, economic, and structural-political relations with China than with any other nation. Simultaneously, depictions of Pakistan as a client state of China,

much less as an ally, are exaggerated, despite its limited regional alternatives to mitigate Chinese influence (IISS, 2025).

In 2024, there was a slight turn in the relations. A surprise diplomatic clash demonstrated Beijing's mounting ire about the safety of its people in Pakistan. In an unusually blunt response to remarks made by a top Pakistani politician who appeared to be downplaying the danger, China's envoy in Islamabad said, "It is unacceptable for us to be attacked twice in only six months." Jiang said, "President Xi (Jinping) prioritizes people's lives and is concerned about the security of the Chinese people." "The safety of the Chinese population in Pakistan is a particular concern of his" (Gul, 2024).

Following a series of incidents that were believed to be directed at Chinese people, mostly in the unrest-plagued southwestern region of Balochistan but also elsewhere, tension has been rising. Given the good diplomatic ties between the two nations, Pakistani authorities called the ambassador's remarks puzzling. However, it was also the first occasion that China and Pakistan had publicly blamed one another, which was a big difference from their customary courteous diplomatic talks, at least those that took place in public (Aamir, 2024). In February 2025, Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari conducted a state visit to China, strengthening the robust diplomatic and economic relations between the two countries. During the visit, both parties concentrated on augmenting commerce and investment, expediting critical CPEC projects, and strengthening military and security collaboration. Furthermore, dialogues occurred about the enhancement of partnership in technology and education, culminating in agreements to promote digital innovation and academic exchanges (Huld, 2025).

The Pakistan-China relationship has evolved from cautious diplomatic engagements into one of Asia's most comprehensive strategic alliances. Despite regional complexities and global geopolitical shifts, both nations have sustained a resilient partnership characterized by mutual strategic interests, military collaboration, economic cooperation, and diplomatic solidarity. From the early border agreement of 1963 to contemporary projects like CPEC, the Sino-Pakistani alliance has demonstrated adaptability and depth. As regional rivalries and global power competitions persist, the partnership continues to serve as a foundation of Pakistan's foreign policy and a strategic asset for China in South Asia.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction to Chapter

In this chapter, I will address the central research questions by applying key theoretical frameworks. The Rimland Theory, as articulated by Nicholas Spykman, posits that control over the coastal fringes of Eurasia, the so-called Rimland, is essential for achieving dominance over the Eurasian continent and, by extension, global supremacy (Spykman, 2017). This theory highlights the strategic significance of regions such as South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East, which serve as both economic engines and geopolitical buffer zones. In the context of this analysis, the Rimland framework is particularly useful for understanding the motivations behind China's BRI, its investments in key maritime infrastructure like Gwadar, and its efforts to secure alternative trade and energy routes that bypass vulnerable chokepoints.

Offensive Realism, on the other hand, provides a theoretical foundation for interpreting state behavior in an anarchic international system. According to this school of thought, great powers are inherently driven to maximize their relative power and security, often through assertive or expansionist policies (Mearsheimer, 2001). This approach helps explain China's proactive strategies in the IO, ranging from port acquisitions to military presence, as rational responses to perceived vulnerabilities and the competitive actions of other regional and extra-regional actors, notably India and the United States.

By integrating these two frameworks, I aim to systematically explore how China's actions in the IO region are shaped by both its desire to secure the potential Rimland and its broader quest for power and security in a contested environment. These theories bridge the concept of hegemony, as Rimland is linked through the pursuit of control over the Eurasian continent, and offensive realism, which emphasizes power maximization. In simple terms, both theories talk about the power and influence.

4.2 China's Strategic Expansion in the Indian Ocean

China is expanding its power to the rimland territories. As Spyksman argued that the Rimland of Eurasia, serving as a buffer zone or coastline region, is crucial for controlling the

World Island rather than the Heartland. Spykman contends that control over the Rimland equates to control over Eurasia, and that mastery of Eurasia confers global supremacy (Htwe,2020). The Rimland encompasses the globe's most dynamic economy, substantial populations, and swiftly advancing technical centers. Regions such as South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe are strategically positioned, hence presenting chances for great powers to conduct influence operations and engage in proxy battles. The BRI of China highlights the strategic significance of the Rimland. The BRI connects overland pathways in Central Asia with marine routes in the IO, therefore expanding Beijing's influence over the Eurasian periphery (Anwar, 2024).

The increasing significance of the IO waterways for the stability and prosperity of the Chinese economy has substantial geopolitical ramifications for Beijing. In a globalized economy, the expansion of China's Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) thousands of miles westward is neither unusual nor an immediate cause for alarm; however, Chinese analysts note that the intricate and predominantly unfavorable power dynamics in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) convert economic reliance on its maritime routes into a significant security liability for Beijing. China's escalating security apprehensions in the IO region arise not solely from its reliance on maritime trade routes but also from its perception as operating from a position of relative vulnerability, contending with several formidable entities seeking to assert dominance over some of its most vital economic lifelines (Lim, 2020). China's foremost concern in the IOR is energy security. The PRC challenges in the Malacca Strait and the impact of US initiatives to regulate what is referred to as the most critical oil route globally. Whoever governs the Strait of Malacca will also dominate China's oil shipping routes. China is acutely cognizant of America's superpower status and India's strategic position in the region, employing a concerted strategy to circumvent any provocative engagement with both countries. This enables China to broaden its strategic influence by collaborating with governments along the IO coastline. China recognizes that India might potentially utilize the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to obstruct the western access to the Malacca Strait, a critical route for China (Nguyen et al., 2022).

The Quad 1.0, also known as the Quadrilateral Initiative, was born in the aftermath of the December 2004 IO tsunami. The main impetus was a 2006 American proposal to establish a regional consultative group to address security challenges and maritime emergencies. The Americans thought the four democracies, the US, Japan, Australia, and India, could establish a consultative group that would regularly exchange opinions on regional issues as they all possessed

strong naval capabilities. But China, in particular, saw the Quad as a growing military and security alliance in the IOR and thought the idea could become “Asian NATO.” The unfavorable responses from China represented a Neo-Realist perspective on the global order and demonstrated its concern about a coalition that may likely threaten its expanding maritime presence in the IOR (Sarkar, 2020).

US President Donald Trump unveiled a new strategy for Asia at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Da Nang in November 2017 with the catchphrase “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP), which was echoed in the US National Security Strategy (NSS) released in December 2017. Japan had already named its strategic approach to the Indo-Pacific region the FOIP motto. To profit from the region’s prosperity, the United States appears to think that China’s strategic goal is to restrict external access to the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR) by making the region unduly reliant on China for development. The IPR was identified as the new regional priority in the December 2017 NSS, which concentrated on the strategic risks presented by China and Russia, two near-peer states. China was specifically targeted for trying to deny the US a legitimate right to patrol and transit the vital SCS, which is necessary for the US and its allies to maintain economic stability and trade in the Indo-Pacific (Arase, 2019).

The United States’ Indo-Pacific Strategy, principally designed to offset China’s influence, has considerably fortified the US-India strategic cooperation. This convergence has elicited security apprehensions for Pakistan, considering its historical antagonism with India. The United States’ ongoing military assistance to India, facilitating its emergence as a regional hegemon, is viewed by Pakistan as a direct danger to its national security (Noor & Maqbool, 2022). As a result, the expanding Indo-US Collaboration has propelled Pakistan closer to China, intensifying its bilateral relations. Strategic initiatives such as the CPEC, collaborative naval drills, and military acquisitions highlight this alignment. In this framework, Pakistan serves as a vital conduit for China to mitigate US and Indian influence, particularly in the IO and Arabian Sea areas.

The rise of naval power in the modern era altered the dynamics of global supremacy by allowing empires to extend their influence much beyond their terrestrial borders. Maritime dominance afforded unmatched mobility, enabling fleets to safeguard trade lines, build colonies, and project power across extensive regions. In the Age of Exploration, naval dominance became integral to empire-building, as maritime powers such as Portugal and Spain utilized their fleets to create global trade networks and colonial settlements. The capacity to dominate maritime routes allowed these empires to regulate the distribution of products, resources, and riches, affording

them a strategic superiority over their landlocked competitors. Maritime superiority enabled the interchange of ideas and technology, promoting the cultural and economic domination that supported their worldwide authority. This naval superiority enabled Britain to control global trade and sustain its status as the world's foremost power in the 19th century. The interdependence of commerce and naval power established a reciprocal relationship: economic affluence financed a formidable navy, while the navy protected trade routes, facilitating more economic expansion (Anwar, 2020). These ambitions can be seen in the 21st century with Chinese characteristics in the shape of the BRI. Firstly, China is securing easy access to the IO to avoid the Choke points like the Malacca Strait. Secondly, China does not want to be dependent on a single route. Through its BRI, it is expanding its sphere to control the rimland territories to acquire a second capability of avoiding choke points and threats in the IO. This is also aligned with the assumptions of Rimland theory.

China, for example, opened its first foreign military base in Djibouti, naming it a "logistical support center." The Chinese-built port of Djibouti will protect the interests of China in the Middle East and Africa, as well as the BRI. The goal of establishing overseas military bases or seaports belonging to China is to take benefit from the strategic locations of important maritime nations near crucial chokepoints, facilitate coordination and connectivity among states for regional development, improve trade, improve financial systems, extract industrial resources, explore economic platforms, and promote diplomatic and military interactions and cooperation to protect China's maritime security and lessen reliance on US maritime security (Shoukat et al., 2021). In March 2017, discussions occurred on the expansion of the PLA Marine Corps to facilitate more foreign deployments, especially at Gwadar. Given Beijing's interests in CPEC and Gwadar, this would have constituted a rational subsequent action, a notion previously articulated in a US Department of Defense assessment. The People Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) restricted peacetime access to Gwadar remains a worry, notwithstanding the absence of a permanent basing presence (Collin, 2018).

