



A Kautilyan Friendship: Pakistan, China and the Kautilyan Case for the CPEC

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Abstract: Since the beginning of bilateral relations between Pakistan and the People’s Republic of China, the relationship has been a matter of debate. Especially the motto of a so-called all-weather friendship has made people ask how such an intimate relationship could develop between an Islamic Republic and a Communist one-party state. This paper aims to answer this question by looking at the case of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), using a Kautilyan perspective, emphasizing the concept of mitra from the Arthashastra. Therefore, I will use a non-Western approach to International Relations (IR), indigenous to South Asia. Consequently, this paper contributes to the growing trends of Global IR and decentering IR. It subsequently argues that by using the PRC as a mitra, Pakistan aims to strengthen its own capabilities. Hence, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor must be viewed as a visualization of a Kautilyan influence on Pakistan.

Keywords: CPEC, Pakistan, China, Kautilya, Arthashastra, Alliances, Friendship, Global IR

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Introduction

“Higher than the Himalayas, deeper than the ocean, and sweeter than honey,”¹ have been the words to describe Pakistan’s so-called all-weather friendship² with the People’s Republic of China (PRC). As Pakistan was the first Muslim country to recognize the PRC diplomatically in 1950,³ the relations grew stronger over the coming decades and have produced headlines through the PRC’s Belt and Road Initiative and its flagship project, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).⁴ The improbability of the friendship between an Islamic Republic like Pakistan, founded on Islamic principles and the communist PRC, founded on Marxism-Leninism, suspicious of religious activities that could challenge the primacy of the Communist Party of China (CPC), has been the cause for debate.⁵

In particular, the treatment of Muslims in the PRC would make one assume that it would threaten the relations between the two countries. Globally, the treatment of the Muslim Uyghur

¹ Garlick, “Reconfiguring China-Pakistan Economic Corridor,” 1.

² Chaudhuri, “The Making of an ‘All Weather Friendship,’” 1.

³ Chaudhuri, “The Making of an ‘All Weather Friendship,’” 4.

⁴ See: BBC, “China’s Xi Jinping.”; BBC, “China-Pakistan.”

⁵ See: Siddiqi, “The Enemy of my Enemy.”

minority in the PRC's far-western Xinjiang Autonomous Region (Xinjiang) has caused public condemnations by Human Rights Organizations, International Institutions and many countries, with a UN report from 2022 citing serious human rights violations.⁶ The United States of America calls the treatment of the Uyghurs a genocide, as internment camps have been set up throughout Xinjiang.⁷ These camps aim to sinicize the Uyghurs, dampen any kind of separatist opposition to the CPC on the grounds of ethnic or religious commonalities and have been implemented alongside a radical policy of sinicization by the CPC in Xinjiang, steadily erasing Uyghur culture in the PRC.⁸ A similar situation has also evolved in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, home to the Muslim Hui minority.⁹

This makes Pakistan's friendly relations with the PRC a curious case, as it has been a vocal supporter of the rights of Muslim minorities in other places globally such as Kashmir¹⁰ and Palestine.¹¹ Islamic understandings of International Relations (IR), that relate to concepts like *dar al-islam*, *dar al-harb*,¹² *ummah* and *assabiyah*,¹³ which could be assumed to be followed by a self-declared Islamic Republic founded on Islamic principles, would propose seemingly opposite actions as those followed by Pakistan in its foreign policy towards the PRC.

As Islamic concepts of IR seem to be insufficient to explain Pakistan's behavior towards the PRC, this paper uses a Kautilyan approach to IR, based on the ancient South Asian *Arthashastra* by Kautilya, to explain Pakistan-PRC-relations, especially concentrating on the Kautilyan concept of *mitra* – the ally. Based on this theoretical framework, the following research question is formulated: “How can Kautilyan conceptions of IR explain the all-weather friendship between Pakistan and the PRC?” As a case study, I will look at the CPEC to analyze how this project can be seen as Kautilyan in nature and of formative character for the wider relations between Pakistan and the PRC. Methodologically, process tracing will be used to analyze the Kautilyan nature of Pakistan-PRC-relations.

