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China-Pakistan Evolving Strategic Relations and Its Implications for South Asia

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ABSTRACT

The partnership between China and Pakistan is one of the oldest and most important in Asia. The two countries move together toward the same objectives and have similar concerns about India, which has allowed them to develop a strong and wide-ranging relationship. It examines how China-Pakistan relations have developed over time, what they mean for South Asia's security, trade, and strategic situation today, and how they might change in the future. Key to this alliance is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a central part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has lifted the relationship to a new level by joining economic progress with added strategic value. In addition, both countries have collaborated in defense and nuclear matters, as well as in diplomacy at international meetings, which have boosted their ties. For this research, a qualitative method is followed using government policy papers, academic journals, and analyses from reason tanks to outline the evolving strategy of the partnership. The research reveals that while both states gain economically and in security, China-Pakistan ties also lead to changes in South Asia's balance of power, mainly by heightening India's concerns and causing strategic rethinking by nearby and faraway countries such as the United States. In the end, the paper analyzes likely trends in the region and offers policies that can help maintain stability as South Asia becomes more multipolar.

Key Words: CPEC, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Qualitative Geopolitical Analysis, Strategic Recalibration

INTRODUCTION

The strong cooperation between China and Pakistan in strategy is a significant aspect of South Asian geopolitics today. The China-Pakistan relationship, which is known as an "all-weather friendship," has steadily developed from basic diplomatic relations. From cooperation in the 1950s, the relationship grew into a strategic alliance with many aspects. The evolution has happened while global powers change, parts of the world deal with conflicts, and new economic realities appear. Currently, the partnership is vital to China's plans in the region and Pakistan's efforts to stay stable, with significant effects on South Asia's security.

At first, Pakistan and China began formal diplomatic relations in 1951, and their relationship became stronger after the Sino-Indian War in 1962 and India's win over Pakistan in the 1971 war. Their partnership in the Cold War and after 9/11 included military collaboration, united opposition to India's dominance, and everyday worries about terrorism and separatism in the region. China-Pakistan ties began to improve significantly in 2013 after China introduced the Belt and Road Initiative or BRI.

One of the emblematic symbols of this stronger relationship is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which was launched in 2015 and aims to invest billions of dollars in infrastructure, energy, and transport. By joining CPEC, Pakistan becomes a key ally for China in its global economic growth and gives Beijing a direct way to reach the Arabian Sea through the Gwadar Port. Even so, the economic benefits of CPEC are linked to important political, security, and sovereignty issues in Pakistan's Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan regions.

Apart from economic ties, China and Pakistan have a strong record of military cooperation. Pakistan considers China its most significant supplier of arms and is cooperating with China in the field of nuclear technology. Among their military activities, they conduct joint drills, take part in fighting terrorism, and share technology. Furthermore, Beijing has repeatedly supported Islamabad in multilateral groups, such as by protecting Pakistan from being singled out by the United Nations and FATF.

The shifting partnership is very significant for South Asia. Because of the China-Pakistan nexus, India feels threatened on two sides. It must make changes in its security policy, including improving defense ties with the US and enhancing its military capabilities. Because of the alliance, South Asian countries that are not major powers will need to rethink their position in the region and might start to hedge their actions. Additionally, the presence of external powers—particularly the US, Russia, and increasingly the Gulf States—complicates South Asia's already delicate strategic balance.

The research paper seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the evolving China-Pakistan strategic relationship and assess its implications for South Asia through the following guiding questions:

1. How have China and Pakistan historically developed their strategic partnership?
2. What are the key pillars—economic, military, and diplomatic—of their contemporary relationship?
3. How does the China-Pakistan nexus affect regional power dynamics, especially about

India and US interests?

4. What are the likely trajectories of this partnership, and what policy options exist to manage its regional impact?

Methodologically, the paper adopts a qualitative and interpretative approach, relying on secondary data sources, including academic literature, policy think tank publications, official documents, and expert commentary. The research also draws upon theoretical perspectives from realism and alliance theory to frame the analysis of bilateral strategic behavior.