The Chinese Navy has reiterated its objective to develop operating capabilities beyond the first archipelago dividing the Yellow Sea, East China Sea, and SCS from the Pacific Ocean. Consequently, to mitigate potential conflict scenarios posed by other nations that might obstruct China's new efforts to protect its interests. The United States and its coalition partners pose a considerable danger to China in the Pacific, but the power vacuum in the IOR and its fragmented security framework offer a substantial opportunity for Chinese advancement. The domestic

economy and political stability were especially susceptible to interruptions in oil delivery. To assume a prominent economic and political position in the Indo-Pacific area, the Chinese government is offering considerable incentives for Chinese enterprises to construct ports in the IO area. In 2018, China made investments in the 50 most active ports globally. This indicates that the IOR has gained significance within the overarching strategy of the BRI (Aslam et al., 2023).

The SCS dispute is widely regarded as a significant issue in global politics today, primarily due to its capacity to destabilize the region and shift the balance of power within the Asia-Pacific. In addition, the crisis poses risks to regional peace and carries far-reaching consequences for global trade, security, and the international rules-based order. Central to the conflict are the SCS's vast natural resources, such as oil, gas, and rich fishing grounds, which have intensified competition and raised tensions. China's increasing assertiveness, particularly through its Nine-Dash Line claim, has sparked international concern. This claim extends China's jurisdiction across maritime zones that are hundreds of nautical miles beyond the typical 12- or 200-nautical-mile boundaries (Mia et al., 2024). In 2009, a series of intense and frequent interactions involving the United States, the Philippines, and Vietnam raised China's concerns about Washington's intentions concerning Chinese sovereignty and national security. Between 2008 and 2009, the US repeatedly urged China to cease its harassment of American companies engaged in oil and gas projects within Vietnamese waters in the SCS. As tensions escalated between China and Vietnam, Hanoi became increasingly open to strengthening its defense ties with Washington. Consequently, the SCS issue gradually evolved into a strategic instrument for the US to further its broader Asia-Pacific agenda. By mid-2010, Washington had come to view China's growing assertiveness in the SCS and beyond as necessitating a more robust American response (Hu, 2021)

Moreover, New Delhi's apprehensions over Beijing's influence in the IO pertain to its advancing blue-water naval capabilities, particularly submarines, and access to regional ports, notably in Pakistan. Beijing will continue to be cautious of New Delhi's influence in its near Western Pacific waterways, notwithstanding the latter's restricted capacity to project naval might in these regions. China primarily focuses on India's involvement in a perceived, extensive US-led containment strategy that enables India to utilize its partners' blue-water capabilities to jeopardize its interests across the Indo-Pacific coastal regions. Although a conflict between China and India is unlikely, their maritime competition, stemming from unresolved terrestrial political issues, will continue amidst their blue water naval ambitions (Collin, 2018). Along with this, as

part of its pivot and rebalance strategy toward Asia, the United States aimed to engage more actively in regional flashpoints and allocated greater resources to address the SCS disputes. This involvement also emboldened certain ASEAN claimants to take bolder actions. Although the US was not the direct instigator of these conflicts and tensions, a common narrative in China portrayed Washington as the mastermind behind the scenes (Hu, 2021).

The rivalry among major nations for dominance over terrestrial routes to the IO has been equally fierce as the competition at sea. Indeed, the extra-regional maritime powers that have predominated in the region for the last several centuries have often intervened to obstruct Eurasian continental powers from establishing new overland routes to the ocean. The limited presence of overland connections enabled maritime nations to maintain dominance over the northern IO as a relatively confined area (Brewster, 2016). If the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, situated near the Malacca Strait and historically seen as a significant risk to China's maritime security, are considered. Both discrete PLAN fleets and platforms, as well as Chinese energy lifelines in the IO Region, are vulnerable to possible Indian interdiction during periods of crisis. Admiral Sureesh Mehta, the former Chief of Naval Staff of India, stated that Beijing's "weak area" has been New Delhi's naval presence in the IOR, asserting that "we sit in the IO and that is a concern for China and they are not happy as it is not so easy for them to come inside" (Collin, 2018, p.10).

The South Asian states situated on the rimland are seen as significant for the sustenance of Chinese economic initiatives. The instigating rivalry with India compelled China and Pakistan to fortify their strategic alliance. The partnership between the Chinese military and security forces and Pakistan encompasses multifaceted cooperation, addressing both the economic and military-strategic goals of the two nations (Swati et al., 2024). Gwadar port is seen as a component of China's "String of Pearls Strategy" and a significant milestone in Pakistan-China economic and strategic collaboration. This strategic position along the South Western Arabian Sea coast, next to the Straits of Hormuz, an essential global oil supply route, is significant for India, as 63 percent of its oil imports are via this maritime passage. The naval presence of China and Pakistan will oversee India's hegemonic, subversive, and expansionist ambitions in the IO, Arabian Sea, Persian Gulf, and Indo-US strategic collaboration (Javaid, 2016).

The strategic dynamics unfolding in the IO region reflect the practical application of Spykman's Rimland Theory, which emphasizes that control over the coastal fringes of Eurasia, the Rimland, equates to control over the Eurasian continent, and ultimately, global supremacy. As detailed, China's increasing presence in maritime South Asia, through initiatives like BRI and

strategic ports in Gwadar, Djibouti, and Kyaukpyu, represents a calculated expansion into the Rimland. According to Spykman, these territories form the critical buffer zone between the Heartland (inner Eurasia) and maritime powers, serving as the arena where major geopolitical contests occur. In this context, Pakistan emerges as a pivotal Rimland partner, offering China a direct maritime outlet while bypassing traditional chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca, which remain vulnerable to US and Indian influence. This supports Spykman's assertion that Rimland control, not Heartland dominion, is the key to Eurasian and, by extension, global dominance.

Within the framework of offensive realism, China's increasing projection of military and economic power into the Rimland and IOR is an example of power maximization and expansion in action. Spykman's Rimland theory, which emphasizes that control over the Eurasian periphery enables global dominance, aligns seamlessly with offensive realism's emphasis on power maximization and survival. China's BRI and its naval presence in key maritime chokepoints (e.g., Djibouti, Gwadar) reflect Beijing's determination to expand its influence over critical geostrategic corridors that are vital to its economic and security interests.

4.3 Pakistan as a Strategic Gateway State and China's Strategic and Security Interests

The South Asian States, especially Pakistan, are a crucial component of the Asian Rimland, which has significant importance for landlocked nations in overcoming geographical obstacles. Nonetheless, it facilitates convenient access to the ocean for China (Hussain et al., 2022). China's intentions to establish overland links between China and the IO are anticipated to possess more strategic importance than the Maritime Silk Route effort. Access to the IO is frequently perceived from a heavily securitized perspective. Strategic players have historically endeavored to leverage geographical limitations to preserve the region as a largely insular strategic domain. The aforementioned causes have led to the historical supremacy of various extra-regional maritime powers in the IO, thereby marginalizing Eurasian land powers like China and Russia (Brewster, 2016).

Pakistan's geopolitical alignment significantly influences global politics and determines regional stability. This region is important due to its strategic proximity to crucial economic routes, including the Arabian Sea and the Strait of Hormuz (Yaseen et al., 2024). For years, East Asian nations have presented several obstacles at both the regional and international levels. Japan,

South Korea, and the USA have exhibited caution at China's increasing influence via BRI and have established an economic coalition to hinder or obstruct China's economic expansion. Additionally, India is a growing power in South Asia, worried about Chinese encroachment in the IOR. To leverage economic and commercial potential and maintain the momentum of economic development. CPEC, a flagship initiative of the BRI, is integral to China's economic security policy and is essential for fulfilling Beijing's economic security objectives (Rahman et al., 2022).

CPEC is a comprehensive geopolitical project designed to extend China's influence in South Asia and the IOR while also countering India's regional supremacy. Consequently, it provides China with a strategic buffer, ensuring a militarily robust ally in Pakistan adjacent to India, while also enhancing its regional influence in countering India's expanding alliances in the Indo-Pacific. It ensures the security of its cargo from West Asia due to the port's closeness to the Strait of Hormuz. Particularly regarding India, the Gwadar port affords China direct access to the Arabian Sea and the IO (Panda, 2024). The Strait of Hormuz is one of the most significant shipping lanes in the world and a critical chokepoint for the transportation of oil. Approximately 20% of the world's oil and gas passes through this slender Gulf shipping channel. The world economy would suffer greatly if it were blocked, as trade would be disrupted and oil prices would rise (Butler, 2025).

China had a minimal presence in the IO a decade ago. China is presently undertaking substantial expenditures in the orderly upkeep of the Indo-Pacific area through military and diplomatic initiatives. In its May 2015 Defense White Paper, China articulated its objective to become a significant maritime power by enhancing and extending its naval capabilities beyond its territorial limits (Yaseen et al., 2024). Gwadar Port, a part of CPEC, is a strategically vital location for the security of the Maritime Silk Road. This substantial foreign direct investment in Pakistan's energy and infrastructure development is also crucial for the vulnerable economy of Pakistan. The geographical significance of Gwadar port renders it crucial to the advancements in CPEC and BRI. Gwadar port is situated about 400 km from the global oil supply route, the Strait of Hormuz, and is positioned at the nexus of marine pathways linking the Persian Gulf, East Asia, and the Pacific. Gwadar has the potential to obstruct the marine passage of the Red Sea and affect the economic lines between Africa and Europe (Rahman et al., 2022).

