



IPS INSIGHTS

Perspectives On the Issues Shaping Policy

Pakistan-China Joint Boundary Commission

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The Pakistan-China relationship has often been described as an “all-weather” partnership. Much of that relationship, however, has traditionally been discussed in terms of defense cooperation, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), diplomatic coordination and strategic convergence. The operationalization of the Pakistan-China Boundary Joint Commission (BJC) adds another important dimension: the institutional management of the frontier itself.

The inaugural meeting of the BJC was held in Islamabad on 16–17 September 2026, formally activating a mechanism envisaged more than a decade ago, with representatives from both sides.

The timing is noteworthy. The commission is being activated when the Pakistan-China frontier is no longer simply a remote mountain boundary. It has become a vital artery for trade, tourism, people-to-people contacts and the broader connectivity ambitions associated with CPEC.

An Old Agreement Acquiring New Life

It is important to understand what the BJC is, and what it is not. The commission does not constitute a new territorial settlement or boundary realignment. Its legal foundation

is the 2013 China-Pakistan Agreement on the Boundary Management System. Article 45 of that agreement envisaged the establishment of a joint commission to oversee the implementation of border-management arrangements. The mechanism remained dormant for more than a decade before its formal activation this month.²

The 2013 arrangement itself rests on the earlier Sino-Pakistan Boundary Agreement of 2 March 1963. The distinction between the two agreements is important. The 1963 agreement dealt principally with the demarcation of the boundary, including surveys, maps and boundary markers. The later 2013 agreement established a continuing system for managing a boundary that had already been demarcated.³

Thus, the BJC should not be confused with the earlier Joint Boundary Demarcation Commission. The latter had a specific, essentially one-time task. The new commission is intended to be a continuing institutional mechanism.

This distinction also explains why describing the BJC as a mechanism for “redrawing” or “handing over” territory would be misleading. The commission’s stated functions concern management rather than territorial redistribution.

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² “Islamabad, Beijing Activate Joint Border Commission,” Dawn, September 17, 2026, https://epaper.dawn.com/DetaillImage.php?StoryImage=17_09_2026_005_003

³ Baqir Sajjad Syed, “Islamabad, Beijing Activate Joint Border Commission,” Dawn, September 17, 2026, <https://www.dawn.com/news/2030508>

What Will The Commission Actually Do?

The practical agenda is broad. According to Pakistan's Foreign Office, discussions have covered cross-border coordination, movement of goods and peoples, joint border surveys and people-to-people connectivity.⁴

The commission provides a formal channel through which the two governments can address matters such as:

- maintenance and inspection of the boundary;
- joint surveys;
- boundary-marker issues;
- management of cross-border facilities;
- handling of border-related incidents;
- movement of people and goods;
- customs and trade facilitation; and
- wider connectivity between communities on the two sides.

This may appear bureaucratic, but effective border management is often built upon precisely such bureaucratic mechanisms. A remote frontier becomes more manageable when agencies know whom to contact, how incidents are reported, how surveys are conducted and how practical disagreements are resolved.

The presence of defense, interior, customs, commerce and surveying officials alongside diplomats is particularly important. It gives the commission an inter-agency character rather than making it simply another diplomatic forum.

Khunjerab: Where Geography Meets Economics

Perhaps the most visible practical beneficiary will be the Khunjerab crossing. For centuries, the Karakoram was an obstacle to movement. Today, roads, tunnels, customs facilities and the Karakoram Highway have transformed parts of the region into a corridor linking

Pakistan with China's Xinjiang region and, potentially, wider markets.

Khunjerab therefore has importance beyond the immediate bilateral relationship. It is a physical gateway for Pakistan-China commerce and an important component of CPEC-related connectivity. The activation of the BJC provides Islamabad and Beijing with a standing mechanism to address the problems that inevitably accompany increased traffic.⁵

As Pakistan and China move towards the next phase of CPEC, connectivity will require more than roads and investment. It will require efficient borders.

A highway can be completed, but if customs procedures are cumbersome, border facilities inadequate or security coordination weak, the economic value of the highway is diminished. The BJC can therefore be viewed as part of the institutional infrastructure necessary for CPEC's next phase.

From An Ad Hoc Frontier to an Institutional Frontier

There is another important dimension. For much of its history, the Pakistan-China frontier was managed through a mixture of bilateral agreements, diplomatic channels and local administrative arrangements. The BJC introduces a more systematic structure.

Institutionalization matters because borders generate routine problems. A damaged marker, a road requiring maintenance, a disputed crossing procedure, an unusual movement of people, a security incident or a sudden interruption of trade can become diplomatically sensitive if there is no established mechanism for dealing with it.

A permanent commission can help prevent such relatively minor issues from escalating. It also creates institutional memory. Officials change, governments change and circumstances change. A standing body allows accumulated experience and agreed

⁴ "Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, "Pakistan-China Boundary Joint Commission," September 17, 2026, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/pakistan-china-boundary-joint-commission>

⁵ N Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Pakistan, China Reaffirm Consensus at Inaugural Boundary Joint Commission Meeting," *Dawn*, September 17, 2026, <https://www.dawn.com/news/2030650>

procedures to survive personnel changes.

