

# The Great Game 2.0: CENTCOM, China, and the Pakistani Pivot

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## Key Points

- Central and South Asia are at the heart of a new “Great Game,” a strategic contest primarily between the United States and China, where Pakistan's alliance is a critical and defining factor for regional influence.<sup>1</sup>
- Pakistan is skillfully navigating this rivalry by maintaining its deep-rooted, “all-weather”<sup>2</sup> strategic alliance with China while simultaneously revitalizing its defense and economic partnership with the United States through significant military and trade agreements.
- The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) represents a monumental strategic advantage for China, providing a direct land route to the Arabian Sea that bypasses maritime chokepoints, secures energy supplies, and vastly expands China's geopolitical and economic footprint in the region.
- For U.S. Central Command, Pakistan's complex alliance create a mixture of significant risks, including a potential loss of strategic influence to China, but also valuable opportunities for re-engagement in areas like counterterrorism and regional diplomacy.

## Introduction

A new strategic contest defines the geopolitical landscape of Central and South Asia. This rivalry is the central focus of the latest U.S. National Security and Defense Strategies, which identify China as the primary “pacing challenge” for the United States. In this modern “Great Game,” the U.S. and China are the principal rivals, with Pakistan positioned as a critical pivot state. For U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), Pakistan's strategic importance has grown in direct proportion to the U.S.-China rivalry. This dynamic is particularly challenging for CENTCOM. It must recognize this elevated importance, navigate a characteristically turbulent relationship with Pakistan, while Pakistan deepens its long-standing, robust partnership with China. This is not merely a diplomatic realignment, it is a fundamental transformation, cemented by massive economic investments and a thorough military modernization driven by Chinese technology. This deepening alignment presents a clear challenge to the core objectives outlined in American strategic documents. A 2025 Pentagon report underscored this concern, noting that “China has likely also considered basing in... Pakistan” as part of its strategy to project military power globally.<sup>3</sup> This is reinforced by a consistent pattern of high-level military exchanges and joint initiatives, which are officially intended to “enhance interoperability and strengthen military-to-military cooperation.”<sup>4</sup> This paper argues that Islamabad's evolving relationship with China creates a complex mixture of significant risks and potential opportunities for CENTCOM. Navigating this reality requires a pragmatic recalibration of U.S. policy. To that end, this analysis will explore the historical context of Pakistan’s foreign relations, assess the current state of its strategic partnerships, and conclude with risks and opportunities for CENTCOM in this new “Great Game.”

### History of Pakistan Relations with China and the U.S.

Historically, Pakistan has navigated a complex “triangular” relationship, maintaining an enduring, “all-weather” strategic partnership with China while experiencing a fluctuating, often transactional alliance with the United States. After initially aligning with the West in the 1950s, Pakistan shifted toward China following the 1962 Sino-Indian War and a 1963 border agreement, eventually facilitating the historic 1972 Rapprochement between the U.S. and China. While the U.S. relationship was periodically strained by nuclear sanctions in the 1990s and trust deficits during the post-9/11 Global War on Terror, China remained a consistent provider of military and technical aid. By 2020, this dynamic further tilted toward China with the 2015 launch of the \$62 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), even as Pakistan continued to rely on the U.S. as its largest export market and a critical partner for regional security in Afghanistan.

Decade	Pakistan-China Relations	Pakistan-U.S. Relations
1940s-50s	Pakistan recognizes the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1950. Cordial relations but secondary to Western ties.	Pakistan joins SEATO (1954) and CENTO (1955), firmly aligning with the U.S. during the Cold War.
1960s	1963 Border Agreement and the 1965 War solidify ties; China provides military and diplomatic support.	U.S. imposes an arms embargo during the 1965 Indo-Pak War, leading to a “great betrayal” sentiment in Pakistan.
1970s	Pakistan facilitates the 1971 U.S.-China rapprochement.	Relations sour over Pakistan's nuclear program.
1980s	Strategic cooperation deepens; work begins on the Karakoram Highway and nuclear energy projects.	Soviet-Afghan War: Pakistan becomes a “frontline state.” U.S. military and economic aid flow in.
1990s	China remains a steady supplier of military hardware despite international pressure.	Pressler Amendment triggers sanctions over nuclear weapons. Relations hit an all-time low after the 1998 nuclear tests.
2000s	Cooperation expands into the economic sphere; development of Gwadar Port begins.	9/11 Attacks: Pakistan becomes a major Non-NATO Ally in the War on Terror; aid resumes but “do more” rhetoric starts.
2010s	CPEC (2015) is launched, a \$60B+ investment under the Belt and Road Initiative.	Abbottabad Raid severely damages trust. U.S. aid is later suspended under the Trump admin.