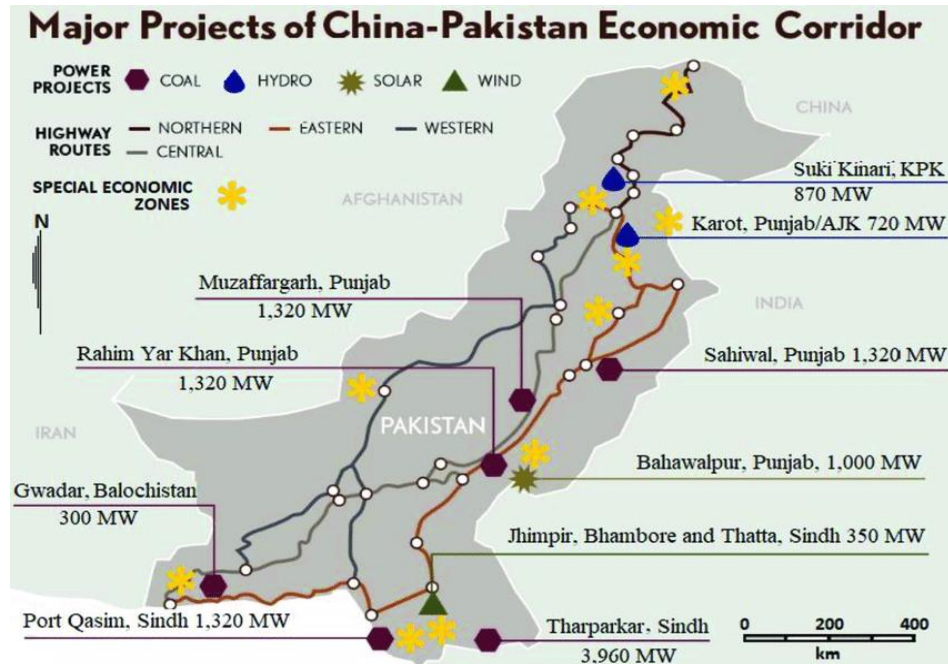


Figure 4.1 CPEC Map, Farooqi & Aftab (2018)

In contemporary global politics, the Rimland is increasingly pertinent due to its strategic geographical positions, encompassing significant maritime routes and chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca and the Strait of Hormuz. The economic importance of Rimland nations is underscored by their status as among the world's fastest-growing economies and essential participants in global commerce. Additionally, the region exhibits political variety, comprising a blend of influential nation-states, emerging economies, and areas of conflict (Lee, 2025).

Aligning with Spykman's theory is the geographical centrality of the IO in China's strategic vision. With ports like Gwadar situated near vital sea lanes and chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, I argue China is attempting to cement its hold over maritime corridors that connect the energy-rich Middle East to the industrial hubs of East Asia. These projects, and China's growing naval investments, underscore the theory's emphasis on territorial control of coastal areas to exercise power over continental and oceanic routes. As part of the Asian Rimland, Pakistan provides China with a critical land-sea link that bypasses maritime chokepoints and counters India's regional influence. Offensive realism explains this as Beijing's rational move to strengthen its position in an anarchic system by empowering a militarized ally next to its rival, India. This partnership turns Pakistan into a gateway, aligning with Spykman's belief that control over the Rimland leads to control over Eurasia, and ultimately global power. The following map

illustrates the geography of Rimland expanding from the eastern part of the Eurasian continent to its western part.

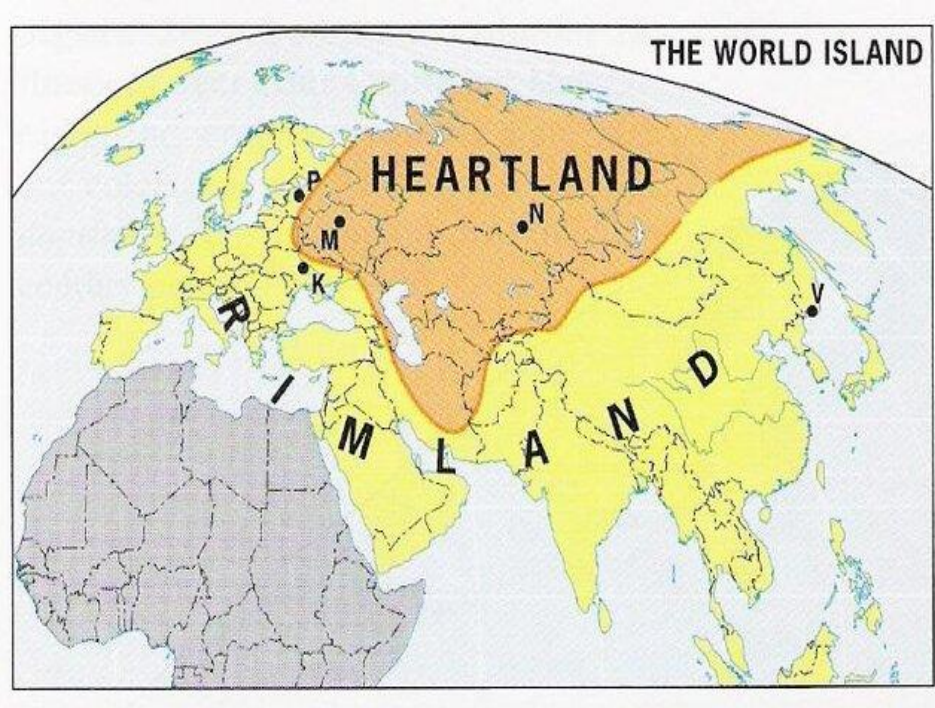


Figure 4.2 The Geography of Rimland, Wakkumbura (2023)

Through the lens of Rimland theory, Gwadar Port, with its strategic importance, becomes a tool of regional hegemony, strengthening China's hand in regional power competition with the leverage of a strategic position in the IO. With these leverages, China can easily oversee the trade in the IO and exert influence in the Strait of Hormuz. This enables China to take aggressive steps against its adversary in times of crisis, impacting trade flow and energy needs. On the other side, offensive realism thus sees China's CPEC project not as cooperative or benign, but as deliberate actions aimed at shifting the balance of power in its favor in the emerging multipolar global order. Through the CPEC project, China builds an alternative for its energy security in case of disruption in the IO. However, Pakistan also gets the economic benefits along with a shadow of a great power. The benefits Pakistan gets in terms of military trade are discussed in the upcoming section.

The Indian-owned Andaman and Nicobar Islands, located near the Bay of Bengal, have geostrategic importance in the large interests of India by containing China in the IO (Hashim et

al., 2023). Myanmar has emerged as a potential conduit for energy supplies to China and India. China is seen as the primary investor in Myanmar, facilitating its access to the IO. Since the 1980s, China has engaged with Myanmar for both economic and geopolitical objectives. Myanmar possesses a considerable advantage for energy development due to its strategically crucial geographical position. In 2007, the Chinese National Development and Reform Commission sanctioned a deal for an oil pipeline. In 2009, China commenced the building of oil and gas pipelines via Myanmar (Kyaukpyu Port) to Yunnan province, establishing a fourth route for the importation of oil and gas (Shoukat et al., 2021).

The proximity of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (shown in the map below) is a potential threat to China in the Bay of Bengal and the Malacca Strait. Any trade through the Kyaukpyu port of Myanmar would be under the strict surveillance of India. This would again limit the threat-free trade of China in the IO, like the “Malacca Dilemma.” The following map demonstrates the geostrategic importance of the Nicobar and Andaman Islands for India and its ally, the US. It provides India and its allies a pivotal point to oversee the movement of China-bound ships in the IO. It has proximity not only to the Bay of Bengal but also to the Strait of Malacca, leaving China in the nexus of security threats. I argue that the threats in the Bay of Bengal would not be much different from those of the Malacca Strait. The Bay of Bengal is encircled by the Indian territory, making the swift flow of China’s energy security needs vulnerable.

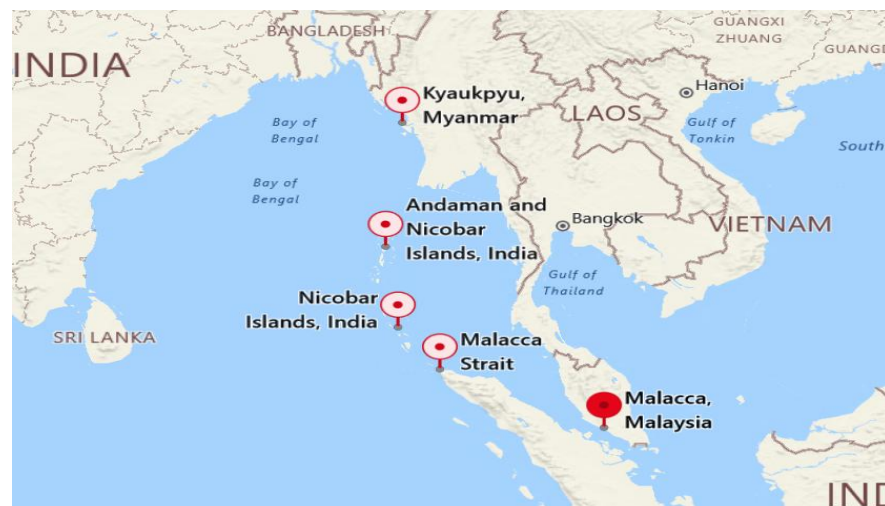


Figure 4.3 Strategic Locations in the Indian Ocean, © 2025 Microsoft Corporation

China has become the second-largest oil importer, a necessity that will progressively increase as the nation industrializes and advances economically. The CPEC project eliminates thousands of kilometers of maritime transit across Southeast Asia. This route is essential, particularly for the development of western parts of China and for facilitating the export of Chinese products to the global market. Moreover, China could exert control over the IO, with its interests focused on advancing Pakistan and preserving the current balance of power between India and Pakistan. The initiative would empower a robust and self-assured Pakistan to confront India, therefore bestowing significant advantages on China (Javaid, 2016).