The paper is structured as follows: Section One presents a historical overview of China-Pakistan relations; Section Two examines contemporary strategic dimensions, including CPEC and defense cooperation; Section Three explores the regional implications for South Asia; Section Four discusses the theoretical underpinnings of the alliance; Section Five offers a forward-looking forecast; and Section Six concludes with key findings and policy recommendations.

Historical Overview of China-Pakistan Relations

The strategic alliance between China and Pakistan has evolved over seven decades, rooted in geopolitical necessity and pragmatic interests rather than ideological affinity. Their relationship has moved through phases of cautious diplomacy, military and nuclear cooperation, and, more recently, comprehensive economic integration. Understanding this historical trajectory is crucial to grasping the motivations, resilience, and evolving contours of their present-day strategic partnership.

Early Diplomatic Engagement (1950s–1960s)

Official diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China and Pakistan were reputable on May 21, 1951, making Pakistan one of the first Muslim-majority countries to recognize communist China. At a time when the United States and many Western countries had refused recognition, Pakistan's early outreach to Beijing was indicative of its willingness to diversify its foreign relations beyond the Western bloc (Small, 2015).

While early relations were modest, the political climate of South Asia in the 1960s catalyzed a stronger bond. Following the 1962 Sino-Indian War, Beijing viewed New Delhi with growing suspicion. Pakistan, which had fought its first war with India in 1947–48 and would go to war again in 1965, found a natural strategic partner in China. The convergence of interests over a shared adversary—India—formed the bedrock of their bilateral relations.

The 1963 boundary agreement between China and Pakistan, in which Pakistan ceded the Trans-Karakoram Tract to China, was a significant diplomatic milestone. While controversial, it was a key gesture of goodwill that set the tone for long-term cooperation (Garver, 1991). The building of the Karakoram Highway, initiated in the late 1960s with Chinese assistance, was both a symbol and instrument of this growing alliance.

Strategic Convergence and Defense Cooperation (1970s–1980s)

The 1970s witnessed deeper strategic engagement, particularly in the context of the

Cold War. After Pakistan's defeat in the 1971 Indo-Pak war and the subsequent emergence of Bangladesh, China became a consistent source of moral and diplomatic support for Islamabad. China's backing at the United Nations, as well as its opposition to Indian intervention in East Pakistan, reinforced Pakistan's reliance on China as a counterweight to Indian influence.

Perhaps the most significant development in this period was the foundation of China-Pakistan nuclear and defense cooperation. As Pakistan began its clandestine nuclear program in response to India's 1974 nuclear test, Beijing played a critical, though carefully managed, role in aiding Pakistan's strategic capabilities. Although both parties denied any proliferation activity, several Western intelligence reports suggest that China provided key technological inputs to Pakistan's nuclear program (Kapur, 2003).

Military ties deepened, with China becoming Pakistan's principal supplier of arms and conventional military hardware. Joint training programs, exchange of personnel, and technological collaboration—including co-production of aircraft and tanks—characterized their defense relationship. China's support proved essential in helping Pakistan maintain strategic parity with India despite its economic constraints.

Post-Cold War Realignment (1990s–2000s)

The end of the Cold War and the unipolar moment of U.S. dominance posed new challenges and opportunities for the China-Pakistan axis. During the 1990s, U.S. sanctions on Pakistan following its nuclear tests, along with tightening arms export restrictions, pushed Islamabad further into Beijing's orbit. China continued to provide critical military support, including the supply of M-11 missiles and assistance in nuclear reactor development (Tellis, 2001).

Meanwhile, the 1998 nuclear tests by both India and Pakistan—and India's subsequent shift toward strategic partnership with the United States—transformed the regional strategic equation. China viewed the emerging Indo-U.S. alignment as a potential threat to its influence in South Asia, further incentivizing a closer embrace of Pakistan.

During this time, China and Pakistan also began expanding their economic and diplomatic cooperation. High-level visits, joint working groups, and bilateral trade agreements became routine. In 2001, the signing of the China-Pakistan Free Trade Agreement (FTA) laid the groundwork for long-term economic integration.

