



CARE & COOPERATION ALONG THE HEALTH SILK ROAD

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When COVID19 swept across the world, it was more than a health crisis, it was a wake-up call. Hospitals overflowed, doctors worked around the clock, and nations scrambled to find vaccines, testing kits, and protective equipment. For countries like Pakistan, the pandemic revealed the cracks in a health system already under pressure. Shortages of vaccines, personal protective equipment, and testing tools made each wave of the virus feel heavier than the last. People waited anxiously for help, and policymakers struggled to keep pace with the fast-moving threat.

Amid this global storm, a pathway of support began to emerge through the Health Silk Road. Part of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, the Health Silk Road aimed to strengthen public health cooperation, share resources, and improve healthcare infrastructure across partner nations. For Pakistan, this was more than aid, it was a chance to learn, adapt, and prepare for future crises.

The Health Silk Road has become a light of hope for countries like Pakistan as they confront the intricacies of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a strategic component of China's Belt and Road Initiative, the Health Silk Road has prioritized international health collaboration, with primary goals of strengthening healthcare systems, improving emergency response capacities, and facilitating the exchange of medical knowledge and infrastructure among partner countries.

China's practical support during health emergencies has been instrumental in helping Pakistan combat the pandemic. This support has included sharing virus genome data, pandemic response protocols, vaccines, personal protective equipment, and sending expert medical teams to assist local health authorities. For instance, early in the COVID-19 pandemic, China rapidly shared detailed information about the virus and treatment strategies with partner countries, enabling faster detection, containment, and treatment measures.

The Health Silk Road's emphasis on knowledge transfer and capacity building has also contributed significantly to Pakistan's health resilience. Pakistan now has technical guidance on disease surveillance, hospital administration, and epidemic preparedness through training programs, online seminars, and collaborative research activities. This comprehensive approach has helped partner countries improve their long-term health capabilities, going beyond immediate aid.



In essence, the Health Silk Road serves as both a supply network & a knowledge-sharing platform, allowing countries dealing with systemic health issues to access expertise, resources, & coordinated support during times of crisis. For Pakistan, this has meant not just obtaining critical aid, but also increasing its ability to respond to future pandemics more effectively.

The partnership between China and Pakistan is built on mutual trust, respect, and a commitment to territorial integrity & shared interests. This friendship has been strengthened further through programs such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which has helped Pakistan grow its infrastructure, energy, & trade.

When the pandemic hit Pakistan, China's support through the Health Silk Road was critical in both the immediate reaction & long-term health improvement. China's vaccine support was a cornerstone of this relationship, providing millions of doses of vaccines such as Sinopharm, Sinovac, & CanSino, which were crucial in jumpstarting Pakistan's early vaccination program (Belt and Road Portal, 2021). The donation of Sinopharm vaccines shortened the time between doses, allowing front-line healthcare workers to receive protection sooner. By mid-2021, Pakistan had administered approximately 40 million COVID-19 vaccine doses, the majority of which came from China, thereby reducing infections & protecting vulnerable populations (Belt and Road Portal, 2021).

China also donated critical medical supplies and human resources, transporting testing kits, ventilators, masks, protective suits, & other necessities by land & air, frequently under the Health Silk Road framework. Contributions from China's Alibaba Foundation & the Xinjiang province ensured that protective gear reached hospitals at key times, protecting healthcare professionals & patients alike. Joint training programs, workshops, & health professional exchanges improved Pakistan's technical capability by providing local teams with up-to-date guidelines for disease surveillance, clinical management, & pandemic preparedness.

The collaboration expanded beyond emergency response to sustainable infrastructure, with the construction of healthcare facilities like as the Pakistan-China Friendship Hospital in Gwadar, highlighting the Health Silk Road's emphasis on long-term healthcare capacity. Laboratories and collaborative disease control programs between the Chinese Center for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) & Pakistan's National Institute of Health (NIH) have improved the country's ability to monitor & respond to epidemics quickly.



China–Pakistan energyPakistan and China signed agreements at ministerial levels to expand emergency response systems & develop pharmaceutical industry collaboration, ensuring preparedness for future health crises. The outcomes of this collaboration are measurable, with early vaccine delivery helping reduce hospitalizations & allowing Pakistan to gradually reopen key economic sectors . Survival rates among healthcare workers improved with timely vaccination & adequate protective equipment, highlighting life–saving impact of the partnership.

This cooperation has strengthened Pakistan and China's "iron brother" connection, establishing them as leaders in South & Central Asian collaborative health diplomacy. Through vaccinations, knowledge, infrastructure, & policy alignment, China–Pakistan collaboration under the Health Silk Road has turned a health catastrophe into an opportunity for long–term development in public health systems & regional collaborations.

The COVID–19 pandemic has taught Pakistan & its partners valuable lessons about managing global health crises. One important insight is that global solidarity is required; depending primarily on national stockpiles delays equitable distribution. Pakistan's experience demonstrates that international collaboration, such as the Health Silk Road, can serve as an alternate avenue for exchanging vaccinations, medical supplies, & expertise.

Investing in long–term healthcare infrastructure has also proved critical. Hospitals, laboratories, & diagnostic centers built with Health Silk Road support not only helped during COVID–19 but also strengthened Pakistan's capacity to respond to future outbreaks.

Moreover, Shared protocols and knowledge have saved lives. Also, timely access to best practices, diagnostic protocols, & disease surveillance data significantly reduced response time. China's early release of COVID–19 diagnostic techniques, for example, assisted Pakistan in detecting and treating cases more quickly.

Managing a pandemic requires careful coordination with economic policies. Pakistan's ability to balance economic pressures with public health measures highlighted the importance of aligning health policy with broader national strategies.



Despite successes, challenges remain, such as coordination among international institutions, standardization of medical supplies, and timely distribution. Differences in regulatory approval and WHO pre-qualification for some Chinese vaccines slowed wider acceptance.

Policy Recommendations:

To move forward, Pakistan can:

- Institutionalize Health Silk Road mechanisms, establishing permanent bilateral health task forces to coordinate pandemic preparedness and response.
- Enhance local vaccine and pharmaceutical production, partnering with Chinese firms to transfer vaccine technology and develop local capacity.
- Improve healthcare infrastructure beyond cities, focusing on rural health centers with sustained funding.
- Standardize supply chains and protocols, working with global bodies to harmonize standards for medical supplies and vaccines.

The Health Silk Road has emerged as a powerful catalyst for health cooperation, transforming Pakistan's pandemic response and strengthening its health systems, while also extending its benefits to other countries in South and Central Asia. Through this partnership, Pakistan and China have demonstrated that collaboration, shared expertise, and mutual investment can overcome even the most daunting health challenges, creating a lasting impact on healthcare capacity and policy frameworks. As the initiative continues to grow, it is poised to shape regional health governance models, fostering a healthier and more resilient future for the entire region.