China's primary interests in the IO area are mostly associated with its energy and oil security. Beijing's oil self-sufficiency concluded in 1993, leading to a sharp increase in imports during the subsequent decade. By 2014, China surpassed the United States to become the leading net oil importer globally. In 2017, Chinese demand reached 12.8 mbpd, while domestic output declined to 3.8 mbpd, resulting in an oil reliance ratio of 70 percent for Beijing. China's reliance on imported oil will intensify in the next decades. Chinese oil consumption is anticipated to attain a minimum of 16.5 mbpd and perhaps as high as 17.8 mbpd. In comparison with domestic output is expected to decline to below 3.5 mbpd by 2040, indicating that imports will satisfy almost 80 percent of China's requirements. The predominant source of Chinese oil imports has been the Middle East and Africa, rendering the IO an essential maritime route for Beijing. The proportion of the two areas in Chinese oil imports has fluctuated between 63 and 75 percent during the past two decades. China's dependence on international maritime commerce routes is notably high: over 80 percent of worldwide goods trade by volume is transported by sea, with current estimates indicating that China's proportion is likely between 90 and 95 percent (Lim, 2020).

Almost all marine energy imports go through a sole strategic chokepoint: the Strait of Malacca. SLOCs of China's energy converge through this strait. Annually, \$3.5 trillion in trade, representing one-third of global GDP, transits the Strait of Malacca, encompassing two-thirds of China's entire trade volume, over 83% of its oil imports, and around 16 mbpd of oil and 3.2 mbpd of LNG. Approximately 6.4 billion deadweight tons (dwt) of cargo transit the strait each year, with around 10 ships arriving or departing every hour. The majority of these exports comprise fossil fuels sourced from the Middle East and Africa (Dossou, 2025). I argue that the Gwadar port and the CPEC serve as a substitute for meeting energy needs during severe crises in the Malacca Strait and SCS. The Gwadar port is not only reducing transportation costs in trade, but projections also suggest a 70% decrease in transit time for commodities transported from Gwadar to China.

Additionally, the railway construction from Gwadar to Kashgar will diminish energy transit distance from the Middle East to China by 85%. This will lessen dependence on the IO and the Strait of Malacca, shortening the transit route from 12,000 km to 2395 km. The fully operational Gwadar port provides a substitute to the IO route by connecting China to the Strait of Hormuz and the Arabian Sea, thereby ensuring energy and commercial security (Rahman et al., 2022).

The reliance of China on the IO, especially the Malacca Strait and the SCS, is making China vulnerable to a severe crisis. This questions the survivability of China, where the offensive realism says that states strive for survivability in the anarchic system. In a hypothetical scenario of no security threat to China in the Malacca Strait and SCS, would reduce the geostrategic importance of Pakistan to China. However, the CPEC project could still be valuable for the trade between China, Pakistan, and other Central Asian nations. Most importantly, this project reduces the transit time from the Middle Eastern countries to China. The project could also be used for the energy needs of western China, which is far away from the coastline. Therefore, I argue that it is the offensive realist strategies of China that make Pakistan a strategic gateway and a robust ally.

China's energy security may be impacted both immediately and over time by a blockade of the Malacca Strait. Without an alternative to the Malacca Dilemma, China's extreme reliance on oil imports would make it vulnerable in the long run. The Chinese economy would suffer greatly. As a result, its ongoing survival in the anarchic international system would be called into doubt. Mearsheimer (2001) contended that a maritime blockade may occasionally be ineffective due to the blockading fleet being thwarted at sea, preventing it from severing the rival's SLOCs. The British and American navies impeded Germany's blockades in both world wars by complicating German submarines' proximity to Allied trade, so preventing them from launching torpedoes. Even when a blockade effectively halts nearly all of the target state's maritime trade, its effects are often constrained for two reasons. Initially, big nations had methods to circumvent blockades, such as recycling, hoarding, and employing substitutes.

Following Mearsheimer's statement, the survival of a state in an anarchic international system depends on its ability to secure and maximize power. If trade and energy imports are disrupted, especially for an oil and resources-dependent state like China, its economic strength, industrial output, and ultimately its military capability would be severely compromised. Since economic power reinforces military power, such disruptions threaten the state's long-term survival. Thus, I argue that securing trade routes and energy supplies is not merely an economic

concern but a strategic imperative. A Great power must preemptively eliminate vulnerabilities, such as chokepoints like the Malacca Strait, and the SCS crisis, by developing alternative routes, like CPEC, to maintain autonomy, ensure uninterrupted access to resources, and maximize relative power against rivals.

Beijing may be seeking more than dual-use facilities and is apparently in negotiations with Islamabad on the development of navy and air bases at Jiwani, located sixty kilometers west of Gwadar (Lim, 2020). In November 2016, Islamabad proposed that PLAN would deploy resources to protect Gwadar and maritime trade under CPEC “in coordination” with the Pakistan Navy. This followed the completion of a naval exercise focused on the maritime security of CPEC and Gwadar Port. This may suggest direct military operations to safeguard Chinese interests in Pakistan. The Sino-Pakistani alliance is a factor in New Delhi’s assessments during escalations with either Beijing or Islamabad (Collin, 2018).

I don’t consider CPEC purely an economic project. I argue that CPEC is a power maximization strategy of China to gain access to the IO as a substitute for the Malacca Strait. I don’t alienate economic might from military might. I agree with Mearsheimer’s (2001) statement that the economy is the foundation of military power. I contend that the blockade of Malacca in the first place affects the energy needs of China, followed by less production of the industries, and so the decrease in exports. This would eventually jeopardize the economy of China in the long run. The economic benefits alone could be considered as a survival strategy. Because countries translate their economies into military might. Mearsheimer (2001) does talk about the translation of economic might into robust military power. However, he also states that it is not a sound indicator of military power. I argue that it depends on the priorities of nations and the threats to them. A threatened state would most probably prioritize translating its economic might into military might, or it would prefer bandwagoning or an alliance. For instance, Ukraine, during the crisis with Russia in the year 2025, allocates 34 percent of its GDP to military expenditures, positioning it as the highest spender relative to GDP among the forty largest military spenders. In 2015, Ukraine’s military expenditure constituted merely 3.5 percent of its GDP. In 2024, the top 15 military spenders constituted 80 percent of worldwide military expenditure, totaling \$2,185 billion. The leading 15 spenders predominantly include the main global economies, with the exceptions of Israel and Poland (Liang et al., 2025). Moreover, Ukraine was the preeminent arms importer worldwide in 2023 and 2024, establishing itself as the top importer for the period 2020-2024 (George et al., 2025). It reflects that states, according to their security and strategic planning,

translate their economy into military might. A country with a stable economy is most likely to build its military power faster than a country with an unstable economy. However, some countries with an unstable economy can build military might with the help of alliances. For instance, Pakistan, with an unstable economy, is a nuclear power. Throughout its history, Pakistan has received military assistance from the US in the beginning and later from China, mainly due to its geostrategic position.

My argument in this thesis is based on the security of China's energy needs and its power maximization strategy, along with the importance of securing Pakistan as an ally. The alliance between China and Pakistan is not only motivated by the geography of Pakistan. It is also the history of power politics in South Asia. For instance, the Sino-India relations, India-Pakistan relations, and the relations of these countries with the US. These relations bring China and Pakistan closer to each other. Mearsheimer said that "I think there is a likelihood that Pakistan would side with China, and the US would try to peel off Pakistan from China in the emerging Cold War. The Indians would ally with the US. The Americans would try to get Myanmar in its fold" (DAWN, 2021).

Additionally, Trump has praised Pakistan multiple times since he came to power for his second tenure. In March 2025, Trump expressed gratitude to Pakistan for helping to apprehend a regional Islamic State leader connected to the 2021 attack at the Kabul, Afghanistan, airport that claimed the lives of dozens of Afghan civilians and 13 American service members (Ur-Rahman, 2025). Moreover, Trump praised the Army Chief and Field Marshal of Pakistan during his visit to the white House for his timely de-escalation and averting a major war in South Asia. Trump further said that he loves Pakistan and also praised Modi (Mason et al., 2025). Additionally, the US signed an oil reserve extraction deal with Pakistan (Shahid et al., 2021).

Trump's repeated praise of Pakistan and trade deal signals a strategic shift aimed at mending and strengthening US-Pakistan relations. By openly commending Pakistan's military leadership and expressing affection for the country, Trump appears to be pursuing a dual strategy: restoring cooperation and leveraging diplomatic goodwill to peel Pakistan away from China's growing influence. Trump's gestures may be designed to weaken Islamabad's dependency on Beijing in both security and economic domains. This calculated diplomacy reflects Washington's broader objective of reasserting its presence in South Asia amidst intensifying US-China competition. These might be the steps that Mearsheimer mentioned about the US, that it would try to peel Pakistan from China.

