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# Mapping Chinese (In)Security in Pakistan

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## Key Points:

- The Pakistan-China comprehensive agreements have not been extended to cover the bilateral security of their partnership.
- The human security concerns due to increased bilateral contact have primarily affected the safety of Chinese workers in Pakistan apart from compromising cross-border security of nationals from both sides.
- The security environment of Pakistan needs to remain at the centre of CPEC's welfare.
- Both sides realise the need for strengthening their joint security cooperation, law enforcement and counter-terrorism capabilities.
- Ensuring bilateral security is imperative given the potential of CPEC to become a tool in the hands of both internal and external actors looking to jeopardise the security of Pakistan and the South Asian region.

## INTRODUCTION

Pakistan and China have been engaged in strategic cooperation since the 1960s. This cooperation has managed to traverse several obstacles over the past few decades.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, this cooperation has extended to the economic realm in the form of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Therefore, the two countries have recently entered the second development phase under their mutual Free Trade Agreement. The China-Pakistan Free Trade Agreement 2 (CPFTA2) has considerably eased the way for Pakistani exports into the Chinese markets. Other provisions like this are expected to further broaden this market in the future.<sup>2</sup> Yet, such comprehensive agreements are limited to the economic side and have not been extended to cover the bilateral security of the Pakistan-

China partnership. This is especially true considering the dimension of human security under the purview of the increasing people-to-people contact between the two countries. The human security concerns stemming from this increased contact have primarily affected the safety of Chinese workers in Pakistan, and in general compromised the cross-border security of nationals from both sides.<sup>3</sup>

Human security is threatened by internal and external security risks, which collectively challenge cooperation between the two countries. Pakistan's existing concerns pertaining to political and economic instability, along with ethnic and sectarian strife, religious fanaticism, and militancy, are among the internal security threats. External security threats emanating from geostrategic and geopolitical realms also complicate this relationship by attaching themselves to the country's internal weaknesses.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Munir, "Pakistan-China Strategic Interdependence," *Strategic Studies* 38, no. 2 (2018): 21-42.

<sup>2</sup> "Preliminary Analysis of Pak-China FTA Phase II," *Pakistan Business Council*, accessed June 23, 2022, <https://www.pbc.org.pk/research/preliminary-analysis-of-pak-china-fta-phase-ii/>.

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<sup>3</sup> "Islamabad, Beijing Begin Crack Down on Illegal Matchmaking Centres," *Tribune*, April 13, 2019, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1950068/working-islamabad-crack-illegal-matchmaking-centres-beijing>.

<sup>4</sup> Shabana Fayyaz and Salma Malik, "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC): Security Concerns," *Global Regional Review* 4, no. 4 (2019): 432-440.

External security threats were not interwoven so strongly with potential internal threats until CPEC was inaugurated in 2015 in Pakistan.<sup>5</sup> Since then, internal security has been notably destabilised. Chinese citizens and institutions in Pakistan are vital to this internal security dimension. In addition to preventing the cross-border flow of destabilising elements, attention must be paid to strengthening the nexus of bilateral security between the two countries. As the central connecting peg in the broader machinery of the CPEC project and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a potentially unstable Pakistan may destabilise the entire project. Thus, the security environment of Pakistan needs to remain at the centre of CPECs welfare. Both sides recognise this situation and realise the need for strengthening their joint security cooperation, law enforcement and counter-terrorism capabilities.<sup>6</sup> This perspective paper examines the link between the external and internal security dimensions of the developments related to the CPEC project and the increasing people-to-people contact between the two countries.

## Decades of Cooperation

Pakistan and China have a long history of cooperation. The association between the two countries has come to include business and energy, in addition to defence and diplomacy over time. The conception of CPEC has further strengthened these multifaceted ties.<sup>7</sup> However, the security of the venture has been growingly compromised. A series of attacks have targeted Chinese nationals and institutions in Pakistan since the beginning of this cooperation.<sup>8</sup> Despite Pakistan's tightening of security arrangements, the attacks have shown an upward trend and heightening sophistication. Added to this complex security matrix are the increased brazen attacks by militant and separatist organisations.

<sup>5</sup> "About CPEC | CPEC," *Parliamentary Committee on China-Pakistan Economic Corridor*, accessed June 20, 2022, <https://na.gov.pk/cpec/?q=about>.

