

XI JINPING'S MULTILATERAL DIPLOMACY AND PAKISTAN: CHINA'S STRATEGIC SHIELD IN INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

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The Chinese use of multilateral diplomacy to shield Pakistan represents one of the most consequential dimensions of Sino-Pakistan relations and reveals fundamental tensions in Beijing's approach to the rules-based international order. While China publicly champions counter-terrorism cooperation and positions itself as a responsible stakeholder in international institutions, its systematic protection of Pakistan at the United Nations Security Council and other multilateral forums directly contradicts these stated principles. This issue brief discusses how China's behavioral pattern offers insights into Xi Jinping's strategic priorities, the limits of Chinese commitment to multilateral norms, and the emerging contours of great power competition in South Asia.

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The relationship between China and Pakistan, frequently characterized as an “all-weather strategic partnership” or “iron brothers” relationship, finds its origins in the early 1960s, but has dramatically intensified under Xi Jinping's leadership. Following the Sino-Indian War of 1962, Pakistan emerged as China's principal strategic counterweight to India in South Asia. Relations strengthened significantly, and Pakistan arguably became China's closest ally, while not being unproblematic.

This partnership has deepened through decades of military cooperation, with China providing crucial support for Pakistan's nuclear weapons program and conventional military capabilities. However, the launch of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in 2015 profoundly transformed the relationship, from a primarily security-focused cooperation into a comprehensive strategic partnership encompassing economics, infrastructure, and regional connectivity.¹

CPEC, valued at \$65 billion as of 2025 and representing the flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative, has elevated Pakistan's strategic importance to China beyond traditional security calculations.² This figure is well above the initial estimate of \$46 billion. As Jonathan Hillman and Maesea McCalpin documented in their analysis for the Center for Strategic and International Studies, CPEC represents the equivalent of all foreign direct investment in Pakistan since 1970 and constituted 17 percent of Pakistan's GDP already in 2015.³

This massive infrastructure investment, connecting China's Xinjiang region to the Arabian Sea port of Gwadar through a network of highways, railways, and energy projects, provides China with strategic access to the Indian Ocean while bypassing the Strait of Malacca chokepoint and secures additional transport hubs.

The economic dimension of CPEC intersects with longstanding military-strategic calculations to maintain a reliable counterweight to India,

China's diplomatic protection of Pakistan manifests most prominently in the voting pattern in the United Nations Security Council, where Beijing has repeatedly used its veto power and procedural mechanisms to block Indian, and other states, efforts to designate Pakistan-based terrorist groups and individuals.

particularly as New Delhi deepens its partnerships with the United States, Japan, and Australia through the Quad framework. The geographical position of Pakistan, at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, makes CPEC indispensable for Xi Jinping, considering his vision of securing China's western periphery and projecting power across Eurasia.

The strategic location of Pakistan induces powerful incentives for Beijing. China aims at insulating Islamabad from international pressure, even when doing so contradicts its stated commitment to global counter-terrorism cooperation and international norms, and to some extent its own security concerns regarding alleged militant activities linked to extremist groups.

Multilateral Shield in Action: The United Nations Security Council

China's diplomatic protection of Pakistan manifests most prominently in the voting pattern in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), where Beijing has repeatedly used its veto power and procedural mechanisms to block Indian, and other states, efforts to designate Pakistan-based terrorist groups and individuals. The case of Masood Azhar, founder of the terrorist organization Jaish-e-Mohammed, exemplifies this pattern. Despite substantial evidence and broad international support, China blocked Azhar's designation as a global terrorist on four separate occasions between 2009 and 2019.⁴

The chronology of China's obstruction reveals a systematic pattern aimed at protecting Pakistan while safeguarding its own interests. In 2009, China first placed a technical hold on India's proposal to list Azhar on the UNSC's 1267 Sanctions Committee.⁵ This technical hold was repeated in 2016 following the Pathankot airbase attack that killed seven Indian security personnel,

again in 2017, and once more in March 2019 after the Pulwama attack that killed more than 40 Indian paramilitary personnel.⁶ On each occasion, China claimed the evidence was insufficient, despite the fact that all other permanent members of the Security Council, the United States, United Kingdom, France, and Russia, supported Azhar's designation as a terrorist.

China's repeated and sustained use of the "technical hold" mechanism deserves particular attention. Under Security Council procedures, any member can place a six-month hold on a sanctions committee proposal, ostensibly to allow time for further deliberation. However, such holds can be extended indefinitely, effectively functioning as a de facto veto. As noted by the Indian government in relation to this case, China provided no substantive grounds for its holds, instead relying on opaque claims about the need for "more time to deliberate" and "consensus among members."⁷ This procedural manipulation allowed China to shield Pakistan, while avoiding the political costs of an explicit veto in open session.