The Theoretical Framework: Kautilyan IR

Kautilyan conceptions of IR have been rising in IR research as part of the drive to globalize IR and to gather new theoretical insights from non-Western sources.¹⁴ Believed to be an advisor to the first Mauryan emperor Chandragupta, it is assumed that Kautilya played an important role in establishing the Mauryan empire.¹⁵ His council is found in the *Arthashastra*; however, it is believed to be the work of several authors.¹⁶

As the *Arthashastra* is a handbook for a ruler, the central actor in Kautilyan IR theory is the *vijigishu* – the conqueror. Any actions related to foreign policy must be seen from the *vijigishu*'s perspective.¹⁷ Surrounding him are different layers of actors, some with friendly intentions and some with hostile intentions.¹⁸ Central to Kautilyan IR is the *rajamandala*, in which the Kautilyan IR environment is described. Readings of the *rajamandala* can vastly differ. From

⁶ Davidson, “Xinjiang human rights abuses.”

⁷ Wong and Buckley, “China's repression of Uighurs.”

⁸ Serhan, “Saving Uyghur culture.”

⁹ Sun, “Islamization and Crackdown in Ningxia.”

¹⁰ Kuszewska, “Kashmir since 2019.”

¹¹ DAWN, “PM Imran.”

¹² Bakir, “Islam and International Relations,” 5.

¹³ Bakir, “Islam and International Relations,” 10.

¹⁴ Acharya and Buzan, “Re-imagining International Relations,” 33–38.

¹⁵ Mitra and Liebig, “An Intellectual Portrait,” 33–34.

¹⁶ Olivelle, “King, Governance, and Law,” 7–8.

¹⁷ Uz Zaman, “The Indian Strategic Thinker,” 236.

¹⁸ Uz Zaman, “The Indian Strategic Thinker,” 236.

rigid geopolitical interpretations that have been used to describe Kautilya as a realist thinker,¹⁹ to constructivist readings that cover the possible fluctuations within the *rajamandala*²⁰. Additionally, there exist nativist interpretations discard notions to interpret the *rajamandala* through the lenses of Western theory and propose to view it through a South Asian cultural view.²¹

How the *vijigishu* behaves in relation to the actors in the *rajamandala* depends on the state capacities of the *vijigishu* – the *prakrti*. The *prakrti* form the *saptanga* cluster and determine the scope of a country to act as a sovereign actor internally and externally.²² Importantly, the *prakrti*, as they are the constituent elements of the state, are interdependent on each other. As the ranking of the *prakrti* indicates their importance, their ranking also expresses their architecture, as every *prakrti* builds on the prior *prakrti*.²³ The *prakrti* are *swamin*, the ruler; *amatya*, the minister; *janapada*, the people; *durga*, the fortress; *kosa*, the treasury; *danda*, executive power and *mitra*, the allied state.²⁴ The *prakrti* need to be optimized and maximized, since every *prakrti* needs to be as effective and strong as possible.²⁵

As *mitra* will be of special importance to this research, it is useful to explore it in detail. *Mitra* is an external factor of an ally, and therefore the only *prakrti*, without direct relation to the internal strength of a country. Thus, the optimization of the *mitra* thus does not mean that the *prakrti* of the ally shall be strengthened, but that the *prakrti* of the ally shall be as exploited as much as possible. This is especially useful for underdeveloped countries, as entering an alliance might help in terms of internal development. While entering into an alliance can lead to the loss of freedom in foreign policy, Kautilya accepts this, at least temporarily, as he views it as an acceptable price for the development of the six internal *prakrti*.²⁶