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on May 12, 2022," *FMPRC*, May 12, 2022, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/202205/t20220512\\_10685185.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202205/t20220512_10685185.html).

<sup>7</sup> Hongsong Liu Allauddin and Raja Qaiser Ahmed, "The changing dynamics and new developments of China-Pakistan relations," *India Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (2020): 73-88.

<sup>8</sup> Fazal-ur-Rahman, "Targeted Attacks On Chinese: Myth and Reality," *Strategic Studies* 27, no. 4 (2007): 129-44, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45242422>.

## GAPS IN SECURITY AND CHALLENGES POSED

Existing geostrategic and geopolitical challenges<sup>9</sup> have compounded the internal insecurities of Pakistan. While sporadic threats are problematic in their own right, the more insidious threats to the bilateral relationship come from the organised groups inside Pakistan. Pakistan and China will also suffer directly from any threats emanating from their unstable neighbour Afghanistan. The threats have already manifested in the form of organisations such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).<sup>10</sup> The NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan similarly points to additional threats; the rise in acts of militancy with Balochi roots suggests a possible Afghani link.<sup>11</sup> The organisational and operational sophistication of these groups hints at logistics, and other forms of support received from across the border. Some of the more notorious groups amongst these are briefly discussed below.

## Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA)

The BLA seeks an independent Balochistan free of Pakistani control. It was proscribed in Pakistan in April 2006 due to its aggressive techniques, including but not limited to bomb assaults. The BLA initially appeared in the late 1990s. It has two known offshoots. The more lethal of these is the Majeed Brigade. It was involved in the recent fatal attack on the Confucius Institute in Karachi. While Harbiyar Marri oversaw the other offshoot, Aslam Achu was in charge of the Majeed Brigade until he was murdered in Afghanistan in December 2018.<sup>12</sup> Within the BLA, the Majeed Brigade is an elite force which highly favours suicide attacks. It has emerged as the most serious threat to the CPEC. The BLA has a physical strength of 2,000 to 3,000 and can operate out of Afghanistan, Iran, and the hilly parts of Balochistan. Labelled as a terrorist organisation by the US Department of State in July 2019, it carried out around 19 attacks in Balochistan in 2020 alone. Attacks in Balochistan increased in the first half of 2021, especially against the security forces. Balochistan has been the site of the majority of these

<sup>9</sup> Fayyaz and Malik, "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)," 432-440.

<sup>10</sup> Kamran Yousaf, "Taliban told to make clean break from ETIM, TTP," *Tribune*, July 28, 2021, accessed June 23, 2022, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2312665/taliban-told-to-make-clean-break-from-etim-ttp>.

<sup>11</sup> Muhammad Amir Rana, "An Insurgency Restructured," *Dawn*, March 20, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1680914>.

<sup>12</sup> Fahad Nabeel, "Aslam Baloch's Killing: Implications for Baluchistan Insurgency," *Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research*, December 28, 2018, <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/defense-security/aslam-balochs-killing-implications-for-balochistan-insurgency/>.

assaults, in addition to Southern Punjab and Karachi.<sup>13</sup>

### **Baloch Raji Ajoi Sangar (BRAS)**

After years of public disagreement, the BLA, the Baloch Liberation Front (BLF), and the Baloch Republican Guards formed the Baloch Raji Ajoi Sangar (BRAS), commonly known as the Baloch People Liberation Coalition. This partnership was formed in November 2019. The coalition intends to launch organised operations targeting the Pakistani military, CPEC infrastructure and Chinese interests in Balochistan in general. According to Pakistan's former foreign minister, BRAS has training and logistics camps in the Iranian territory bordering Pakistan. The group operates in the southern portion of Balochistan and has "safe havens" in Kacha, DG Khan, and Koh Suleman. BRAS' main targets in Balochistan are Chinese workers and CPEC projects. Near the Makran shore, BRAS has also targeted military and paramilitary security forces. The Sindhu Desh Revolutionary Army (SDRA) and BRAS declared operational cooperation on 25 July 2020 and have increasingly demonstrated their strength in the past few years.<sup>14</sup>