I do not argue that the United States would succeed in peeling Pakistan away from China. However, this raises important strategic questions: How would such a shift impact China? Would Beijing be willing to let go of a long-standing, strategically significant partner? Can China afford to lose a sustainable alliance that serves its regional ambitions, particularly in South Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific context? I argue that Beijing is unlikely to simply “let Pakistan go” without attempting to counter or mitigate such a shift. The loss of Pakistan would not only weaken China’s western flank but also diminish its capacity to project power and secure trade routes for its energy security. Furthermore, Pakistan plays a role in China’s broader effort to encircle and balance India, and any drift toward the US could tilt the regional balance unfavorably for Beijing. In my opinion, China can’t afford two of its nuclear power neighbors in the US block. This is also the reason that China is deepening its relations with Pakistan.

China’s development of CPEC and Gwadar Port aligns with rimland logic, as it secures access to India and bypasses vulnerable maritime chokepoints historically dominated by Western powers, particularly the United States. Simultaneously, Offensive Realism explains China’s actions as part of its broader strategy to maximize power and ensure survival in an anarchic international system. China is driven by the imperative of survival in an anarchic world, seeking to secure energy flows, reduce dependency on chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca. Together, these theories reveal that China’s investments are not just economic; they are deeply geopolitical efforts to control the Rimland, secure energy routes, and tilt the regional balance of power in its favor.

The maps below illustrate key maritime and strategic chokepoints across the IO and SCS that are vital for China’s energy security and trade routes, while also highlighting the associated security vulnerabilities. China is heavily dependent on maritime trade, particularly oil imports transit through the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca, both of which are susceptible to geopolitical instability or naval blockades. The maps show China’s efforts to mitigate these risks through a “String of Pearls” strategy, involving strategic investments and port developments in Gwadar, Djibouti, Kyaukpyu, and the Port of Hambantota. These positions allow China to secure sea lanes and project influence, but they also expose Beijing to regional rivalries and potential encirclement by the US and its allies, particularly around the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Visakhapatnam, and the SCS.



Figure 4.4 Chokepoints and strategic locations in the Indian Ocean, 2025 Microsoft Corporation (Edited)

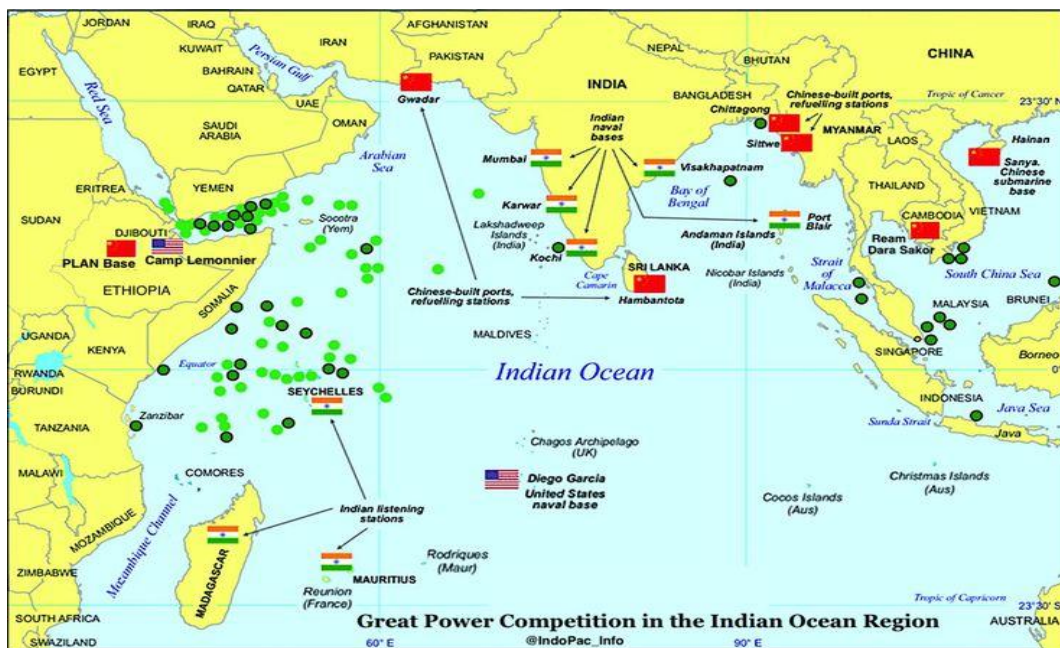


Figure 4.5 Indicate potential military hold (Follow the flags), [Pinterest](#)

China's proactive maritime expansion, naval modernization, and the establishment of foreign bases such as its military installation in Djibouti are indicative of power-maximizing behavior consistent with offensive realism. The findings highlight that China views the IO as a potential vulnerability in its energy supply chain, making maritime routes a geopolitical liability. In response, China is securing physical assets, ports, military logistics hubs, and dual-use

infrastructure to mitigate strategic threats posed by rival states like India and the United States, who dominate key maritime zones. This effort to reduce dependence on the US-controlled Sea lanes aligns with Mearsheimer's premise that great powers will expand and secure influence wherever systemic threats loom, even in peacetime, for their survival.

With rising US and Indian military presence in the Indo-Pacific, including the militarization of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, China faces the real threat of maritime encirclement. In this context, Pakistan is a reliable military and political partner extending China's influence deep into South Asia and the Arabian Sea. Islamabad hosts Chinese infrastructure and facilitates the projection of Chinese soft and hard power in the region. Furthermore, Pakistan's alignment with China counters India's regional aspirations and supports China's "String of Pearls" strategy to secure maritime dominance. Thus, China's dependency on Pakistan goes far beyond geographic convenience; it is embedded in Beijing's long-term vision for energy security, regional influence, and strategic resilience.

Moreover, Pakistan possesses extensive expertise in managing Afghan issues. The intensification of Sino-Pakistan collaboration in Afghanistan is a component of a broader strategic alliance, founded on decades of established trust. In this role, it can provide support for the future rehabilitation of Afghanistan. The trust deficit that constituted the United States' vulnerability in Afghanistan is a significant strength for China (Ali, 2022). During a trilateral conference in Beijing on May 21, 2025, with China serving as a facilitator, the foreign ministers of Pakistan, China, and Afghanistan officially consented to reinstate full ambassador-level diplomatic contacts between Islamabad and Kabul for the first time in nearly four years. They pledged to expand CPEC into Afghanistan, therefore improving regional connectivity within the BRI. This trend arises in the context of increased regional tensions and escalating security worries (Hussian, 2025). Building upon the established foundation of Sino-Pakistan collaboration in Afghanistan, it is evident that China's strategic interests in the region are deeply reliant on Pakistan's geopolitical position, historical experience, and intelligence infrastructure. While China brings economic might and diplomatic balance to the table, it lacks the localized operational capacity and nuanced understanding of Afghanistan's complex ethnic, tribal, and militant landscape gaps that Pakistan is uniquely positioned to fill.

China's involvement in fostering the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan considerably enhances the trust and profundity of its bilateral relationship with Pakistan. By serving as a trustworthy mediator, China demonstrates its

dedication to regional peace and addresses Pakistan's strategic issues, especially with cross-border militancy and the security of Chinese citizens and infrastructure. This partnership coincides with the security objectives of both nations, enhancing coordination in counterterrorism and regional defense. This demonstrates the confidence that China places in Pakistan. As India enhances its strategic engagement with the United States, China's ongoing backing fortifies Pakistan's confidence in its enduring alliance, therefore strengthening its historical connection through strategic and economic avenues.

According to the definition employed in this thesis, a gateway state is not necessarily defined by its military strength, economic development, or abundance of natural resources, but rather by its strategic location, infrastructure connectivity, political alignment, and function as a conduit between regions (Moisoiu, 2017). I argue that a militarily and economically capable gateway state can better secure transit routes, deter external threats, and ensure the uninterrupted flow of goods and strategic assets. Likewise, economic capacity strengthens internal infrastructure, increases resilience against foreign pressure, and enhances the attractiveness of the state as a reliable conduit for trade and energy. In this regard, Pakistan leverages its nuclear capability, military deterrence posture, and strategic alliance with China to increase its value as a secure and efficient gateway. Pakistan is not only a transit corridor but also a militarized ally, a unique feature that combines gateway state characteristics with offensive realist strategic depth. China does not just pass through Pakistan; it deepens its security footprint in the region through its presence in Gwadar and other string of pearls.

According to the definition in the first Chapter, Pakistan, with a qualified sovereignty, exemplifies the characteristics of a gateway state as defined by its strategic location and connectivity. Situated at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, Pakistan can facilitate the movement of goods, energy, and geopolitical influence between China and the Arabian Sea. Through initiatives like CPEC, Pakistan can enable the bulk transfer of resources and offer an alternative and short route to vulnerable maritime chokepoints such as the Malacca Strait. Economically, Pakistan is not a stable country. However, China is heavily investing in infrastructure, including highways, railways, and the pipelines that would be built under CPEC, connecting China directly to Gwadar Port, underscoring its role as a vital corridor for China's strategic and economic outreach.

I add that any state can serve as a gateway state if it offers vital routes, be they for trade, energy transit, or military logistics, to another state seeking regional or global access. However,

the degree of its strategic importance depends not only on geography but also on the quality of its infrastructure, the strength of its economy, its military capabilities, and the nature of its bilateral or multilateral relations. A state with robust transport facilities, stable governance, and cooperative strategic ties enhances its value as a dependable corridor. Conversely, weak institutions, poor connectivity, or political instability may reduce its utility, despite a favorable location. In the case of Pakistan, while geography alone makes it a natural gateway for China to the IO, the depth of China-Pakistan relations, combined with investments through CPEC, military cooperation, and shared strategic interests, significantly elevate Pakistan's status from a mere gateway to an indispensable geopolitical ally.