Decade	Pakistan-China Relations	Pakistan-U.S. Relations
2020s	Deepening “Iron Brotherhood”; focus on high-tech military equipment and debt restructuring.	Shift toward a “limited” relationship post-Afghanistan withdrawal; focus on climate and health rather than security.

Table 1: History of Pakistan relations with China and U.S.

**SEATO:** Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, **CENTO:** Central Treaty Organization, **CPEC:** China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, **FTA:** Free Trade Agreement.

### Current Relations

As of early 2026, Pakistan’s foreign policy remains a delicate balancing act between its “ironclad” strategic alliance with China and a revitalized defense partnership with the United States.

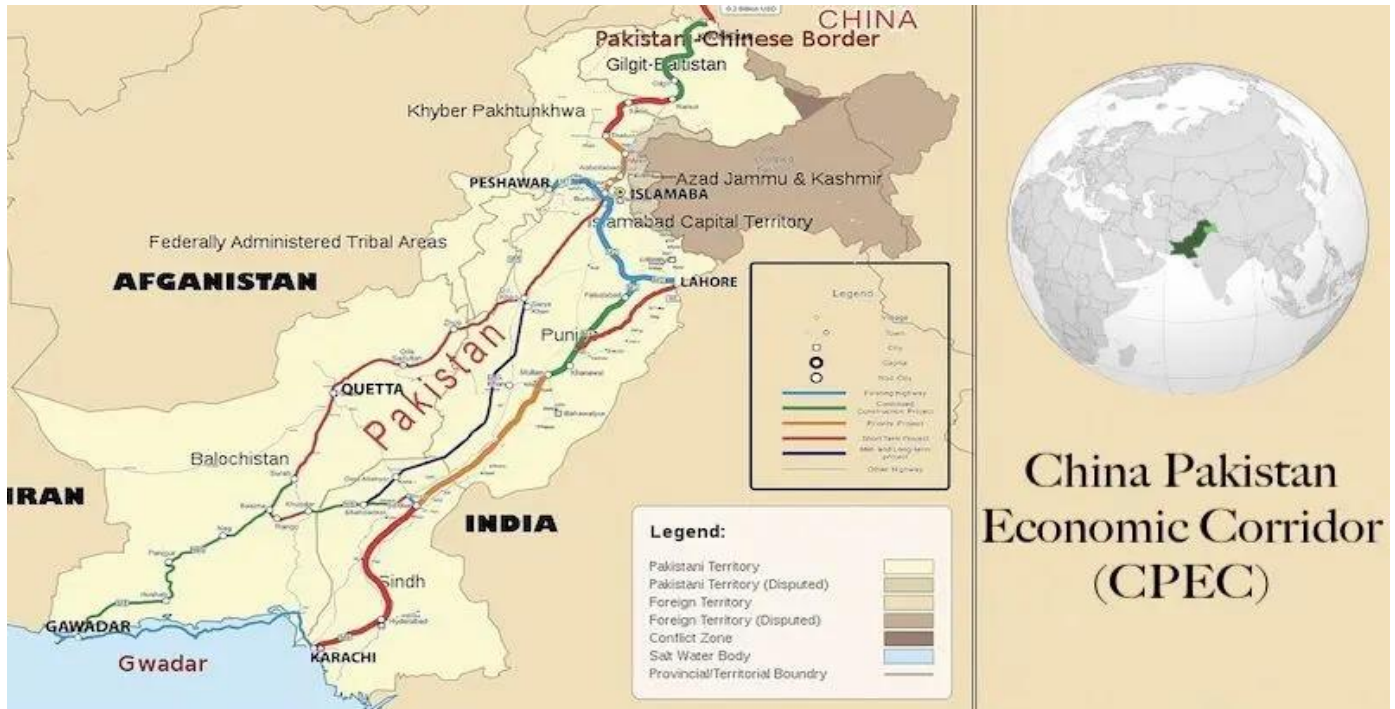
**Pakistan - U.S. Relations:** The relationship with the United States has seen a notable resurgence since late 2025, moving toward what officials describe as a "results-oriented partnership." A centerpiece of this shift is the December 2025 approval of a **\$686 million Foreign Military Sale (FMS)** package aimed at sustaining and modernizing Pakistan's **F-16 fleet**, which includes advanced Link-16 tactical data systems and avionics upgrades.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, in January 2026, the two nations emphasized shared sovereignty and economic resilience during high-level diplomatic engagements, expanding cooperation into critical minerals, mining, and infrastructure supported by U.S. financing tools.<sup>6</sup>