Particularly the attacks of BLA's Majeed Brigade have increased the concerns of the Chinese government about the security of their nationals in Pakistan. As pointed out earlier, these internal security threats have combined with external threats. The collection of security intelligence has revealed substantial cross-border support from India to these insurgent groups.<sup>15</sup> This is apparently aimed at sabotaging CPEC. Geostrategic and political interests, and aspirations are being realised by exploiting the internal instability of Pakistan. Hostile neighbours<sup>16</sup> retain an interest in containing China and making Pakistan's economy compromised.<sup>17</sup>

### **Sindhu Desh Liberation Army (SDLA)**

SDLA is a Sindhi nationalist organisation that is a recently emerging threat to CPEC in Pakistan. While the leader lives in exile, it has targeted the Chinese nationals

in Pakistan by collaborating with the BLF and BLA.<sup>18</sup> It has been active since 2020.<sup>19</sup>

### **EXISTING SECURITY ARRANGEMENTS**

Despite this alarming security situation, the only properly organised and dedicated security force for the Chinese investment in Pakistan is Task Force-88 (TF-88). This special naval task force was commissioned by the International Maritime Conference 2016. The task force has been mainly responsible for the maritime security of the Gwadar port.<sup>20</sup> TF-88 focuses on traditional and non-traditional security threats to the Gwadar port and CPEC project (emanating from maritime risks). It is a comprehensive maritime security arrangement that accounts for the various nuances of maritime security concerned with CPEC.<sup>21</sup> However, it does not cover on-land safety or the physical security of Chinese nationals in Pakistan. The mechanism for the land-based security of CPEC is the Special Security Division (SSD). As the on-land counterpart of the Task Force, the SSD comprises several army battalions and civilian wings. In tandem, these arrangements comprehensively cover the security of CPEC and individuals associated with the mega-project.<sup>22</sup>

Yet none of these arrangements and agreements covers the security of Chinese nationals in Pakistan who are not a part of CPEC. The current insecurity of the Chinese individuals in the country demands a broader approach to Chinese security. In response to the steadily increasing insecurity, a District Foreign Security Cell (DFSC) is being put together to ensure the safety of Chinese nationals working on non-CPEC projects in the capital.<sup>23</sup> The DFSC will fall under the supervision of the DIG Operations and will enlist the help of Chinese-speaking Pakistanis to provide assistance to Chinese residents in Pakistan.<sup>24</sup> In addition, the Special Branch of the Security Division and Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD) will

<sup>13</sup> Fahad Nabeel, "Interpreting BRAS-SRA Alliance," *Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research*, July 27, 2020, <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/defense-security/interpreting-bras-sra-alliance/>.

<sup>14</sup> Cedoca Belgium, *EASO*, 40.

<sup>15</sup> "Pakistan Navy's special 'Task Force-88' Set Up to Guard Gwadar Port's Sea Lanes," *Dawn*, Dec 13, 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1302102>.

<sup>16</sup> Yen-Chiang Chang and Mehran Idris Khan, "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and Maritime Security Collaboration: A growing bilateral interests," *Maritime Business Review* 4, no. 2 (2019): 217-235, <https://doi.org/10.1108/MABR-01-2019-0004>.

<sup>17</sup> "Protecting the corridor : Special security force for CPEC Notified: Report," *Tribune*, Jan 23, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1303994/protecting-corridor-special-security-force-cpec-notified-report>.

<sup>18</sup> Munawer Azeem, "Capital Police's Special Branch to Audit Security Arrangements of Foreigners," *Dawn*, June 6, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1693301/capital-polices-special-branch-to-audit-security-arrangements-of-foreigners>.

<sup>19</sup> Israr Ahmad, "Islamabad Police to Set Up Foreigners' Security Cell," *The Nation*, Jun 5, 2022. <https://nation.com.pk/2022/06/05/islamabad-police-to-set-up-foreigners-security-cell/>.

<sup>13</sup> Cedoca Belgium, *EASO Pakistan Security situation: Country of Origin Information October 2021* (European Asylum Support Office, 2021), 41, Available at: [https://coi.euaa.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/2021\\_10\\_EASO\\_COI\\_Report\\_Pakistan\\_Security\\_situation.pdf](https://coi.euaa.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/2021_10_EASO_COI_Report_Pakistan_Security_situation.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 42.

<sup>15</sup> Fahad Nabeel, "Interpreting BRAS-SRA Alliance," *Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research*, July 27, 2020, <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/defense-security/interpreting-bras-sra-alliance/>.