Pakistan's value as a gateway state is amplified by its security alliances and geostrategic positioning. It provides China not only with logistical access to the IO but also with a militarized ally adjacent to regional rival India. Despite lacking advanced economic strength, Pakistan's robust connectivity, strategic military facilities, and cooperative foreign policy make it indispensable in China's pursuit of power maximization and survival. As a modern gateway state, Pakistan promotes economic integration, supports China's energy security, and helps reshape regional power dynamics, confirming its centrality in contemporary Eurasian geopolitics. As discussed, the blockade of the Malacca Strait or crises in the SCS would question the energy security of China. According to Mearsheimer (2001), great powers always feel threatened by each other. Thus, it forces states to find alternatives for survival.

4.4 Arms Transfers and Strategic Collaboration: CPEC, Buck-Passing, and the China-Pakistan Nexus

China has actively provided Pakistan with advanced military equipment and technology, reinforcing their strategic partnership and enabling Islamabad to withstand regional pressure from its adversaries, particularly India. Taj (2023) contends that the military alliance between China and Pakistan is essential to their strategic partnership. China supplies Pakistan with significant military equipment, including firearms, aircraft, and submarines, hence augmenting Pakistan's defensive capabilities against India. This military cooperation is part of a broader strategy to subvert India's regional supremacy, with China supporting Pakistan as a counterweight to Indian hegemony.

The importance of China-Pakistan collaboration can be seen through the data of arms exports to Pakistan from China. For instance, China represented 5.9 percent of global arms

exports from 2020 to 2024, a marginally reduced share compared to 2015 to 2019. The majority of Chinese arms exports (77%) went to Asian nations and Oceania, followed by Africa (14%). Between 2020 and 2024, China supplied significant armaments to 44 nations, with nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of its arms shipments directed to a single country: Pakistan (George et al., 2025). It makes up 81 percent of Pakistan's imported armaments in the last five years (Gan et al., 2025). Additionally, China is openly supporting Pakistan against India. China gave Pakistan economic, effective, and comprehensive military technology and support. Pakistan received \$394 million in military equipment from China in 2014. This increased by 70 percent the following year, with China sending Pakistan \$565 million in firearms. US armament sales to Pakistan fell from \$189 million in 2014 to \$66 million in 2015. In its 2011-2015 research on the worldwide arms trade, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) found that Pakistan bought 35 percent of China's weaponry between 2013 and 2017 among 48 recipient nations. Pakistan has imported the most Chinese armaments since 1991 (Hashmi et al., 2019).

China is allegedly accelerating the supply of fifth-generation J-35 jets to Pakistan, giving the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) deep-strike capabilities against India. The news comes one month after the India-Pakistan clash in May 2025. J-35 stealth fighters employ laser-guided bombs to attack targets while avoiding opponent radar with a peak speed of Mach 2.0. Recently, Pakistan announced in an X post that it is also buying KJ-500 AWACS and HQ-19 ballistic missile defense systems from China (Alam, 2025). In 2022, China dispatched the inaugural shipment of the J-10CE to Pakistan. It is now the most cutting-edge fighter aircraft in Pakistan's inventory, besides the JF-17 Block III, a 4th-generation lightweight fighter developed together by Pakistan and China. During the current India-Pakistan confrontation, Pakistan downed an Indian aircraft with Chinese J10Cs. This increased the market shares of China's Chengdu Aircraft Corporation by 40 percent in the subsequent week (Gan et al., 2025).

Mearsheimer posits that a state may secure its paramount objective, survival, by consistently growing in power and maintaining the aspiration to eventually become the hegemon within the international system (Mearsheimer, 2001). Therefore, China's arms transfer, especially the J-10CE and J-35 stealth fighters, along with HQ-19 ballistic missile systems, are not merely transactional. These systems enhance Pakistan's deterrence capabilities while enabling China to challenge India's regional superiority indirectly. This aligns with offensive realism's view that China's support for Pakistan is not merely an arms trade but a tool for enhancing its great power's strategic advantage. This allows China to focus on its other strategic and economic projects in the

region, especially the SCS crisis. China's military and technological support to Pakistan, including fighter jets, missile defense systems, submarines, and joint exercises, demonstrates a power-maximizing strategy aimed at countering India's regional ascent and the growing convergence of US-India strategic interests. By arming Pakistan, China effectively externalizes strategic pressure onto India, forcing New Delhi to divide its attention between its eastern and western fronts. This supports offensive realism that great powers will exploit regional balancing opportunities to weaken rivals.

In the context of escalating geopolitical tensions in South Asia in May 2025, a notable Chinese strategist, Victor Gao, delivered a clear admonition to regional powers: any military aggression on Pakistan will provoke a response from Beijing. He further added, "China & Pakistan are all-weather ironclad allies. No one should second-guess this alliance between China and Pakistan. China will always come to Pakistan's help and assistance whenever Pakistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity are threatened by any country. China's full commitment is to defend Pakistan's sovereignty," he said. Gao emphasized that the commitment was substantive, rooted in enduring political trust and shared interests. He stressed that China would see any assault on Pakistan as "extremely serious" and would provide active support if Pakistan's sovereignty was threatened (Business, 2025). Victor Gao's explicit security guarantee to Pakistan embodies a commitment to alliance reliability in the face of potential conflict. It also illustrates the importance of Pakistan in China's broader strategic expansion. Such declarations can be interpreted as a signal to adversaries, reinforcing deterrence by making the costs of aggression against Pakistan, and by extension, Chinese interests, explicit. In Mearsheimer's terms, this is part of regional hegemony-building, where China seeks to dominate its immediate sphere and deter hostile coalitions, particularly the US-India partnership.

Additionally, the recent India-Pakistan conflict has indirectly bolstered China's defense trade and global arms reputation, with Pakistan playing a central role. Pakistan claimed to have used them along with Chinese-made PL-15 long-range missiles and air-defense systems in what it described as successful engagements against Indian aircraft, some of which were reportedly French-made. This clash has been portrayed by analysts as a proxy battle between Western and Chinese defense technologies, with Pakistan acting as a live showcase for Chinese weapons. The performance of Chinese jets in this conflict, amplified by nationalist voices and media within China, is seen as a confidence booster for Beijing in future territorial disputes, including Taiwan and the SCS. Pakistan's adoption and deployment of Chinese systems not only reinforce bilateral

strategic ties but also validate China's growing credibility as a global arms supplier, helping to shift the perception that Western technology holds unquestioned superiority on the battlefield (Wung, 2025).

The China-Pakistan military alliance reflects the core assumptions of offensive realism, which argues that in an anarchic international system, states must prioritize survival by "maximizing their relative power through arms build-ups, unilateral diplomacy, and mercantile foreign economic policies" (Karagiannis, 2013, p. 75). China's extensive arms transfers to Pakistan are not acts of generosity but strategic moves to strengthen an ally that can counterbalance India, its regional competitor. This arms buildup improves Pakistan's deterrence capabilities and forces India to divide its military focus, thus enhancing both Pakistan's and China's security. Weakening India is directly proportional to weakening the US-India alliance, which is the strategy of China in South Asia. Pakistan, for its part, embraces this support not only out of loyalty but as a rational response to its security threats, especially as US support has declined. In line with Mearsheimer's (2001) argument, both countries use this alliance to bolster their positions and improve their chances of survival in a hostile regional environment.

CPEC is anticipated to enhance the presence of China and Pakistan in the Gulf and the Arabian Sea. However, the deployment of China's naval assets near Gwadar and Karachi ports raises concerns for India. To lessen India's concerns and those of the West, China underscores that its aims are fundamentally economic and commercial (Javaid, 2016). Concurrently, China is investigating various strategies to dominate the IO for the safeguarding of its commerce and transit. To counteract, the Indian Government contends that the economic corridor will traverse Gilgit Baltistan, a contested region integral to the Kashmir dispute, alongside apprehensions over Chinese influence in the IO. Therefore, the United States has a ground to provide strategic and economic assistance to India to mitigate the expanding Chinese influence in the IO, particularly since the commencement of the BRI and CPEC (Hussain et al., 2022).

Kashmir's role as a land connection between China and Pakistan intensifies the conventional geopolitical rift between New Delhi and Beijing, while Gwadar contributes a marine aspect to BRI. India sees the Pakistani port as an element of China's expanding maritime force projection in the IO. While Gwadar is presently a civilian installation, several individuals in New Delhi anticipate its evolution into a significant naval station for China. If this is accurate, Chinese access to Gwadar's port would enable the PLAN to maintain a presence in the IO, therefore transforming the region's power dynamics. PLAN's submarines have docked at ports in Sri Lanka

and Pakistan. China's military diplomacy in the region is increasingly focused on forging unique political ties and agreements with rimland nations that may yield advantageous naval access. Beijing's official establishment of its inaugural overseas military facility in Djibouti during the summer of 2017 significantly heightened New Delhi's apprehensions (Baruah, 2018). Moreover, the importance of Kashmir is evident from its geographical location. The Kashmir conflict is driven not only by national pride but also by strategic considerations. Gaining complete control over Kashmir would provide India with access to Central Asia and a direct border with Afghanistan. At the same time, it would deprive Pakistan of its border with China, thereby reducing the strategic value of the China-Pakistan partnership (Marshal, 2016).

