



# RCAS Commentary

## Security Clouds over China-Pakistan Relations Threaten Belt and Road

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## About RCAS

香港亞洲研究中心| The Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS) is a nonprofit research organization focusing on Asian affairs. It is a newly established institution founded in February 2022 by Dr. Nian Peng in Haikou and subsequently moved to Hong Kong in September 2023. We currently have an international research team with nearly 100 resident/nonresident researchers from China and other countries.

RCAS aims to become a leading research institute and think tank on Asian affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. To date, RCAS has conducted research programs on maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), China's relations with the Indo-Pacific states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), terrorism/counterterrorism in the Afg-Pak region, and so on. It is committed to promoting maritime cooperation, regional integration, and regional peace in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has published nearly ten books in Chinese and English and more than 20 papers in SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *Territorial Disputes, The Role of Leaders and The Impact of Quad: A Triangular Explanation of China-India Border Escalations* (2023); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches* (2022); *China-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies* (2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988* (2021); and *China-Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade: An Appraisal of Supplier's and Recipient's Motives* (2020).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles, and its researchers have been interviewed in various local and international media outlets, such as *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum (EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN*, *Global Times*, *World Affairs* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the United States, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places.

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## Security Clouds over China-Pakistan Relations

### Threaten Belt and Road

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Chinese Premier Li Qiang was in Pakistan from 14 to 17 October for a bilateral visit and to attend the 23rd Meeting of the Council of Heads of Government of Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). This was the first visit by a Chinese premier to Pakistan in 11 years.



▲ Chinese Premier Li Qiang and Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif react after unveiling a plaque to mark the completion of the New Gwadar International Airport, during a ceremony at the Prime Minister's House in Islamabad, Pakistan, on 14 October 2024. (Prime Minister's House/Handout via Reuters)

Previous significant visits from China were by Premier Li Keqiang in May 2013, when the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was proposed, and by President Xi Jinping in April 2015, when the CPEC was formally inaugurated. Over the years, Pakistani leaders have made numerous lavish yet substantively lacking visits to China. China-Pakistan relations in the past decade have largely centred on CPEC, a multi-billion dollar project aiming to connect China's western region with Pakistan's Gwadar port in the southwestern province of Balochistan. Due to its perceived geostrategic and geoeconomic significance, CPEC was hyped as a “game-changer”, with Pakistan's Gwadar port emulating Shenzhen or Singapore.

However, this soon proved to be an illusion due to Pakistan's chronic security challenges and political instability. Even as analysts started pointing out the cooling of relations as China downgraded its relationship with Pakistan from "high priority" to "priority", the outcome of Li's recent visit confirms this perception.

### **Security risks straining China-Pakistan ties?**

The Pakistani military, which calls the shots in national affairs and is responsible for the security of CPEC, has failed in its duty. Anticipating security challenges as CPEC was being rolled out, Pakistan established a Special Security Division (SSD) in 2017, composed of over 15,000 armed personnel, including 9,000 from the army and 6,000 from paramilitary forces. This cost billions in local currency.

As attacks on the Chinese continued, most recently in October 2024, the Pakistani government approved an additional Rs 45 billion for the military to strengthen its capacity to protect Chinese commercial interests. The escalating security costs proportionally increase project expenses, adding to Pakistan's debt. The SSD is led by a sitting two-star general, with Major General Muhammad Abbas as its current head.

Despite these measures, persistent attacks have continued to test China's patience, which is wearing thin. In August 2024, the Pakistani military invited a Chinese military delegation led by General Li Qiaoming, the commander of the People's Liberation Army Ground Force. While the delegation was interacting with Pakistani military officials, the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), a separatist militant group fighting for the independence of Balochistan, launched its most coordinated attacks to date, shaking the province.

### **A turning point?**

On 6 October, merely a week before Premier Li's visit, the BLA again succeeded in a suicide attack on a Chinese convoy, resulting in the deaths of two Chinese nationals. The incident took place near Karachi airport, which is apparently a highly secured area.

The security situation during Premier Li's visit was so fragile that Chinese nationals in Pakistan were barred from travelling to sensitive areas. Pakistani authorities enforced a blanket lockdown on the capital, Islamabad, and the adjacent garrison city, Rawalpindi, with three public holidays declared during the SCO conference.

As a result of the precarious security situation, Premier Li "virtually" inaugurated the Gwadar airport, built with China's assistance. The inauguration of the airport was postponed due to security concerns.

From 2017, the year SSD was established, estimates are that at least 21 Chinese nationals have lost their lives in Pakistan. Considering the pattern, terrorist attacks are expanding in scale and scope, spreading beyond Gwadar and Balochistan.

According to former senator Mushahid Hussain, who is close to both the Pakistani military and China, and heads the Islamabad-based Pakistan-China Institute, the 6 October attack near Karachi airport was a severe blow and could be a “turning point” for the strategic partnership between the two countries.

### **Impact on economic cooperation**

During Li’s visit, the two sides signed 13 documents and issued a 30-point joint statement that rehashed most of the issues addressed in earlier statements. Pakistan reiterated its support for China on Taiwan, Hong Kong and the South China Sea.

China stated that “the Jammu and Kashmir dispute is left over from history and should be properly and peacefully resolved in accordance with the UN Charter, relevant UN Security Council resolutions, and bilateral agreements”. While the Chinese stance supports Pakistan’s position, there was no call for the abrogation of Article 370, which India introduced in August 2019 to revoke the Kashmir Valley’s special status. This is Pakistan’s primary demand for negotiations with India.

The Main Line-1 (ML-1), Pakistan’s railway connecting Peshawar to Karachi and passing through Lahore, Multan, Sukkur and Hyderabad, spans approximately 1,726 kilometres. An upgrade of ML-1 is the most expansive single project under CPEC, costing between US\$6.7 billion.

Discussions on the upgrade of ML-1 began during the first phase of CPEC. While it is a vital link for connectivity from the Chinese border to Pakistan’s ports, China has become increasingly reluctant to finance it as the security situation deteriorates. The joint statement remained ambiguous about financing, stating that the two sides will work to “formulate financing and implementation plans that are feasible and sustainable at the earliest”.

In addition, while the “Chinese side reiterated its support for Chinese companies to invest in Pakistan’s Special Economic Zones [that should be] in line with the market and commercial principles”, no new financial commitment was reported during the visit. It appears that in August 2024, China’s rollover of billions of dollars in debt (along with the UAE and Saudi Arabia), which facilitated the IMF’s US\$7 billion Extended Fund Facility for Pakistan, was its final economic relief.

### **Retention of downgraded status**

The joint statement hoped that “any attempt to disrupt or undermine Pakistan-China cooperation is bound to fail”, but did not show any resolve to counter such attempts.

In fact, the joint statement's retention of the downgraded status of diplomatic relations with Pakistan as a "priority" explains it all.

Li is China's second most powerful leader after Xi Jinping. During his visit, the lack of notable advancements in the relationship, new investments and explicit commitments to the second phase of the CPEC indicates a slowdown in the relationship. The future progress of CPEC, and for that matter, bilateral relations, largely depends on the security situation, political stability and financial viability of Pakistan.

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## About Author



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