The United States circumvented this obstruction by introducing a resolution outside the 1267 Committee framework in 2019, which would have required China to publicly explain and defend any veto. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying strongly criticized this move as undermining the authority of the 1267 Committee.⁸

Facing mounting international pressure and the prospect of having to openly defend its protection of a designated terrorist leader, China ultimately lifted its hold in May 2019, allowing Azhar's designation to proceed. Significantly, this shift occurred only after the proposal was revised to remove references to specific attacks, particularly the Pulwama incident, thereby enabling the remainder of Pakistan's broader support for Kashmiri separatist causes as legitimate.⁹

China blocked the designation of Masood Azhar, founder of the terrorist organization Jaish-e-Mohammed, as a global terrorist on four separate occasions between 2009 and 2019. China claimed the evidence was insufficient, despite the fact that all other P5 members, the United States, United Kingdom, France, and Russia, supported Azhar's designation as a terrorist.

China has similarly obstructed efforts to designate other Pakistan-based terrorists, including Zakiur-Rehman Lakhvi, the operational commander behind the 2008 Mumbai attacks that killed 166 people, and Sajid Mir, another key figure in the Mumbai operation.¹⁰ This systematic protection has provoked increasingly sharp criticism from India and its partners. India's External Affairs Ministry stated in 2017, "We are deeply disappointed that once again, a single country has blocked international consensus on the designation of an acknowledged terrorist and leader of UN-designated terrorist organization."¹¹

The costs of this diplomatic protection deserves deeper analysis. Each Chinese veto or technical hold reinforces global perceptions of double standards in Beijing's approach to terrorism. While China aggressively pursues international support for its campaign against Uyghur separatists under its "three evils" doctrine targeting terrorism, separatism,

and extremism, it simultaneously shields Pakistan-based groups that have killed thousands of civilians in terrorist attacks. This contradiction severely undermines China's credibility as a responsible stakeholder in the international counter-terrorism architecture. The claim is not that China is unique in this regard, it is not, but rather an indication of the importance of Pakistan for China.

Pakistan and the Financial Action Task Force

China's multilateral shield extends beyond the Security Council to economic institutions, most notably the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). FATE, established by the G7 in 1989, sets international standards for combating money laundering and terrorist financing. Pakistan's placement on the FATF "grey list" in June 2018, indicating strategic deficiencies in its anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing regime, represented a significant threat to its already fragile economy.¹² Grey-listing results in restrictive access to international financial markets, diminishes foreign investment, and subjects all financial transactions to enhanced scrutiny. This became a concern for China, it is would potentially impact all the development in CEPC. The circumstances under which Pakistan was grey listed are themselves revealing. According to research by the Indian Council of World Affairs, India played a central role in building the coalition necessary to overcome Chinese and Saudi resistance to Pakistan's listing.¹³

The U.S. Acting Secretary of State Alice Wells stated explicitly that the decision was partly due to Pakistan's failure to take concrete action against Hafiz Saeed, the Lashkar-e-Taiba chief responsible for the Mumbai attacks, and terrorist organizations including Jaish-e-Mohammed.¹⁴ It has been suggested that China ultimately agreed only after being promised vice-presidency of the FATF in exchange, something that has been formally denied.¹⁵

China then worked to systematically prevent Pakistan's uplift to the FATF blacklist, which would have imposed detrimental economic sanctions. Throughout Pakistan's four years on the grey list, from 2018 to 2022, China joined with Turkey and Malaysia in defending Pakistan during FATF plenaries.¹⁶ Chinese diplomatic interventions proved to be crucial in multiple instances where Pakistan's compliance failures might otherwise have triggered blacklisting. Research conducted by the European Foundation for South Asian Studies estimated that FATF's grey-listing of Pakistan from 2008 to 2019 caused losses exceeding \$38 billion to the country's GDP, underscoring the significant economic pressure that China helped Pakistan withstand.