For the U.S., Pakistan is important for the following reasons:

- **Maintaining a Stable South Asian Balance:** A core U.S. interest lies in maintaining a stable balance of power in South Asia. While U.S. supports India's rise as a counterweight to China, it also recognizes that regional stability is best served when no single state achieves unchecked dominance. A capable and conventionally deterrent Pakistan contributes to this equilibrium. This dynamic compels both nations to act with a degree of strategic caution, thereby preventing regional security from deteriorating in a way that would demand U.S. intervention and divert focus from the broader competition with China.
- **The Imperative of Crisis Management and De-escalation:** Maintaining regional stability and preventing conflict between India and Pakistan is a paramount U.S. interest. A major crisis between the two nuclear-armed states would not merely be a distraction, it would shatter the foundational assumptions of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, consuming all diplomatic and strategic bandwidth and rendering the long-term competition with China a secondary concern.<sup>7</sup>
- **Securing Maritime Chokepoints in the Arabian Sea:** Pakistan’s strategic geography offers proximity to the Arabian Sea and critical maritime chokepoints, most notably the Strait of Hormuz. Securing the free flow of global energy through this corridor has long been a core mission for CENTCOM. Therefore, the prospect of increased Chinese naval influence in this region, particularly operating from a strategic port like Gwadar, presents a direct challenge to this enduring U.S. security interest.<sup>8</sup>
- **The Gateway to Afghanistan: Counterterrorism and Influence:** Pakistan remains an indispensable, if complex, partner for U.S. counterterrorism objectives and for influencing the trajectory of post-takeover Afghanistan. Its geographic proximity and deep intelligence networks are crucial for monitoring and disrupting transnational violent extremist organizations (VEOs) like ISIS-K and al-Qaeda. Furthermore, Pakistan's historical leverage with the Taliban regime provides a critical, albeit challenging, channel for

communication and potential constraint, a vital tool for U.S. as it pursues its "over-the-horizon" security strategy in the region.

**China-Pakistan Relations:** China remains Pakistan's primary strategic and defense partner, characterized by deep-rooted "all-weather" cooperation. This relationship was reaffirmed during the January 2026 **Joint Strategic Dialogue**, which focused on the implementation of a comprehensive Action Plan (2025–2029) for the **China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)**.<sup>9</sup>



Map 1: China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)<sup>10</sup>

For China, Pakistan is important for the following reasons:

- **Energy Security and the "Malacca Dilemma":** CPEC provides a direct land-based route from the Arabian Sea to western China, allowing Beijing to bypass the Strait of Malacca. This reduces China's vulnerability to potential maritime blockades and secures its energy supply lines from the Middle East.<sup>11</sup>
- **Strategic Shorter Routes:** The corridor is expected to reduce the journey for oil transportation to China from approximately 12,000 km (7,456 miles) to about 2,400 km (1,491 miles). This operational efficiency is estimated to save China up to **\$2 billion annually** in logistics and shipping costs.<sup>12</sup>
- **Western Region Development:** By connecting the deep-water port at **Gwadar** to China's inland Xinjiang province, CPEC stimulates economic growth in China's less-developed western regions, providing them with direct access to global markets.<sup>13</sup>
- **Geopolitical Influence:** Pakistan acts as a "strategic anchor," deepening China's influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean while countering regional rivals. In 2026, this influence is expanding further as China and Pakistan work to extend the corridor into **Afghanistan** and **Iran** to enhance regional trilateral cooperation.<sup>14</sup>
- **CPEC 2.0 and Industrial Relocation:** Under the current "Phase 2.0," China is using Special Economic Zones to relocate its industries to Pakistan, leveraging local labor for manufacturing while maintaining control over supply chains and expanding its technological footprint.<sup>15</sup>
- **Maritime Power Projection:** Ownership and development of the Gwadar Port enhance China's maritime profile at the mouth of the Arabian Sea, providing a vital node for its 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.<sup>16</sup>

On the military front, cooperation has reached new heights with the **Hangor-class submarine** project, which includes technology sharing and joint production to enhance Pakistan's maritime power projection in the Indian Ocean.<sup>17</sup> Recent strategic and economic shifts in 2025 and early 2026 have led Pakistan to sign significant “win-win” agreements with both China and the United States. See table below.