Crucial for Kautilyan foreign policy analysis is the *shadgunya* cluster, which consists of six approaches to conduct foreign policy. Unlike the *saptanga* cluster, the different options in the *shadgunya* cluster are not interdependent, do not build on another and have no normative order. The *shadgunya* and *saptanga* clusters are intrinsically linked to each other, as the strength of a country's *prakrti* presupposes its usage of the *shadgunya*.²⁷ The six approaches to foreign policy are: *samdhi*, peace; *vigraha*, war; *asana*, neutrality; *yana*, war preparation and coercive diplomacy; *samshraya*, alliance building and *dvaidhibhava*, diplomatic double game.²⁸

Furthermore, it is important to assess why Kautilya still matters for contemporary South Asia. Per Liebig, Kautilya has a latent influence on modern Indian politics, that can be understood by using the concept of *habitus*, which indicates a permeation of the collective consciousness with impacts on perceptions, thinking and practices.²⁹ This implicit permeation of modern Indian politics by ancient Indian political theory is not only impacted by the Arthashastra but also by other classical Indian texts such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana and the Panchatantra literature.³⁰

Finally, the Arthashastra's advice is strictly limited to the Indian subcontinent. Kautilya does not deal with powers outside South Asia. The aim of his handbook is the political unification

¹⁹ Sarkar, "Hindu Theory International Relations."

²⁰ Shahi, "Arthashastra beyond Realpolitik."

²¹ Mishra, "Kautilya's Arthashastra."

²² Mitra and Liebig, "An Intellectual Portrait," 113.

²³ Mitra and Liebig, "An Intellectual Portrait," 92.

²⁴ Liebig, "Kautilya's Relevance," 101.

²⁵ Liebig, "Kautilya's Relevance," 102.

²⁶ Mitra and Liebig, "An Intellectual Portrait," 110–111.

²⁷ Mitra and Liebig, "An Intellectual Portrait," 116–117.

²⁸ Liebig, "Kautilya's Relevance," 103.

²⁹ Liebig, "Kautilya's Relevance," 107.

³⁰ Liebig, "Kautilya's Relevance," 107.

of South Asia.³¹ This might contribute to the debate concerning how Kautilyan IR can be used outside of South Asia, or whether it can even be used outside a Hindu context. I deem it useful to analyze Pakistani foreign policy because Pakistan is a successor to the British Raj, which followed other empires such as the Mughal Empire and Guptas. The state bureaucracies of these empires were permeated by local South Asian thought, and as Liebig proposes certain core patterns of thought remained throughout time.³²

Pakistan's Foreign Policy through a Kautilyan Lens

To assess how Kautilyan IR can explain Pakistan's foreign policy, Pakistan's place within the Kautilyan environment needs to be set. As the central actor in any Kautilyan foreign policy analysis is the *vijigishu*, Pakistan takes on this role. Pakistan's rival since its independence has been India³³; thus, India must be interpreted as the *ari* - enemy³⁴ - of Pakistan. Through a rigid understanding of the *rajamandala*, the PRC would also be interpreted as an *ari*. I interpret the *rajamandala* as a fluid scheme, that must not be seen as geo-political destiny. Therefore, the role of the PRC changes to an ally – *mitra* – hence, the PRC takes on the role of an actor in the *rajamandala* and as a *prakrti* of Pakistan.³⁵

As Pakistan, in relation to India, is the smaller state with less powerful *prakrti*, Kautilya would propose the *shadgunya* of alliance building – *samshraya* – as Pakistan has no chance to surpass India on its own in the foreseeable future.³⁶ The shortcomings of Pakistan's *prakrti* in contrast with India's *prakrti* are easily seen. Firstly, Pakistan is the smaller country, both in area and population size. Pakistan has an area of 796,100 square kilometers³⁷ and a population of about 225 million people³⁸, while India has an area size of 3,287,259 square kilometers³⁹ and a population of about 1.39 billion people.⁴⁰ Hence, India's *prakrti* related to the strength and size of a country's population – its *janapada* - is stronger than those of Pakistan. Relating to the financial strength – *kosa* - of a country it is useful to look at the GDP. India's GDP stands at 3.17 trillion US\$, while Pakistan's GDP stands at 346.43 billion US\$.⁴¹ India's annual GDP growth rate of 8.7 % is also stronger than Pakistan's annual GDP growth rate of 6.5 %.⁴² Finally, turning to the *prakrti danda*, a country's coercive power, it is imperative to compare the militaries of Pakistan and India. According to the Global Firepower Review of 2022, Pakistan ranks 9th out of 142 studied countries with a total military personnel of about 1.6 million people, 1387 aircrafts and 114 naval assets⁴³. In contrast, India ranks 4th, with a total military personnel of about 5.1 million people, 2182 aircrafts and 295 naval assets.⁴⁴

