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REPORT
Roundtable Discussion on
China-US Competition: Pakistan's Role as a Connector

*Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS), BNU Center for Policy Research
and Understanding China Forum*

December 16, 2025 | 10:00 am to 2:00 pm | SLASS 125, BNU

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Pakistan's crucial role in Kessinger's secret visit to China in 1970s lead to the historic engagement of President Nixon and Chairman Mao, which dissolved the long isolation of China from the west. China's diplomatic and economic ties developed with the western states afterwards. Its growth accelerated with the expansion of interaction and it became an integral part of international economy and network.

Today, Pakistan has a strong strategic cooperative partnership with China. The relationship is thriving under economic cooperation, defense partnership and financial initiatives. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor-CPEC 2.0 is the center of focus under the context of infrastructure and China is the largest defense supplier of Pakistan. On the other hand, Pakistan has renewed its relationship with U.S, with the May 2025 India-Pakistan conflict served as a turning point; where U.S mediation efforts helped prevent escalation, restoring Washington's trust in Pakistan's power and diplomacy. U.S. presented interest in Pakistan's mineral wealth, which have opened doors for new economic opportunities. Pakistan holds ties with the two most powerful states in the international realm; however, these powerful states are at odds with each other, which places



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Pakistan at sensitive position. The tensions between USA and China have reached their highest point. Since the second Trump administration, the U.S-China relations have entered a period of extreme volatility characterized by an unprecedented "super" trade war. The world saw a tit-for-tat escalation of tariffs which stirred the international trade and kept the oval office busy with talks.

The roundtable discussion "China-U. S Competition: Pakistan's Role as a Connector" discussed the Pakistan's complex position within this environment. It brought together diplomats, academics, policymakers, journalists, and students to critically examine the evolving geopolitical and geo-economic landscape shaped by intensifying United States-China rivalry. Historically allied with the United States and simultaneously China's closest strategic partner, Pakistan faces both opportunities and constraints in managing its external relations. It aimed to reassess long-standing narratives, especially that the idea of Pakistan as a "connector" between great powers, to explore whether such a role remains viable in light of contemporary realities.

The Discussion:

The dialogue was attended by H.E. Mr. Zhao Shiren, *Consul General of China in Lahore*, as Chief Guest, along with a distinguished delegation from Shanghai Institutes for International Studies-SIIS, including Prof. Chen Dongxiao *President SIIS*, Prof. Liu Zongyi, *Senior Research Fellow and Director, Centre for South Asia Studies*, Dr. Tan Chenyi, and Dr. Zhang Xiaoyin. Prof. Dr. Tahir Kamran, *Head, Department of Liberal Arts BNU*, Dr. Ejaz Hussain, *Associate Professor of Political Science Lahore School of Economics*, Mr. Fawad Hassan Fawad, *Former*



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Principal Secretary to Prime Minister, Dr. Zafaruddin Mahmood, Founding President Understanding China Forum, Mr. Nasir Jamal, Bureau Chief Dawn News, Dr. Maryam Siddiqui, Assistant Professor Maritime Centre of Excellence, Pakistan Navy War College Lahore, and Ms. Saima Sial, Instructor of “China in the 21st Century” course BNU served as the discussants while Ambassador Mansoor Ahmad Khan, *Director BCPR*, chaired the session.

Prof. Chen Dongxiao, President of SIIS, in his opening remarks spoke on the evolution of U.S.-China relations, acknowledging Pakistan's diplomatic achievements while emphasizing that China's deepening global integration has fundamentally reshaped international political and economic networks. He noted Pakistan's continued support for China's core interests, including the One-China policy, and observed that initiatives such as CPEC and the Gwadar Port can enhance Pakistan's connectivity, provided expectations remain realistic and aligned with national capacity. Prof. Chen reaffirmed China's long-term commitment to Pakistan's economic development through CPEC and highlighted the importance of people-to-people exchanges, particularly in the economic sphere. He encouraged Pakistani businesses to leverage China's economic reforms and emerging opportunities, stressing that improved security conditions are essential for attracting investment, fostering entrepreneurship, and sustaining long-term bilateral cooperation. He posed three key Questions for the audience and the policy makers to reflect upon for advancement in the cooperation.

1. How can Pakistan create meaningful opportunities for youth to explore new markets and develop businesses?



2. What platforms or policy frameworks are needed to support new and emerging projects?
3. How can security concerns be addressed, and what government policies are required to effectively counter terrorism and ensure a stable investment environment?

Prof. Dr. Tahir Kamran, *Head of Department of Liberal Arts BNU*, presented a critical reassessment of Pakistan's aspiration to function as a "connector" between China and the United States. According to him the significant intermediary role that Pakistan played in 1970s was due to the historical conditions at the time. The convergence of interests allowed Pakistan to facilitate dialogue, not because of intrinsic power, but because both sides needed a discreet intermediary. Pakistan's role was tactical, time-bound, and dependent on structural asymmetries that no longer exist. Today China has transformed into huge global economy and technological hub. In the present international structure, China has its own institutionalized channels to communicate with its counterparts which decreases the need for third party mediation. Even amid rivalry, these channels persist because they serve mutual interests. Supporting the view of Dr. Tahir Kamran, Mr. Fawad Hassan Fawad, *former Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister*, and Mr. Nasir Jamal of Dawn News, argued that portraying Pakistan as either a facilitator or a connector between China and the United States is an idealistic illusion, as the country currently lacks the capacity, leverage, and structural positioning required to act as a bridge between the two global powers. He described CPEC as an opportunity that can yield long-term benefits only if Pakistan formulates and implements a robust economic strategy. He emphasized that Pakistan cannot expect other states to make sacrifices on its behalf and must instead develop its own economic



and development frameworks to compete globally. He identified policy incoherence, security challenges, and governance weaknesses as key obstacles to Pakistan's economic aspirations, arguing that these shortcomings have eroded the country's capacity to function as a significant player on the global stage.