Deepening Ties in the Post-9/11 Era

The global war on terror and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan created a complex security environment in which Pakistan emerged as a frontline state. While the U.S. strengthened its meeting with Islamabad, Pakistan's parallel and consistent strategic partnership with China remained unaffected. In fact, China leveraged its influence to secure energy and infrastructure contracts in Pakistan, particularly in the underdeveloped western provinces.

One of the most critical developments came in 2006 with the formalization of the China-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue. This mechanism institutionalized bilateral cooperation across a range of sectors, including counter-terrorism, border security, energy, and economic

planning.

China also played an important role in mediating Pakistan's regional relationships. For instance, China has repeatedly called for dialogue between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, even as it maintains its own claims in the region. This dual strategy of supporting Pakistan diplomatically while maintaining a "neutral" public posture highlights Beijing's delicate balancing act in South Asia (Malik, 2011).

Strategic Modernization: The CPEC Era (2013–Present)

The announcement of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, and the subsequent launch of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in 2015, marked a watershed in bilateral relations. CPEC, which is valued at \$60 billion, seeks to link Xinjiang in China with Gwadar Port in Pakistan using roads, railways, and pipelines. Through CPEC, China can use the Arabian Sea and support Pakistan's development of infrastructure and energy resources.

CPEC has created strategic effects that go beyond the relationship between China and Pakistan. This project shows China's long-term involvement in Asia and makes Pakistan an important part of the shifting Eurasian political scene. The way CPEC is being protected with a special security team and Chinese efforts in fighting terrorism points to the growing military and strategic nature of the relationship.

China has backed Pakistan even during complex international discussions such as those at the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), where it opposed efforts to label Pakistan. After India revoked Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir in 2019, China followed Pakistan's objection at the United Nations, strengthening their alliance.

Contemporary Strategic Dimensions of China-Pakistan Relations

Three main areas support the current China-Pakistan relationship: economic exchange, security and nuclear matters, and close diplomacy. Since the early 2000s, all the dimensions of the partnership have advanced, making it into a full-scale strategic partnership. Because of these interactions, the China-Pakistan relationship is now at the center of South Asia's security and geopolitical situation.

Economic Cooperation: The Strategic Importance of CPEC

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is the primary and most important feature of the new era of China-Pakistan relations. CPEC, worth more than \$60 billion, is meant to link China's western Xinjiang region with Pakistan's Gwadar Port on the Arabian Sea by constructing roads, railways, and energy infrastructure. The project supports several important strategic targets. China hopes CPEC will allow it to reach the Middle East more easily and obtain energy, making it less dependent on chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca. With the economic corridor, Beijing can avoid the South China Sea and still connect with the Arabian Sea over land, making its strategy more flexible when there are problems in the South China Sea.

CPEC is a significant chance for Pakistan to overcome its long-lasting shortages in infrastructure and energy. Power generation and road construction projects done ahead of

schedule have already played a role in stabilizing the economy and creating jobs in important sectors. Furthermore, Gwadar Port, which is built and operated by Chinese companies, may later be used as a naval base or logistics center for Chinese maritime needs.

Even so, CPEC has encountered various problems. Because of threats from insurgent groups in Balochistan, Chinese engineers and workers have been attacked. As a result, Pakistan has created a special military team to look after Chinese personnel. Debate has also emerged in Pakistan about whether the country can pay its debts, how transparent the government is, and the effect on the environment, leading to criticism from analysts in the West. However, both cities continue to emphasize that CPEC will change the direction of regional development and connectivity.

Military and Defense Cooperation

Cooperation in the military is at the heart of the close relationship between China and Pakistan. China is now Pakistan's primary source of arms, sending extensive military items such as tanks, fighter jets, surface-to-air missiles, and naval vessels. The JF-17 Thunder multirole fighter aircraft is one of the best-known joint projects between Pakistan's PAC and China's Chengdu Aircraft Industry Group.

The level of defense cooperation is not limited to sharing armaments. Regularly, the two nations hold exercises that train members on countering terrorism, mountain fighting, and teamwork in the sea. They strengthen the army's ability and also act as a signal to India and others that the countries are determined to work together.

