



RCAS Commentary

Security Concerns Impede China-Pakistan Relations

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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 Concerns Impede China-Pakistan Relations

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Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan Jiang Zaidong recently criticized the repeated attacks on Chinese nationals in Pakistan, calling them “unacceptable” and citing security as the biggest challenge to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). His comments followed two fatal incidents within six months, which claimed seven Chinese lives. Pakistan’s Foreign Office, instead of addressing the concerns, dismissed the remarks as “perplexing,” revealing underlying tensions in the bilateral relationship. Despite China’s role as Pakistan’s key economic partner, security lapses and strained diplomacy are testing the limits of their traditionally strong ties, highlighting deeper challenges to the CPEC and broader cooperation. These tensions point to a more complex dynamic in bilateral relations, revealing that mutual dependency alone may not be sufficient to sustain smooth cooperation amidst mounting challenges.



▲ The Inauguration of China-Pakistan Joint Exercise Warrior-VIII on November 20, 2024.(China Military)

BACKGROUND

The diplomatic row between China and Pakistan intensified during a seminar in Islamabad on October 30, when Chinese Ambassador Jiang Zaidong openly rebutted remarks by Pakistan’s Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar. Dar

claimed that China prioritized security in its overseas investments but made Pakistan an exception due to its friendship. The ambassador firmly countered, stating that President Xi Jinping consistently emphasizes the importance of ensuring the safety of Chinese personnel, institutions, and projects in Pakistan, reiterating that security remains China's top concern and a major constraint to the CPEC.

This marked the first public expression of such sentiments by China and an equally unprecedented response from Pakistan's Foreign Office, which described the remarks as "perplexing" and "surprising." Pakistan's English-language media reflected the gravity of the situation, with Dawn describing the exchange as rare and The Nation advising restraint from the Foreign Office. Further complicating matters, Pakistan canceled President Asif Ali Zardari's planned visit to China on November 2, citing a dubious pretext of a foot injury, signaling deeper strains in the relationship amid growing concerns over security and diplomatic discord.

This is not the first time China has urged Pakistan to ensure the security of its nationals. In several meetings with Pakistani leaders, China has consistently emphasized the importance of safeguarding Chinese citizens and interests in Pakistan. During his meeting with Pakistani Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif in June 2024, Chinese President Xi Jinping reiterated the need for Pakistan to create a safe and stable environment, stressing the protection of Chinese nationals, projects, and institutions. In line with this, Beijing also sent Liu Jianchao, Minister of the International Department of the CPC Central Committee, to Islamabad, where he echoed similar concerns regarding security during discussions with Pakistan's political leaders. China has faced numerous attacks on its citizens in Pakistan, with over 21 Chinese nationals killed since 2017.

The Balochistan Liberation Army, a separatist group seeking independence for the underdeveloped Balochistan province, which hosts the strategic Gwadar Port, is behind many of these attacks. The Balochi population has long expressed grievances over marginalization and resource extraction without benefiting from the region's wealth, fueling insurgent movements. Currently, Balochistan is experiencing its fifth wave of insurgency.

Another key source of attacks on Chinese nationals is the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a militant group primarily based in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. While the TTP has denied responsibility, Pakistani authorities have attributed the March 2024 suicide bombing that killed five Chinese engineers to the group. Allegations suggest that the TTP may be collaborating with Uyghur separatists, given their shared religious ideology, further complicating the security landscape for Chinese nationals in Pakistan.

IMPLICATIONS

The Chinese ambassador's public expression of frustration and his direct reprimand of Pakistani officials highlighted China's increasing impatience with Pakistan's handling of security for Chinese nationals. By emphasizing the gravity of the situation and warning against future incidents, the ambassador signaled that China would no longer shy away from bluntly addressing its concerns.

This shift in tone underscores the growing tension in the bilateral relationship, with the potential for global attention if the situation deteriorates further. The security situation in Pakistan will be pivotal in determining China's future investment decisions. If the security environment remains unstable, China may choose to complete ongoing projects but refrain from launching new ones. This was evident during Chinese Premier Li Qiang's mid-October visit to Pakistan for the SCO conference, where he did not explicitly endorse the second phase of the CPEC or any new initiatives. This lack of commitment signals that security concerns could heavily influence China's willingness to deepen its involvement in Pakistan moving forward.

China and Pakistan had already planned to review their counterterrorism cooperation, and recent developments are likely to expedite this process through three key trends. First, China may increase its security support by providing bomb-proof vehicles for the safe transport of Chinese engineers, offering specialized security training to Pakistani personnel, and expanding intelligence sharing and consultation between the two countries.

Second, the idea of involving Chinese private security companies (PSCs) or establishing joint security arrangements with Pakistani counterparts could gain traction. China has expressed interest in deploying PSCs, especially in conflict zones worldwide, to safeguard its growing investments. However, the deployment of PSCs to Pakistan faces both legal and practical obstacles. Pakistani law prohibits foreign security companies from operating within its borders. Even if this hurdle is overcome, the concept is likely to face challenges due to the country's security realities. The Pakistani military and intelligence agencies, despite having the necessary resources and capabilities, have struggled to protect Chinese nationals. Given this, private companies, with far fewer resources, may not be effective in improving security.

Additionally, bringing in foreign security personnel, whether from China's armed forces or private firms, could expose them to the same risks from terrorist groups that have targeted Chinese nationals in the past.

Third, the worsening security situation in Pakistan could provide the military with a pretext for launching another large-scale military operation, something it has long advocated. In June 2024, the Pakistani government approved the counter-terrorism operation Azm-e-Istehkam (Resolve for Stability), but its implementation was delayed due to opposition from political parties and the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM),

which advocates for the rights of Pashtuns. However, conducting a military operation during a period of economic difficulties, political polarization, and significant opposition would reduce its likelihood of success.

Additionally, such an operation would come with substantial economic costs and the risk of collateral damage, particularly in already unstable regions, further complicating its execution and effectiveness.

CONCLUSIONS

Although a seemingly minor incident, Chinese Ambassador Jiang Zaidong's remarks have exposed long-standing issues between China and Pakistan, revealing underlying challenges in their relationship. These comments have sparked debate, both within Pakistan and internationally, regarding the durability of their "all-weather" friendship. If one factor has most damaged the Sino-Pakistani partnership, it is terrorism. Likewise, if there is one issue that will significantly determine the future of this relationship, it is the ongoing challenge of terrorism and its impact on security for both nations.

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<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13829-security-concerns-impede-china-pakistan-relations.html>.

About Author



Dr. Ghulam Ali is currently Deputy Director of the Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS), Hong Kong. Before joining RCAS, he was Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science, Sichuan University of Science and Engineering, Zigong, PR China. He obtained his PhD from Monash University in Australia in 2013 and his Postdoc from Peking University, China. He is the author, editor or co-editor of four books: *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics*(London: Routledge, 2022); *Perspectives on Contemporary Pakistan: Governance, Development and Environment*(London: Routledge, 2020); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry*(Singapore: Springer, 2022); *China-Pakistan Relations: A Historical Analysis*(Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2017). His articles have been published in SSCI-and Scopus-indexed journals such as *Issues&Studies*, *The Pacific Review*, and *Pacific Focus*. Email: ghulamali74@yahoo.com.

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