Given that Chinese loans constitute more than one-fourth of Pakistan's total debt, and Pakistan's external debt reached 33.7 percent of its GDP in 2025, Beijing's strategic calculation were increasingly driven by the need to avert an economic collapse that would jeopardize its own regional investments.¹⁷ A blacklisted Pakistan would have struggled to service its debt to China and might have been forced to turn to the International Monetary Fund, potentially exposing the opaque terms of CPEC agreements to international scrutiny. As suggested by analysts of the Lowy Institute, China's stakes in CPEC made it highly likely that Beijing would provide financial support to avoid Pakistan from turning to the IMF, and thereby keeping CPEC agreements confidential.¹⁸

Pakistan's removal from the grey list in October 2022 came only after Islamabad took tactical measures to demonstrate compliance, including the conviction of Hafiz Saeed and other high-profile terrorists. Despite UN blacklisting, Masood Azhar has never been prosecuted, and Hafiz Saeed, while supposedly imprisoned, was reportedly housed in a military-protected residence in central Lahore with extensive amenities. This pattern reveals how China's diplomatic shield allows Pakistan to make

superficial compliance gestures while avoiding substantive action against terrorist infrastructure.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and Counter-Terrorism Cooperation

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) presents a third arena where China's protection of Pakistan intersects with proclaimed counter-terrorism objectives. Established in 2001 with the core mission of fighting the "three evils" of terrorism, separatism, and extremism, the SCO operates through its Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure based in Tashkent. Pakistan's accession to full SCO membership in 2017, alongside India, theoretically subjected Islamabad to the organization's counter-terrorism framework and scrutiny.

However, reality has proven to be more complex. China has carefully managed the organization's counter-terrorism mandate to avoid the creation of mechanisms that could be used against Pakistan.¹⁹ While the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) maintains a classified list of terrorist organizations and individuals that reportedly far exceeds the UN Consolidated List in scope, the organization's inherent operational opacity makes it impossible to verify if Pakistan-based militants are subject to meaningful oversight.

Internal contradictions within the SCO regarding Pakistan-based terrorism have become increasingly apparent. While the SCO-RATS is designed to synchronize regional security efforts, its efficacy is frequently compromised by fundamental definitional disputes. For instance, despite a 2017 consensus between China, India, and Russia to designate Jaish-e-Mohammed as a terrorist organization, Pakistan continues to oppose this classification and remains reluctant to act against the group.²⁰ This fundamental disagreement has paralyzed effective action. In June 2025, India

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refused to endorse a joint statement at the SCO defense ministers' meeting in Qingdao, China, citing concerns that it failed to reflect India's position on terrorism.²¹ Defense Minister Rajnath Singh criticized the joint statement for its selective condemnation, noting that while it addressed militancy in Balochistan, it omitted the April 2025 Pahalgam massacre of 26 tourists. For New Delhi, this omission signaled a surrender to Pakistan's narrative and underscored the SCO's structural inability to confront states that employ cross-border terrorism as a strategic tool.

The SCO's structural features reinforce Chinese control over counter-terrorism cooperation. Joint military exercises, while portrayed as counter-terrorism cooperation, carefully avoid scenarios that might implicate Pakistan. The 2025-26 Pakistani chairmanship of the SCO's counter-terrorism body highlights the organization's internal contradictions, effectively allowing Islamabad to shape the regional security agenda despite persistent international allegations regarding its support for proxy groups. This arrangement emphasizes how

China has transformed the SCO from a potentially constraining institution into one that provides Pakistan with multilateral legitimacy.

The Chemistry of Sino-Pakistani Multilateral Cooperation

The effectiveness of China's multilateral shield depends significantly on the chemistry and coordination between Chinese and Pakistani diplomats across international forums. This coordination operates at multiple levels, from working-level cooperation in technical committees to high-level strategic consultations.

The joint statement by Chinese Premier Li Qiang and Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif in October 2024 explicitly demonstrated this coordination. "In light of Pakistan's term as a non-permanent member of the U.N. Security Council from 2025 to 2026 and China's assumption of the rotating presidency of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the two sides agreed to further strengthen communication and collaboration in international affairs."²²

This coordination manifests in carefully calibrated communication on counterterrorism. Both countries emphasize their commitment to fighting terrorism "in all its forms and manifestations" while simultaneously opposing "the politicization and instrumentalization of counterterrorism." This shared rhetoric provides cover for a selective application of counter-terrorism norms and aggressive action against groups threatening Chinese or Pakistani state interests while protection for groups like Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba that target India.

The joint statement's language about working "with the international community to strengthen multilateral counter-terrorism cooperation within frameworks such as the U.N. and the SCO" creates an appearance of multilateral engagement that

belies the reality of bilateral coordination to shield Pakistan-based terrorism.