Pakistan believes its partnership with China serves a key role in ensuring it remains equal to India following the growth in U.S.-India defense and military ties. Because of this, China finds a dependable neighbor in Pakistan on India's western border, which causes India to split its military efforts between the two sides.

Although it is less clear, nuclear cooperation has been crucial. China was involved in significant ways in helping Pakistan build nuclear reactors at Chashma and develop other nuclear facilities. Despite both countries saying they work within IAEA rules, China's support has helped Pakistan preserve its nuclear deterrent and boosted mutual trust.

China's support for Pakistan's military helps China to influence events in the Indian Ocean area. The growth of dual-use facilities in Gwadar and investments in Pakistan's navy implies that China wants to maintain a modest but established military presence in South Asia's maritime areas.

Diplomatic Support and Multilateral Coordination

In diplomacy, China and Pakistan stand together and back one another in various local and worldwide events. China has consistently backed Pakistan's main interests, mainly when it comes to India and Kashmir. When India removed Jammu and Kashmir's semi-autonomous status in August 2019 after revoking Article 370, China spoke up about it at the United Nations Security Council for Pakistan's benefit, a rare example of Beijing backing Islamabad.

China has regularly protected Pakistan from facing criticism at the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). As part of the FATF's decision-making team, China has not supported

Western states and India in listing Pakistan for not following anti-terror financing rules. Pakistan's place on the "grey list" rather than the "blacklist" is thanks to Beijing's actions in maintaining Pakistan's relations with international financial institutions.

In response, Pakistan backs China's regional plans, such as its "One China" policy and its claims to the South China Sea. Islamabad has not spoken out against China's actions in Xinjiang, even as many countries have expressed concern over the Uighur Muslims. This agreement between the countries reflects how well-balanced and deep their bilateral relationship is.

China and Russia are also trying to increase multilateral cooperation by using platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to address shared issues of terrorism, separatism, and extremism. These forums allow them to help form regional security standards, argue with Western ideas, and promote government models related to authoritarian development.

Implications for South Asia

The strengthening of China-Pakistan ties matters strategically for South Asia because security, economic, and diplomatic matters are so closely related. The arrangement has affected both the bilateral relations between China and Pakistan and the regional order, mainly in regard to India, Afghanistan, and other countries in the region. This section looks at the ways the China-Pakistan relationship is shaping the security, growth, and international ties of South Asia.

Impact on India: Strategic Rivalry and Security Dilemmas

For India, the growing China-Pakistan relationship is very concerning. Both China's rise in South Asia and Pakistan's improved military power, especially in nuclear and conventional weapons, are causing India to worry about its security.

Pakistan is able to counterbalance India, in part because of the assistance China provides, including building Gwadar Port and the Karakoram Highway. Having Chinese staff in Pakistan, especially in Gwadar and Balochistan, worries India about its security in the West. China and Pakistan claim that their cooperation has only economic goals, though the use of many projects in both countries makes New Delhi suspicious.

India has long prepared for the possibility of facing challenges on its western and eastern borders at the same time from Pakistan and China. Beijing's military involvement in Pakistan, together with its increasing influence in the Indian Ocean, makes these worries more serious. In addition, China's transfer of nuclear technology to Pakistan has increased India's nuclear security problems by encouraging a new arms race in the region. The JF-17 fighter jets and M-11 missile systems given by China to Pakistan have made India feel more cut off from its allies.

India has been outspoken in challenging China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), believing it is designed to give China more power over the region. India has not joined the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor because the route goes through Kashmir, a disputed area.

India has consistently objected to the CPEC, especially at the United Nations and other international platforms, and urged the world to acknowledge how the project could disturb the region's security.

As a result of China-Pakistan cooperation, India has tried to strengthen ties with the United States, Japan, and Australia. The partnership between India and the United States, mainly in military and technology, is a direct answer to India's belief in a growing China-Pakistan alliance. Being part of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with the US, Japan, and Australia is regarded as a way for India to check China's growing influence.

Regional Reactions: Afghanistan, Iran, and Central Asia

Apart from India, China-Pakistan ties also affect the whole South Asian and Central Asian regions. Due to their place between South Asia and Eurasia, Afghanistan, Iran, and Central Asia are being affected by the changing political situation caused by the China-Pakistan relationship.