<sup>16</sup> Naveed Siddiqui, "Balochistan terror attacks' handlers in Afghanistan, India: ISPR," *Dawn*, Feb 3, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1673060>.

<sup>17</sup> However, Balochistan's recently successful local elections signal the province's support for national development and discourse. The 60 per cent turnout – as per the official reports – signals the presence of resistance to both internal and external hostile elements.

periodically audit all the security arrangements.<sup>25</sup> At the provincial level, the Sindh government has also agreed to collaborate with the Chinese security authorities on comprehensive security arrangements for the Chinese working on both CPEC and non-CPEC-related projects.<sup>26</sup>

The security steps taken have great potential. Although intended to be quite comprehensive, the steps lean towards unilateral arrangements from the Pakistani side. Apart from their economic agreement, the two countries have no comprehensive security agreement or joint agenda covering the physical security of non-CPEC-related Chinese nationals. Given the escalating risks, violence against Chinese nationals often earns demands for tightening security from the Chinese side and promises to be more vigilant from the Pakistani side.<sup>27</sup> However, the economic aspect of CPEC has always remained at the forefront of the negotiations and debates on the project. Both national and international attention has also gravitated toward the economic or strategic facets of the project.<sup>28</sup> Despite its multi-dimensional challenges, the internal security aspect has remained starkly absent from any meaningful discussions. Similarly, exceptionally important is human security. Without ensuring such an essential form of protection for the Chinese working on both the CPEC and non-CPEC-related projects, Pakistan and China cannot move forward with any meaningful cooperation.

As a country barely emerging from the shadow of its war against militancy, Pakistan needs an ambitious and pre-emptive approach to meet the security risks associated with CPEC and its relationship with China in general. Safeguarding human security remains imperative given the potential of CPEC to become a tool in the hands of both internal and external actors looking to jeopardise the security of Pakistan and the region of South Asia. Both state and non-state actors are vigilant about exploiting all possible gaps in the Pakistan-China relationship. Human security is one glaring weakness. It remains the focus of international strategic destabilisers and non-state, sub-national groups claiming ideological and territorial motives. Comprehensive bilateral security is therefore vital to ensure a “win-win” outcome

<sup>25</sup> Shakeel Anjum, “Security cell for Chinese to be set up in Islamabad,” *The News*, Jun 5, 2022, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/963571-security-cell-for-chinese-to-be-set-up-in-islamabad>.

<sup>26</sup> “Chinese working in CPEC, non-CPEC projects: Sindh govt, Chinese team agree to evolve foolproof security plan,” *Brecorder*, May 22, 2022, <https://www.brecorder.com/news/40174795/chinese-working-in-cpec-non-cpec-projects-sindh-govt-chinese-team-agree-to-evolve-foolproof-security-plan>.

<sup>27</sup> “PM Shahbaz Sharif directs to ensure security of Chinese nationals in Pakistan,” *The News*, May 17, 2022, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/958479-pm-shehbaz-directs-to-ensure-security-of-chinese-nationals-in-pakistan>.

<sup>28</sup> Uzair Younus, “Pakistan’s Growing Problem with its China Economic Corridor,” *United States Institute of Peace*, May 26, 2021, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/05/pakistans-growing-problem-its-china-economic-corridor>.

conceived as part of CPEC.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Some recommendations to improve Pakistan’s response, considering the challenges and gaps outlined in the previous sections, are stated as follows.

- The intelligence-gathering mechanisms in urban areas should be constantly upgraded and enhanced. The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) should be increased in this matter.
- Establishing routine and emergency protocols for Chinese nationals can ensure extra vigilance and monitoring.
- Pakistani intelligence and law enforcement agencies will need to conduct intelligence-based operations on a priority basis to locate and destroy existing networks of facilitators and sleeper cells of militant groups to disrupt the physical footprint of militant groups in the country.
- Authorities need to enhance and consolidate intelligence information through mechanisms such as the National Intelligence Coordination Committee (NICC).
- Pakistan must set up a separate database of at-risk individuals who can potentially be exploited by extremist and militant organisations. NADRA can play a pivotal role in this regard.
- Cultural exchanges and interactions between Chinese workers and locals can be encouraged in a safe environment to foster cooperation.