The multilateral cooperation extends to mutual defense against criticism. When Pakistan faced pressure over CPEC's debt implications, Chinese and Pakistani officials coordinated responses emphasizing mutual benefit and development. Pakistani military leadership issued strong statements, with the Chief of Army Staff declaring from Beijing that "BRI [Belt and Road Initiative] with CPEC as its flagship is destined to succeed despite all odds and Pak Army shall ensure security of CPEC at all costs."²³ This military-to-military coordination reinforces diplomatic cooperation, creating a comprehensive protection against international pressure.

Strategic Costs and Sustainability

China's multilateral protection of Pakistan carries significant costs that merit careful analysis. The reputational damage is substantial and cumulative, and Beijing is not always comfortable with the situation. Each veto or intervention in international institutions reinforces perceptions that China applies double standards to terrorism, undermining its broader claims to champion a fair and just international order. This contradiction creates vulnerabilities in China's relationships with countries that have suffered from Pakistan-based terrorism and undermines the Chinese argument that "western" states, often the U.S., have double standards. It is the case not only for India but also for Afghanistan, where Taliban operations represent a threat to Chinese interests in Central Asia, and to Pakistan itself.

Within the SCO, China's protection of Pakistan obscures relationships with other member-states concerned about regional stability. Russia, despite its strategic partnership with China, has repeatedly supported Indian positions on designating Pakistan-based groups as terrorist organizations. Central

Asian states, while dependent on Chinese economic engagement, harbor deep concerns about the nexus between Pakistani-based groups and militants operating in their territories. China's constant protection of Pakistan despite these concerns endangers SCO's effectiveness and credibility as a regional security organization.

As Sino-Indian competition intensifies, the question of sustainability becomes acute. India's growing economic and technological capabilities, combined with deepening security partnerships with the United States, Japan, Australia, and European powers, create increasing costs for China's Pakistan-centric South Asia strategy. Each Chinese intervention to protect Pakistan provides concrete evidence of Chinese instrumentalization of international institutions for its own benefit, arguments increasingly prevalent in Washington and allied capitals. This evidence proves to be particularly valuable for those arguing that China represents a systemic challenge to the rules-based international order.

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Future Implications and Conclusions

China's multilateral shield for Pakistan ultimately reveals fundamental tensions within Beijing's approach to international institutions under Xi Jinping's leadership. The gap between China's rhetoric about counter-terrorism cooperation and its actions in shielding Pakistan from accountability demonstrates the limits of the expectation of a Chinese integration into existing institutions as to produce normative convergence. Rather than being socialized by participation in international institutions, China has proven itself as being adept at manipulating institutional mechanisms, from UNSC technical holds to FATF grey-listing procedures to SCO counter-terrorism frameworks, all so as to advance its strategic interests.

For India, this behavior reinforces the logic of deepening security partnerships with the United States and other democracies. The failure of multilateral mechanisms to address Pakistan-based terrorism, despite overwhelming evidence and broad international consensus, corroborates India's assessment that bilateral and minilateral partnerships offer more reliable security cooperations than institutions where China exercises veto power. India's refusal to endorse SCO statements that ignore Pakistani terrorism and its leadership of the Quad framework reflect this strategic reorientation.

For smaller states, China's protection of Pakistan illustrates how great power rivalry can paralyze multilateral mechanisms, fundamentally designed to address transnational threats. The SCO, FATF, and UNSC sanctions committees all theoretically operate on principles of evidence-based decision-making and consensus. Yet, in practice, Chinese strategic interests override these principles, transforming institutions meant to provide collective security into arenas for great power competition.

Looking forward, the sustainability of China's multilateral shield faces growing challenges. As Pakistan's economic crisis deepens and its dependence on Chinese financial support increases, the contradiction between China's global aspirations and its active protection of a failing state becomes harder to manage. The costs of this protection, in terms of reputational damage, strained relationships with other states, and evidence for critics of Chinese intentions, accumulate. Whether these costs ultimately force a recalibration of Chinese policy, or whether Beijing doubles down on its Pakistan commitment represents one of the key uncertainties in Asian security dynamics.

The broader lesson concerns the future of multilateral cooperation in an era of great power competition. China's systematic manipulation of international institutions to protect Pakistan demonstrates that institutional participation alone does not guarantee normative compliance, and this is not distinctive to China but rather a norm among Great Powers. As the systemic rivalry between Beijing and Washington intensifies, the subordination of multilateral norms to national strategic imperatives will increasingly define the international order. The challenge for defenders of the rules-based international order is to develop mechanisms capable of maintaining institutional effectiveness even when major powers seek to instrumentalize them for strategic advantage. China's multilateral shield for Pakistan provides a case study in this challenge, revealing both the vulnerabilities of existing institutions and the urgent need for reform.

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