Afghanistan: Security Concerns and Strategic Calculations

The country's response to the China-Pakistan alliance is determined by its history of security worries and its ties with both nations. Pakistan's neighbor being powerful has always been a problem, mainly because of Pakistan's assistance to the Taliban, which keeps affecting Afghanistan's stability.

At the same time, Afghanistan sees how Chinese investment can bring economic gains, mainly through the Belt and Road Initiative. Because it is located between China and Pakistan, Afghanistan could gain from the trade and infrastructure projects created by CPEC. China has been interested in investing in Afghanistan's minerals, which could offer the struggling nation an important economic boost. Nevertheless, the fact that the Taliban are present in Afghanistan creates difficulties for such meetings.

Being dependent on the US in many areas and lacking complete diplomatic freedom with Pakistan and China, Afghanistan tends to watch as China and Pakistan form a strong alliance. With the growing competition among nations in the area, this delicate balance between opportunities and worries will probably remain.

Iran: Limited Engagement, Strategic Caution

Iran enjoys a more complicated relationship with the China-Pakistan alliance, though it borders both China and Pakistan,. Even though Iran has friendly relations with China, it is concerned about the rising number of Chinese projects in Pakistan, mainly in Balochistan. In the southeastern province of Sistan-Baluchestan, Iran's own Baloch minority has cultural and ethnic links to the Baloch in Pakistan. Due to this, Iran is considering the CPEC and Gwadar Port projects with caution since developing Gwadar could strengthen the region's importance and indirectly change Iran's regional situation.

The triangle between Iran, Pakistan, and China is also influenced by the ongoing competition between the US and China. US sanctions have caused Iran to be isolated, but its partnership with China under the BRI could help its economy. However, Iran is mindful that its connection with Pakistan should not be too influenced by China, choosing to stay careful

to keep its region free from too much Chinese impact.

Central Asia: Geopolitical Competition and Cooperation

Central Asian nations are feeling both hopeful and worried about the increasing China-Pakistan relationship. Long ago, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan began working to diversify the countries they trade with. China's Belt and Road Initiative helps Central Asian nations to increase their trade with China, and Pakistan is a natural way for them to get to the Arabian Sea via Gwadar.

The increasing activities of China and Pakistan in Central Asia worry some people about the region's stability. Central Asian countries are concerned about relying too much on China, which is working to take a bigger role in the region through its infrastructure and energy investments. Leaders in Central Asia worry about how Pakistan's strong ties with China could affect the security situation in Afghanistan and throughout the region.

Global Reactions: United States and Other Major Powers

Various countries, including the United States, have given different reactions to China and Pakistan's deeper relationship. The US, which has long been India's ally, sees the China-Pakistan alliance as another way for China to increase its presence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Officials in the US have raised concerns about CPEC and the possibility of China building military bases in Pakistan, mainly around Gwadar.

The Trump administration has been seen as moving closer to India and boosting Indo-U.S. defense links to challenge China's rise in the region. The US has raised concerns about China's actions against Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang, but Pakistan has stayed chiefly quiet, making the situation more difficult to manage.

Instead, Russia has chosen to keep neutrality with China and Pakistan and strengthen its friendship with India. The US plays a bigger role in the region than Russia, but Russia has carefully handled its ties with Pakistan, wanting to ensure good relations with China and India.

The China-Pakistan Axis and the Future of South Asian Stability

China's increasing cooperation with Pakistan has transformed the way things are done in South Asia. The alliance could reshape the region's balance of power, mainly because both countries are increasing their economic and military strength. Although CPEC and other economic projects are beneficial for China and Pakistan, they cause security worries for India, Afghanistan, and Iran, as well as for other countries in the region.

The stability of South Asia will be affected by the ways in which India and other regional powers deal with China and Pakistan. The way in which nations cooperate economically and compete militarily will likely guide the region's future and have effects on peace, security, and development. The deepening relationship between China and Pakistan has significant effects on their bilateral ties as well as on the whole South Asian area. Canada and the US have built a strong and diverse relationship over economic, military, and diplomatic matters during the last few decades. Even if China and Pakistan get many benefits from their relationship, it leads to many problems and risks in India and its surroundings.