Following *samshraya*, Pakistan would be advised to look for a strong *mitra* to balance against India. Taking the strong friendship between Pakistan and the PRC into account, Pakistan follows a Kautilyan path of engaging the PRC to balance against India. Engaging a *mitra* is not

³¹ Liebig, "Kautilya's Relevance," 123–124.

³² Youtube, "IRC 2018."

³³ Cohen, "Shooting for a Century," 1.

³⁴ Mitra and Liebig, "An Intellectual Portrait," 125.

³⁵ Mitra and Liebig, "An Intellectual Portrait," 109–111.

³⁶ Mitra and Liebig, "An Intellectual Portrait," 121.

³⁷ WorldData.info, "Pakistan."

³⁸ World Bank, "Pakistan."

³⁹ WorldData.info, "India."

⁴⁰ World Bank, "India."

⁴¹ World Bank, "Pakistan, India."

⁴² World Bank, "GDP growth."

⁴³ Global Fire Power, "Pakistan."

⁴⁴ Global Fire Power, "India."

only advised to balance against an *ari*, but also to optimize one's own *prakrti* and for internal development.⁴⁵ To investigate the usage of the PRC as a *mitra*, I will examine Pakistan's involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative in the context of the CPEC as a case study.

The CPEC as a Kautilyan Project

The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the CPEC was already signed in July 2013, as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, which was announced by the Chinese President Xi Jinping during a visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013⁴⁶. Subsequently, the CPEC was officially launched in April 2015 during a visit of Xi Jinping to Pakistan, as 51 MoU's and agreements regarding Chinese investments in Pakistan were signed.⁴⁷ It follows in the footsteps of prior engagement between the countries. The PRC has been the biggest supplier of military and nuclear hardware to Pakistan since the 1990s and has provided much-needed aid regarding economic development as well as disaster relief aid.⁴⁸ Relating to both countries' economic cooperation, the China Pakistan Free Trade Agreement of 2007 needs to be mentioned, as it strengthened bilateral trade and granted enhanced market access to products on a reciprocal basis for goods. This led the PRC to become Pakistan's largest trading partner.⁴⁹

According to its website the potentials of the CPEC are plentiful, such as alleviating poverty, increasing livelihood opportunities, developing human resources, and enhancing the security, stability, trade and commerce in the region.⁵⁰ This gives an impression of how Pakistan intends to use the CPEC, as the goals mentioned are meant to strengthen Pakistan's economic infrastructural and human development and security. These fields of improvement all cover aspects that can be found in the *saptanga* cluster.

The official CPEC website lists 98 projects that have already been completed, are still under construction, or are still in their planning stage.⁵¹ These projects are estimated to be worth US\$ 62 billion⁵², and approximately US\$ 34 billion is allocated for the generation and distribution of electricity⁵³. This is important, as Pakistan has notorious problems with a lack of electricity and power shortages⁵⁴ that hinder economic development. Its focus on infrastructural development especially in rural regions, such as Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan, can be interpreted as the strengthening of the *janapada*, its population in the countryside. The CPEC's other large focus area is Pakistan's economic development, as it aims to attract foreign direct investments to the country to strengthen its GDP and GDP growth rates. Therefore, the CPEC aims to strengthen Pakistan's *kosa*, which is the precondition for a strengthened *danda*. Generally, the CPEC has been described as a game changer for the economic development of Pakistan through its emphasis on foreign investment and infrastructure build-ups. Hence, Pakistan aims to optimize its *prakrti* through the implementation of the CPEC and its projects.