CPEC presents a challenge to India's sovereignty over Kashmir, as evidenced by the Indian Government's official stance, which reiterates concerns regarding CPEC, asserting that the incorporation of CPEC as a flagship initiative of BRI directly affects India's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The supposedly CPEC crosses regions of the Union Territories of Jammu & Kashmir that are under the administration of Pakistan (Panda, 2024). CPEC is not just an economic endeavor for China but also a strategic investment by an expanding global power. The augmentation of Chinese influence in a pivotal geographic location jeopardizes conventional American regional hegemony. The United States has established enhanced strategic relations with India due to the CPEC's operation in disputed regions of Gilgit-Baltistan, which concurrently shifts regional power balances in favor of Pakistan. China safeguards its enduring strategic interests worldwide and in South Asia by supporting Pakistan. The United States initiated attempts to counteract the growing Chinese influence and encouraged India to oppose CPEC to maintain its influence in the area and thwart China's attempts to reshape the regional order (Uddin et al., 2025). Both China and Pakistan share animosity against India, and China is competing against the US in the region. These factors significantly contribute to the cooperation between China and Pakistan.

Following the start of the Modi administration in 2014, China started to perceive India's rise as posing a more serious threat. According to a Chinese academic, India had implemented security measures against China under earlier administrations, but they had not taken a punitive stance. China is now more sensitive to India than it was before the US Indo-Pacific strategy was introduced, and India's border policy became more assertive. The elements that affect the degree of threat are (1) total power, (2) proximity, (3) offensive capacity, and (4) offensive intention, according to Stephen Walt's balance-of-threat theory. The core security of other states may be

impacted when a country has offensive capabilities and intentions, which will heighten the dynamic of threat perception. As a result, India's shifting stance toward China is likely to heighten China's perception of India as a threat (Deb & Jiayue, 2024).

In today's world of rising power rivalries, India is positioning itself as a serious competitor to China in the Indo-Asia Pacific region. With its growing global influence and strengthening economy, India is building up its military to push back against China's expanding ambitions. China's increasing assertiveness, both regionally and globally, has raised alarms among Indian leaders, especially Modi. India is particularly concerned about China's expanding influence in the IO, through initiatives like BRI, which India sees as a way for China to limit its strategic space. From India's perspective, the Gwadar port is part of a military strategy to encircle and control key sea routes in the IO. Given the history of conflict, ongoing border tensions, and strained relations, it's not surprising that India is responding by strengthening its military to protect its interests (Goetz, 2021).

According to Chinese strategic thinking, India has changed its long-standing non-aligned foreign policy approach under Modi and shifted toward greater security and defense cooperation with the US. Growing Indian-American ties are seen by Beijing as a major geopolitical obstacle to China's larger strategic objectives. Unlike his predecessors, Modi has not shied away from collaborating with the US to secure more significant geopolitical advantages. India's strong border policy and the US Indo-Pacific strategy are the two main causes of China's increased threat assessment of India. According to Wu Shichun, president of the National Institute of South China Sea Studies, India is the key nation that the US relies on to counterbalance China, and the US is the main force driving the Indo-Pacific strategy against China. Furthermore, India has reaffirmed that the border issue has made its relationship with China abnormal and would remain such till the border is resolved (Deb, 2024). In 2020, the Sino-Indian Line of Actual Control (LAC) experienced multiple violent confrontations between the PLA and the Indian military, leading to a tense standoff between the two highly mobilized forces and causing Sino-Indian bilateral relations to reach their nadir since the 1962 border conflict. Although conflicts between Chinese and Indian border forces are rather frequent, this present crisis is notable for the intensity of the skirmishes and the concerning speed and extent to which recognized rules of engagement along the LAC have deteriorated (Westcott, 2021).

Based on the arguments above, China may use Pakistan as part of the Buck Passing strategy. Mearsheimer defines a 'buck-passing' approach wherein a great power incentivizes its

regional allies to assume the duty of deterring or confronting an aggressor. Buck-passing is a strategic behavior in which a threatened great power seeks to avoid confrontation with an aggressor by shifting the burden of deterrence or defense onto another state. It operates under four main assumptions: first, the buck-passer maintains good or neutral relations with the aggressor to avoid provocation and direct targeting. Second, it deliberately distances itself diplomatically from the intended buck-catcher that might foster good relations with the aggressor. Third, despite trying to avoid war, the buck-passer still strengthens its military as a precaution in case it ultimately must face the aggressor alone or if the buck-catcher fails. Finally, the buck-passer may even support the rise of the buck-catcher's power, ensuring it is strong enough to contain the aggressor and allowing the buck-passer to remain uninvolved (Mearsheimer, 2001).

In the context of South Asia, China's support for Pakistan can be interpreted as a case of buck-passing. Rather than confronting India militarily, China empowers Pakistan to challenge and constrain India's regional ambitions and expansions. By supplying Islamabad with advanced weaponry, military technology, and economic support, Beijing is essentially passing the burden of containing and balancing India to Pakistan. This reduces China's need for confrontation with New Delhi while still weakening India's ability to rise uncontested. Ultimately, this has an impact on the US-India alliance and the US's Indo-Pacific strategy, where China considers India a core element. In this case, Pakistan isn't accepting an extra burden from China. However, Pakistan itself has border issues with India since its inception.

Mearsheimer (2001) asserts that threatened states typically favor buck-passing over balancing, primarily because the buck-passer evades the expenses associated with confronting the aggressor in the event of conflict. The buck-passer acknowledges the necessity of curbing the aggressor's expansion of global power but seeks another state, also threatened by the aggressor, to undertake that burdensome responsibility. I don't consider China a weak power for buck-passing India, nor does it need to balance with India. I argue that China does not want India to balance its power with China. India is not a conventional aggressor for China. However, concerns like the disputed border, China's claim on Indian territory, the US-India alliance against the containment of China, and India's objections to CPEC make India a threat to China in the region. Most importantly, the US-India alliance alone makes India a potential threat to China. Furthermore, in the recent conflict between Pakistan and India, India blamed China for providing live satellite images of the Indian military to Pakistan (Dayal, 2025). This shows that India sees China as a firm ally of Pakistan during crises.

Strategically, China views Pakistan as an indispensable partner in its regional power calculus. In this context, the China-Pakistan relationship is deeply rooted in mutual strategic interests. To preserve and strengthen this alliance, China has consistently supplied Pakistan with advanced weaponry, military technology, and logistical support. This long-term defense cooperation ensures Pakistan's ability to withstand regional threats, particularly from India, while simultaneously anchoring Chinese influence in South Asia. As Pakistan continues to face conventional and asymmetric security challenges, its reliance on Chinese arms and defense systems is likely to deepen, making military dependence a cornerstone of its enduring bilateral partnership. Thus, I argue that the partnership between China and Pakistan is a rational strategy in an anarchic international system where states seek to maximize their power for survival. China uses Pakistan as a strategic ally to project its influence, counterbalance India, and challenge US dominance in the region, while Pakistan leverages Chinese support to strengthen its position in South Asia against India, its long-standing rival. Any support India gets from the US will push Pakistan closer to China for its security and survival. Their deepening alliance reflects the offensive realist view that states ally to serve their interests. Moreover, the efforts of the US to contain CPEC with the help of India will not only confine China to the US-influenced Malacca Strait but also jeopardize the rimland strategies of China. However, the question of whether the US can contain China remains.

China's initiatives, such as CPEC and arms trade, are aligned with mercantilist strategies that serve dual military and economic purposes, securing energy routes and granting strategic access to the Arabian Sea, as stated by Karagiannis (2013). Meanwhile, Pakistan's deployment of Chinese arms in real conflicts with India not only enhances its deterrence but also boosts China's global arms market credibility, turning Pakistan into a showcase for Chinese defense technology. This boosts Beijing's global arms export reputation and amplifies its soft power, contributing to long-term power accumulation, another key tenet of offensive realism. This dynamic partnership also exemplifies offensive realism's view of alliances as tools for power maximization, not moral commitments. Both China and Pakistan are using each other strategically to counter adversaries, expand influence, and survive in a competitive, unpredictable international order.

Security cooperation is a vital element of China-Pakistan relations, driven by the need for strategic alliances and practical considerations about mutual threat assessments. Defense Cooperation: China's provision of military equipment, collaborative counterterrorism initiatives, and joint drills with Pakistan aim to augment Pakistan's military capabilities and ensure a reliable

ally in the area. This military alliance acts as a counterbalance to India's growing military power (Khan & Hassan, 2024). Mearsheimer asserts that the offensive realist world is exceedingly dangerous, where the optimal option for states to ensure survival is to brace for the worst and implement an aggressive foreign policy by consistently augmenting their relative might (Mysicka, 2021). China is strategically arming Pakistan to serve its interests. This not only pressures India but also weakens the broader US-India security axis that Beijing perceives as a containment strategy. Essentially, a well-armed Pakistan is a low-cost but high-impact strategy that keeps India off-balance and reduces the strategic reach of Washington in South Asia. Both countries behave in an offensive realist way of power maximization and alliances.

Additionally, the Sino-Pakistan strategic partnership is not one-sided; both states are interdependent in one way or another. Technically, no other partner can offer China the military and geopolitical leverage that Pakistan provides in South Asia. Throughout their history, the two countries have consistently supported one another on critical security matters, from joint military exercises and arms development to diplomatic backing in international forums. In South Asia, Pakistan is the only state with a significant military capability to bolster China's interests and help counterbalance India and other regional competitors.