China-Pakistan Strategic Partnership: A Game-Changer for South Asia

The CPEC is still the primary project under their rising planned partnership. As a significant part of the Belt and Road Initiative, CPEC is expected to link different economies and give Pakistan a chance to improve its infrastructure and tackle persistent energy issues. As a result of CPEC, China can trade more easily with the Arabian Sea, avoiding the South China Sea, which is becoming more disputed.

Even so, the project has effects that go beyond just economic factors. For both countries, CPEC adds value, improving Pakistan's place in South Asia and boosting China's presence in the Indian Ocean region. The creation of Gwadar Port is important because it could give China a naval base and act as a key connection between Central Asia, the Middle East, and East Asia.

CPEC holds great promise as it encounters challenges related to security, debt, and the environment in Balochistan. This shows how difficult it is to turn a vision of regional links into something practical. Additionally, Pakistan's gains from CPEC are still unknown because most of the infrastructure is constructed by Chinese companies, and much of the financing is in the form of loans.

Geopolitical Implications: Regional and Global Reactions

Regional and international powers have given varied reactions to the China-Pakistan association. India, above all, believes this partnership directly threatens its influence and security in the region. India is increasingly worried about a two-front military threat due to the China-Pakistan alliance, Chinese military activities in the region, and the growth of projects like Gwadar Port that could be used by both the military and civilians.

New Delhi's efforts to work more closely with the US and other Quad members are a clear sign that it sees a strengthening alliance between China and Pakistan. In addition, Afghanistan, Iran, and the countries of Central Asia must cope with the consequences of China and Pakistan's increasing cooperation. On the one hand, Afghanistan and countries of Central Asia could gain from CPEC's increased trade and infrastructure, but on the other hand, they risk losing control of their own strategies by becoming too close to China and Pakistan.

Many in the international community, mainly the United States, are worried about China's increasing influence in South Asia. To respond to China's rise in Asia, the US has increased its cooperation with India, grown its defense partnership with India, and supported efforts for regional security. How the great power competition happens is expected to influence South Asia for a long time.

The Path Forward: Opportunities and Risks

Both China and Pakistan must carefully manage the challenges they face inside their own countries, in their region, and around the world, as they deepen their strategic cooperation. Maintaining independence while depending on China for its economy will be very important for Pakistan. While the future economic gains of CPEC are not clear, Pakistan should take care not to depend too much on Chinese financing and loans that could make its

debt problem worse.

China is aware that its relationship with Pakistan includes some potential hazards. Pakistan is a key partner in the region, but the increasing security trouble in Balochistan could make the area less secure and endanger major projects such as CPEC. On top of that, China must address the sensitive topic of the Kashmir issue, which matters a lot to India and creates friction between it and Pakistan.

The entire South Asian region should anticipate the geopolitical changes caused by the China-Pakistan partnership. Even though CPEC and similar projects may foster regional economic cooperation, the actions of China and Pakistan may add new challenges to security in the region. India, Afghanistan, and Iran are responsible for finding a way to work with China and Pakistan without sacrificing their own interests.

The Future of South Asia's Strategic Landscape

In essence, the way China and Pakistan work together shapes both the problems and opportunities in South Asia. The agreement may help the economy, mainly through CPEC, but it could also lead to new threats to regional security and the distribution of power. With China emerging as a global leader, its relationship with Pakistan will be key to guiding South Asia and creating both economic chances and threats to the region.

The increase in China-Pakistan ties makes it necessary for India to adjust its strategic stance and find a better way to cooperate with its neighbors. Pakistan has to find a way to keep its relationship with China while maintaining its economic, political, and safety needs. The future stability of South Asia will depend significantly on the development of China-Pakistan relations, so other regional actors have to respond to these changes.

The long-term future of South Asia is tied to the way China, Pakistan, and their neighbors deal with their partnerships and handle the relationship between economic agreements and security issues. Even though the China-Pakistan strategic partnership is important, it is just a piece of the entire region's picture. The way South Asia deals with its competing forces will determine whether it can maintain stability and prosperity.

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