Additionally, the CPEC must be seen as a geopolitical project that aims to achieve military parity with India.⁵⁵ Hereby, it aims to strengthen the aforementioned *danda* and optimize

⁴⁵ Mitra and Liebig, "An Intellectual Portrait," 110.

⁴⁶ Nabyeva, "Blickwechsel."

⁴⁷ Kuszewska and Nitza-Makowska, "Context Regional Security," 229.

⁴⁸ Wolf, "Concept, Context and Assessment," 9–10.

⁴⁹ Wolf, "Concept, Context and Assessment," 10.

⁵⁰ CPEC, "About CPEC."

⁵¹ "CPEC."

⁵² Kuszewska and Nitza-Makowska, "Context Regional Security," 229.

⁵³ Hassan, "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor," 137.

⁵⁴ Garlick, "Reconfiguring China-Pakistan Economic Corridor," 3.

⁵⁵ Wolf, "Concept, Context and Assessment," 88.

Pakistan's geostrategic situation within the *rajamandala*. The CPEC also intends to stabilize Pakistan internally. Provinces like Balochistan, which amount to many of the CPEC projects, have seen their security situation deteriorate drastically, as separatist movements and terrorist groups have challenged the Pakistani state.⁵⁶

Theory and Reality: Does the CPEC strengthen Pakistan's *prakrti*?

While the CPEC is far from being finished, as it is only forecasted to be completed by 2030,⁵⁷ a preliminary assessment as to how it has been able to achieve its goals up to this point is possible. A total investment of US\$ 60 billion has been called way to low of an investment to account for a meaningful positive transition in a middle-income economy worth US\$ 320 billion.⁵⁸ Although Chinese investment under the auspices of the CPEC mushroomed from 2014 to 2017, this investment has become significantly less ever since.⁵⁹ The narrative of an economic game changer for Pakistan seems to not be met in reality, as the CPEC has not been able to circumvent the ongoing structural problems of the Pakistani economy, such as corruption, nepotism and clientelism.⁶⁰ Instead of a win-yielding transformation of the Pakistani economy, the CPEC has contributed to the maintenance of this dire economic status quo, keeping Pakistani elites in a privileged situation in relation to the general population.⁶¹ Therefore, while beneficial in theory, the CPEC has so far not been able to contribute to Pakistan's *kosa*, as it has not been optimized in a financially sustainable manner.

Pakistan's janapada should theoretically benefit from the CPEC, as many infrastructural projects of the CPEC are situated in Pakistan's rural regions and are hence aimed to foster the development of Pakistan's countryside. As it has been the case with Pakistan's *kosa*, its janapada has seen a similar dire development under the auspices of the CPEC, as most of the CPEC's infrastructure projects are still unfinished and have yet to have a meaningful impact on the development of Pakistan.⁶² It is noteworthy that the Gwadar Port still has to rise to the occasion of its many advanced praises. Originally intended to increase the capacity of the port from 3 to 100 berths, so far, it has not increased by one single berth. Additionally, Gwadar shrinks in its importance to the CPEC when compared with the port of Karachi, which welcomes around 1600 ships annually, while only 20 ships docked at Gwadar over a five-year average from 2013 to 2018. Subsequently, Gwadar's total traffic only amounted to a little more than 1% of Karachi's total traffic.⁶³ Hence, the CPEC so far has also not been able to meaningfully contribute to Pakistan's janapada, despite its flowerful language.

Regarding Pakistan's *danda*, its internally destabilized regions, such as Balochistan, have remained volatile. During the implementation of the CPEC, several incidents occurred, in which Chinese nationals were targeted at in kidnappings or attacks. The frequency of these attacks shows a certain local resentment against Chinese activities.⁶⁴ Although the total number of terrorist attacks in Balochistan decreased between 2016 and 2020, a rise in attacks was observed for 2020 and 2021.⁶⁵ Therefore, CPEC's impact on Pakistan's *danda* seems to be mixed, as the

⁵⁶ Kapur and Ganugly, "The Jihad Paradox," 114–115.