4.5 The Ukraine Case

Ukraine, situated on the western fringe of the Eurasian steppe along the civilizational fault line, developed into a center that connected East and West as well as Europe and Asia. For a long time, Ukraine has been considered the "Gate of Europe" and the main gateway between Russia and the West (Aftab et al., 2022). This underscores the critical significance of preserving Russia's geopolitical influence over Ukraine, which is vital for Moscow to establish dominance in the post-Soviet region and reassert its presence in Central and Eastern Europe. Ultimately, Ukraine serves as a bridge facilitating access to the territories of the former Warsaw Pact nations (Kondratenko, 2020).

Historically, it has shaped its complex and often contentious relationship with Russia. In the early 20th century, the Bolsheviks had solidified their hold over Russia, most modern-day Ukraine, and other areas known as Soviet Republics by the time the Russian Civil War was formally concluded in 1923. The new Soviet administration viewed Ukraine as a crucial territory due to its "black earth," a wealthy soil type unique to the Dnipro Basin, as well as the economic

significance of the Donbas coal. Some Ukrainians welcomed the Nazi occupation of their country during the nazis' expansion. The Nazis viewed Ukraine as a geopolitical asset that could provide them with food in abundance. Ties between Russia and Ukraine were originally largely friendly and peaceful in the post-Soviet period. However, the two nations argued in 1992 about who should take command of the Black Sea Fleet (based in Crimea) (Roozenbeek, 2024). Moreover, after gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine, a natural ally of Russia, adopted a foreign policy that aligned with Western interests. The 1998 signing of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU solidified Ukraine's conformity with EU ideals and underscored the EU's aim to bolster regional stabilization and the security of its economic, commercial, and specifically energy activities. As a result, Russia faced a reduction of its sphere of influence, presenting a significant threat to the preservation of its core territory and intensifying tensions among the involved parties (Barata, 2014).

The 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine marked the inception of a genuinely democratic state facilitated by the US government. Since that time, Russia's economy has been under significant pressure from the US government, which intended to prevent Ukraine from succumbing entirely to Russian influence. Russia was compelled to respond to this situation in some manner. In the absence of Ukraine, Russia no longer qualifies as a Eurasian empire. Should Moscow reestablish dominion over Ukraine, encompassing its 52 million inhabitants, significant resources, and access to the Black Sea, Russia would reacquire the capacity to emerge as a formidable imperial force, extending throughout Europe and Asia. (Girgin, 2015). Gotz (2014) challenges the view that President Putin's character and security service history are the primary influences on Russia's Ukraine policy. It proposes a geopolitical rationale highlighting three elements: Ukraine's geographical position, the EU's heightened engagement in Eastern Europe, and the pro-Western stance of the current administration in Kyiv. These three elements give Russia a compelling motivation to adopt an aggressive stance against Ukraine. Moscow's primary objective is to reassert influence over Kyiv's foreign policy direction and, if that proves unattainable, to create a corridor of pro-Russian regions in eastern Ukraine.

As the bipolarity era ended, there was a greater propensity for distinct regional systems to emerge. Interstate competition has proliferated in many areas, raising the possibility of territorial disputes and local warfare. At the regional level, security starts to influence interstate collaboration. Russia continues to be the only power center in the post-Soviet sphere. The processes occurring in the space under discussion also increase the degree of interference in the

other states (Kotliar et al., 2020). The overall geopolitical climate of the time, along with the pro-Western political forces' resounding victory in 2014 with the Euro-Maidan protests and Ukraine's following attempt to approach the EU, convinced Russian officials to step up their aggression and reassessment against Ukraine to defend what they perceive to be their legitimate national interest (Kotoulas & Pusztai, 2022).

Since the takeover of Crimea in 2014, the confrontation between Russia and Ukraine has continued, but it has gotten more intense because Ukraine has indicated that it aspires to join NATO. In reaction to Ukraine's ambitions for NATO membership, Russia announced a unique military campaign in Ukraine on the 24th of February, 2022. Since that time, Ukrainian and Russian soldiers have been embroiled in conflict, leading to substantial casualties on both sides and precipitating one of the most extensive refugee crises in Europe since World War II. The conflict has resulted in the displacement of around 8 million individuals from Ukraine. The start of war presents a considerable risk to international commercial connections. The countries actively engaged in the war are the most affected, followed by those geographically close together and closely linked markets (Mishra et al., 2024).

From the lenses of Mackinder's Heartland Theory and Offensive Realism to the Ukraine case reveals the geopolitical imperatives driving Russia's aggression. Ukraine lies on the western edge of Mackinder's Heartland, a region he described as the key to controlling Eurasia and, by extension, global power. For Russia, keeping influence over Ukraine is crucial to preserving its strategic depth and securing its position as a dominant land power. From the lens of offensive realism, Russia's behavior is driven by the anarchic structure of the international system, where great powers seek to maximize their power and eliminate threats. Ukraine's pivot toward Western institutions like NATO and the EU challenged Russia's regional dominance and threatened to bring a hostile alliance closer to its borders. In response, Russia pursued aggressive strategies, including the annexation of Crimea and the full-scale invasion in 2022, to reassert control, deter further Western expansion, and restore a favorable balance of power in its near abroad.

Despite both serving as strategic gateways, Ukraine for Russia and Pakistan for China, the two countries have experienced markedly different outcomes due to the nature of their geopolitical relationships. Ukraine's position on the fault line between Russia and the West has made it a target of territorial revisionism and coercion. Russia perceives Ukraine not merely as a neighbor but as a historical part of its sphere of influence, critical to its imperial identity and security buffer. Ukraine's shift toward Western institutions like NATO and the EU directly

challenged this vision, provoking military aggression, including the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and a full-scale invasion in 2022. In contrast, Pakistan's relationship with China has been shaped by mutual strategic interests, particularly their shared rivalry with India. This has led to a cooperative, rather than coercive, alliance where China invests in Pakistan's infrastructure and defense without threatening its sovereignty, despite concerns over growing economic dependence through CPEC.

Economically, both nations rely heavily on their respective great power patrons, but the outcomes diverge due to the dynamics of power and consent. Ukraine's attempt to diversify its alliances and reduce dependency on Russia resulted in conflict because Moscow sought to prevent Western encroachment in its near abroad for security and survival. Meanwhile, Pakistan has largely embraced Chinese economic and military support, viewing it as a means to balance Indian regional dominance and gain economic leverage. However, this has created asymmetrical dependency, raising concerns about sovereignty and the military's growing role in civilian affairs. Unlike Ukraine, Pakistan's strategic alignment has insulated it from direct military conflict with its patron, but at the cost of growing vulnerability to Chinese influence through arms trade. Thus, while Ukraine's assertiveness invited confrontation, Pakistan's alignment has brought strategic security, albeit with potential long-term costs to autonomy.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to examine Pakistan's role as a strategic gateway state for China and its broader significance within the evolving geopolitical landscape. Utilizing Spykman's Rimland Theory and the principles of offensive realism, the research analyzed the power maximization and survival dimensions of the China-Pakistan partnership, with a focus on CPEC. The findings validate the central argument that Pakistan's geographic position offers China a critical terrestrial-maritime link to the IO, allowing Beijing to bypass traditional chokepoints like the Malacca Strait and enhance its access to global trade routes. This arrangement not only strengthens Pakistan's status as a strategic gateway state but also advances China's geostrategic ambitions to counterbalance US and Indian influence in South Asia and beyond. This argues that Pakistan, as a gateway state, is beyond economic purposes. It encompasses a broader strategy of China's expansion.

Theoretically, this thesis bridges Spykman's rimland theory and offensive realism to explain Pakistan's evolving strategic importance. This dual-theoretical lens underscores the interplay of geographic advantage, systemic constraints, and power-driven state behavior, providing a robust framework for understanding Pakistan-China relations. By situating Pakistan as a critical actor in the rimland, this study reinforces the notion that control over this pivotal region shapes broader power dynamics across the IO and Eurasia.

The research further demonstrates that China-Pakistan strategic cooperation is driven by the structural pressures of an anarchic international system. Despite its historical alliances with Western powers, Pakistan's strategic choices reflect pragmatic power-maximization behavior shaped by its regional security dilemmas, competitive rivalries, and economic imperatives. Applying offensive realism provides a compelling explanation for this sustained partnership, as Pakistan seeks security and economic stability through deeper alignment with China. On the other hand, China acquires the help of Pakistan to curb the influence of India in the South Asian Region as a buck-passing strategy.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, it relies primarily on secondary data, including existing scholarly literature. While this provides a broad foundation for analysis, it restricts the capacity to capture new developments and nuanced motivations of key

factors that could emerge from primary data collection, such as interviews or field research. Second, the research is conducted within the scope of two theoretical frameworks, Spykman's rimland theory and offensive realism, which, while insightful, overlook other significant dimensions of international relations, including domestic political dynamics, regional identities, or alternative IR paradigms like constructivism and liberal institutionalism. Finally, the rapidly shifting geopolitical environment, marked by intensifying US-China competition and evolving regional alliances, implies that the conclusions drawn in this thesis may require reevaluation as new trends and power configurations emerge.

While previous literature often treats CPEC as a purely developmental project, this thesis repositions it as a strategic and geostrategic initiative that enhances China's power projection into the IO and challenges regional rivals. By placing Pakistan's role alongside other potential gateway states (such as Myanmar), this thesis broadens the comparative lens and underscores Pakistan's unique geostrategic value to China. This thesis also asks for a comparative study of Ukraine and Pakistan as gateway states to analyze the similarities and differences.

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