In this sense, the BJC is not necessarily dramatic. Its importance may lie precisely in making border management less dramatic.

The India Factor

The commission inevitably has a geopolitical dimension because the Pakistan-China boundary intersects with the larger and unresolved Kashmir dispute.

As expected, India has rejected the BJC. Indian Foreign Ministry spokesman Randhir Jaiswal said that New Delhi's position remained unchanged, arguing that the commission had no legal basis and that there was no recognized Pakistan-China boundary in the areas concerned. India also does not recognize the 1963 Sino-Pakistan Boundary Agreement and maintains that Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh are integral parts of India.⁶

Pakistan and China, however, approach the matter from a different legal and diplomatic position. For them, the BJC is an implementation mechanism under the 2013 agreement and is concerned with managing the existing frontier rather than negotiating a new territorial settlement. Pakistan's official announcement describes it specifically in terms of border management, surveys, movement, trade and connectivity.⁷

These competing positions should be kept separate from the practical purpose of the commission. The activation of the BJC does not resolve the wider India-Pakistan or India-China territorial disputes. Nor does India's objection prevent Pakistan and China from using a bilateral mechanism that they regard as deriving from their existing agreements.

Why Now?

The question naturally arises: why did a mechanism envisaged in 2013 take until 2026 to become operational? There is no single officially stated explanation for the

timing. Several developments, however, provide useful context.

- First, the strategic and economic importance of the Pakistan-China frontier has grown. CPEC has placed unprecedented emphasis on north-south connectivity and the movement of goods through Pakistan.
- Second, border management has become more complex. Increased commercial movement requires closer coordination among customs, security, immigration, communications and other agencies.
- Third, the broader regional environment has changed considerably since 2013. India-China relations have experienced prolonged military tensions along the Line of Actual Control, while India-Pakistan relations have also remained contentious. In this environment, both Beijing and Islamabad have an interest in ensuring that their own frontier remains stable and efficiently administered.
- Finally, the activation comes as Pakistan and China discuss the future direction of their economic relationship. If CPEC is to evolve from an infrastructure-centered project towards greater industrial, agricultural, technological and trade cooperation, the physical border through which much of that connectivity passes must also become more efficient.

A Message Beyond Border Management?

The commission inevitably sends a diplomatic signal as well. For China, institutionalizing cooperation with Pakistan along the Karakoram frontier demonstrates that Beijing regards its relationship with Islamabad as long-term and strategically important. For Pakistan, the mechanism reinforces its ability to manage and develop the frontier with one of its most important strategic partners.

⁶ Express News Service, "'Has No Legal Basis': India Rejects Pakistan-China 'Boundary Commission,'" *The Indian Express*, September 17, 2026, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/has-no-legal-basis-india-rejects-pakistan-china-boundary-commission-10881333/>

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, "Pakistan-China Boundary Joint Commission," September 17, 2026, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/pakistan-china-boundary-joint-commission>

Yet it would be excessive to portray the BJC simply as an anti-India initiative. The publicly stated agenda is overwhelmingly practical: border management, surveys, trade, movement and connectivity. Its geopolitical implications arise partly because of the unresolved territorial disputes surrounding the region.

Indeed, the more useful interpretation may be that Pakistan and China are seeking to separate practical border management from the larger political disputes that neither side expects this commission to resolve.

What Could The BJC Achieve?

The real test will come after the inaugural meeting. If the commission meets regularly, develops standard operating procedures, improves customs coordination, conducts systematic joint surveys and creates reliable mechanisms for dealing with incidents, it could substantially reduce friction along the frontier.

It could also contribute to making Khunjerab a more dependable commercial gateway. For CPEC, that would be particularly important. Connectivity is not simply about constructing roads; it is about ensuring that people, vehicles, cargo and information can move efficiently across borders.

There is also a human dimension. The Foreign Office has specifically referred to people-to-people linkages. Communities

living on either side of the Karakoram have historically interacted across one of the world's most formidable geographical barriers. Better institutional arrangements can make legitimate movement easier while strengthening security controls against illegal crossings.

The Road Ahead

The Pakistan-China Boundary Joint Commission is unlikely to resolve the larger territorial controversies of South Asia, and it is not designed to do so. Its importance lies elsewhere.

The 1963 agreement provided the foundation for the boundary; the 2013 agreement created the framework for managing it; and the 2026 meeting has finally given that framework an operational institutional mechanism.

That progression is significant. Pakistan and China are increasingly connected by roads, trade, investment, energy, and defense cooperation and people-to-people exchanges. The border between them must therefore be managed not merely as a line on a map but as a living interface between two increasingly interconnected economies and societies.

In an era when borders are often associated with confrontation, the Pakistan-China Boundary Joint Commission offers a different lesson: *A well-managed border can become a bridge rather than simply a barrier.*