Category	China	United States
<b>Military</b>	<b>2026:</b> Cooperation for protecting Chinese personnel via shared security posts and potential <b>J-35A stealth fighter</b> acquisition.	<b>2025:</b> \$2.5B contract including <b>AMRAAM missile sustainment</b> and spare parts for Pakistan's F-16 fleet.
<b>Economy</b>	<b>2025-2026:</b> Launch of <b>CPEC 2.0</b> and the <b>Maritime Action Plan</b> to upgrade Gwadar Port and industrial zones.	<b>2025:</b> Historic <b>Bilateral Trade Deal</b> featuring reciprocal tariff reductions and a \$500M mineral partnership with U.S. Strategic Metals
<b>Policy</b>	<b>2025:</b> Implementation of the <b>Action Plan (2025–2029)</b> to foster a “Community with a Shared Future”.	<b>2025:</b> Re-established <b>Counter-Terrorism Dialogue</b> and U.S.-brokered regional ceasefire diplomacy.

Table 2: Recent Pakistan agreements with both China and the United States.<sup>18 19 20 21 22 23</sup>

**Risks and Opportunities for CENTCOM**

**Risks**

1. **Strategic Control:** China's physical and economic footprint via CPEC (especially naval access to Gwadar) - could erode U.S. freedom of movement in the region.
2. **Loss of Influence:** If Pakistan turns decisively towards China, CENTCOM may lose basing rights, logistics routes, and real-time intelligence.
3. **Intelligence and Operational Gaps:** A decline in trust hampers joint operations, counterterrorism coordination, and broader regional situational awareness.
4. **Military Integration:** China’s support for Pakistan includes advanced weaponry. This, accelerated by recent combat validation of Chinese weapons, can restrict U.S. influence and bolster the argument for Pakistan to rely more on Chinese equipment over Western counterparts.

**Opportunities**

1. **Reengagement Leverage:** CENTCOM can serve as a platform for revived security ties, including joint exercises, maritime capacity building, and military modernization support.
2. **Counterterrorism Cooperation:** Shared interests in targeting transnational terrorists' groups provide grounds for continued collaboration.
3. **Maritime Strategy:** The U.S. could explore limited logistics or observation agreements at Pakistani ports to monitor the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean dynamics.
4. **Multilateral Engagement:** By involving Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, and Central Asian countries, CENTCOM can diversify its strategic presence while counterbalancing China's influence.

### Conclusions

1. Pakistan has successfully positioned itself as an important pivot state in the 21st-century "Great Game" between the United States and China, skillfully leveraging this rivalry to secure economic and military gains from both global powers.
2. For U.S. Central Command, this new paradigm renders the old model of a simple, transactional alliance obsolete.
3. The primary challenge is no longer merely managing a partnership but actively competing for influence against a deeply entrenched China, which threatens to diminish U.S. strategic access and intelligence capabilities.
4. U.S. CENTCOM can bolster defense partnerships by upgrading military equipment and engaging in high-level cooperation, which is part of a wider strategy to uphold its regional influence and counteract that of China.
5. Therefore, U.S. strategy must evolve towards a pragmatic and competitive approach: countering Chinese strategic gains where necessary, while simultaneously seeking opportunities for cooperation on shared interests like counterterrorism.
6. Successfully navigating this complex dynamic will be essential to safeguarding U.S. interests in a region increasingly shaped by China's ambitions.

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<sup>1</sup> A term historically used to describe the strategic rivalry and political maneuvering between the British Empire and the Russian Empire for supremacy in Central Asia during the 19th century. It involved covert operations, diplomatic intrigue, economic competition, and proxy conflicts, primarily focusing on Afghanistan and surrounding territories as a buffer zone and gateway to India.

<sup>2</sup> The “all-weather” term refers to the **China-Pakistan All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership**, a unique diplomatic designation used by China to describe a relationship that remains steadfast regardless of global or domestic political changes. <https://safe.menlosecurity.com/doc/docview/viewer/docN06ED58A628F3e7763956cfdbbb52abfcb5f752f13b576fb2c5418762e3b9fc107035dc254e81>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

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