Differing with the assessment of previous panelists, Dr. Zainab Ahmad, *Deputy Director of BCPR*, argued that while China remains a close and reliable partner, Pakistan's core challenges, such as governance deficits, corruption, and political instability, are fundamentally domestic in nature. She emphasized that these internal weaknesses should not be conflated with limitations in Pakistan's external role. She stressed the importance of recalibrating Pakistan's foreign and economic policies in line with evolving international realities. Drawing parallels with countries that effectively engage with regional blocs and major powers without formal alignment or membership, she maintained that Pakistan can still exercise a meaningful outward role between great powers if it adopts pragmatic, interest-based diplomacy. In her view, acknowledging internal challenges should not lead to strategic pessimism; rather, with policy coherence and institutional reform at home, Pakistan can continue to play a constructive role in the broader international landscape.

Dr. Ejaz Hussain, *Associate Professor of Political Science at Lahore School of Economics*, reiterated that Pakistan's geopolitical relevance has re-emerged, particularly in the Middle East. Since 1947, Pakistan has sought to play a leading role in the Muslim world. This orientation was evident in its participation in recent diplomatic efforts concerning Gaza, alongside Muslim and



Western-backed states. China's decision not to veto UN Security Council resolutions aimed at establishing a peace framework in Gaza has enhanced Beijing's standing among Muslim-majority countries, including Pakistan. This creates space for Pakistan to act as a situational diplomatic facilitator, helping bridge perspectives between China and the United States on peace and stability in the region, particularly the need for sustained engagement with China in South Asia, the Indo-Pacific, and the Middle East. He emphasized that in an era of intensifying China-US competition, renewed confrontation would harm not only the two major powers but also middle powers such as Pakistan. Drawing on its historical experience, strategic location, and balanced relations with both Beijing and Washington, Pakistan remains well positioned to act, situationally and pragmatically, as a facilitator, contributing to regional and global stability.

Dr. Zhang Xiaoyin, Research Fellow at the Center for South Asia Studies in SIIS, discussed the expanding role of social media in shaping bilateral and regional relations. While acknowledging its potential to enhance connectivity and information sharing, she cautioned that social media also intensifies misunderstandings, polarization, and hostility. She underscored the value of face-to-face engagement, academic collaboration, and people-to-people exchanges, particularly through university partnerships, as essential tools for building mutual understanding and sustaining regional stability.

Building on this discussion, Ms. Saima Sial, Instructor for the course "*China in the 21st Century*," in BNU focused on security, labor, and human capital challenges. She argued that acting as a "connector" is a strategic function rather than a permanent status. She identified



language barriers as a major impediment to deeper cooperation and called for sustained investment in Chinese language education in Pakistan. To strengthen Chinese language capacity in Pakistan, the discussants emphasized the need to upgrade Chinese language programs in universities and schools, introduce standardized curricula aligned with market needs, expand scholarships and exchange programs, and facilitate the placement of qualified Chinese language teachers. Institutional partnerships, Confucius Institutes, and joint degree programs were identified as practical avenues to normalize Chinese language learning and integrate it into Pakistan's broader human capital development strategy.

H.E. Mr. Zhao Shiren, *Consul General of China in Lahore*, in his keynote closing address expressed that the China-Pakistan relationship is “Iron-clad” and is immune to the circumstances. China is committed to support Pakistan's economic development, particularly through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). He highlighted significance of people-to-people interaction especially through the domain of economy. He encouraged Pakistani businesses to leverage China's economic reforms and opportunities under the Belt and Road Initiative. He candidly highlighted security concerns for the Chinese citizens, who come to Pakistan for business initiatives, market engagement and government projects, while reaffirming China's deep commitment to Pakistan.

He noted that China views Pakistan as a close bilateral partner and seeks greater freedom of movement for its nationals during engagements, which remains constrained due to security concerns. He emphasized that improved security would build economic confidence, encourage



youth entrepreneurship and market exploration, and strengthen long-term cooperation, highlighting the critical link between security and the success of bilateral initiatives such as CPEC.

Conclusion:

Considering these two varying perspectives, Pakistan's position between the United States and China should be understood with greater realism and strategic clarity. While Pakistan's historical relationships with both Washington and Beijing do provide diplomatic space and room for strategic balancing, this should not be overstated as an inherent ability to act as a connector or bridge between two global powers locked in structural rivalry. Any facilitative role Pakistan may play is contingent, limited, and dependent on its internal capacity rather than historical sentiment or external expectations. Going forward, Pakistan's priority should be to consolidate its own economic strength, governance capacity, and security environment. CPEC represents not merely a symbol of friendship with China but an opportunity to build sustainable economic foundations that can enhance Pakistan's relevance in the international system. Rather than aspiring to mediate between great powers, Pakistan should adopt a proactive, interest-driven foreign policy that diversifies partnerships, strengthens relations beyond traditional allies, and positions the country as a credible, economically resilient actor. Only through internal consolidation can Pakistan maintain balanced relations with both the United States and China while safeguarding its own long-term strategic interests.