⁵⁷ McCartney, "The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor," 4.

⁵⁸ McCartney, "The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor," 4.

⁵⁹ Garlick, "Reconfiguring China-Pakistan Economic Corridor," 39.

⁶⁰ Garlick, "Reconfiguring China-Pakistan Economic Corridor," 51.

⁶¹ Garlick, "Reconfiguring China-Pakistan Economic Corridor," 52.

⁶² Garlick, "Reconfiguring China-Pakistan Economic Corridor," 52.

⁶³ Garlick, "Reconfiguring China-Pakistan Economic Corridor," 41.

⁶⁴ Garlick, "Reconfiguring China-Pakistan Economic Corridor," 88.

⁶⁵ SATP, "Datasheet – Balochistan."

security situation in the CPEC's most important region of Balochistan improved, although it remains very tense.

Concerning the *rajamandala* the CPEC serves Pakistan's interest in using the PRC as a *mitra* to balance against India. By inviting the PRC to develop projects such as the Gwadar Port at strategically important locations, the CPEC constitutes a win-win situation for Pakistan and the PRC at the military level, as both countries are able to strengthen their position in relation to India. The CPEC's emphasis on connectivity between Pakistan and the PRC further strengthens this notion as both countries might grow stronger together in the future, and better infrastructure might have a positive impact for possible military endeavors, especially in the CPEC's northern parts of Gilgit-Baltistan. While the CPEC seems to be of great use to the development of Pakistan's *prakrti* in rhetoric, the reality displays that it has barely helped develop Pakistan's *prakrti* in a meaningful way. However, it does help Pakistan to improve its strategic situation vis á vis India, as the PRC's strong military resources are used by Pakistan to balance against India.

Conclusion

Coming back to the research question as to how Kautilyan IR concepts can explain the all-weather friendship between Pakistan and the PRC, it can be said that Pakistan follows a Kautilyan path, trying to utilize a stronger *mitra* – the PRC – to both develop its own internal *prakrti* and to balance against its main rival, India. Hence, Pakistan follows a *samshraya* approach towards India, as its own *prakrti* are less powerful than those of India. To showcase *samshraya* and *mitra* are being implemented by Pakistan, I used the CPEC as a case study. The CPEC is useful as a case study, as its aims to develop Pakistan's internal *prakrti*, such as its infrastructure, economic development and internal stability, and geostrategically impacts both Pakistan and the PRC.

However, the results of the analysis show that while flowerful in rhetoric and theory, Pakistan is barely able to meaningfully develop its internal *prakrti* by engaging the PRC through the CPEC. However, the CPEC does have strategic importance to Pakistan relating to its position within the *rajamandala* and can be utilized as a geostrategic tool against India.

The Kautilyan theorizing of Pakistan's relations with the PRC shows at an elevated level why both countries have friendly relations, despite the PRC's rigid persecution of its Muslim minorities. As Kautilya foreshadows, entering an alliance with a stronger ally might curtail a country's ability to act independently in its foreign policy. This can be seen in the case of Pakistan and the PRC, as the PRC's persecution of its Muslim population cannot be countered by Pakistan due to its dependence on the PRC to balance against India and to support the development of its own *prakrti*. In Kautilyan terms through the CPEC, the PRC has evolved into an integral constituent element of the Pakistani state, because of its status as a *mitra*, on which Pakistan has grown dependent.

The analysis of Pakistan-PRC-relations through a Kautilyan lens therefore bears fruit, as it is a beneficial way of explaining a relationship that has often been seen as confusing due to the many differences between both countries. It is further useful as it analyzes the foreign policy of a South Asian nation by using a theoretical framework native to the region and to the political *longue durée* of the South Asian bureaucratic elites. Further research on the use of Kautilyan IR theory by South Asian nations beyond India should be pursued, as this research has shown that Kautilya can indeed be found in the foreign policy of South Asian nations.

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