



# RCAS Commentary

## Protecting Chinese Workers in Pakistan: Should the PLA Intervene?

Ghulam Ali

Deputy Director, The Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS)

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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.

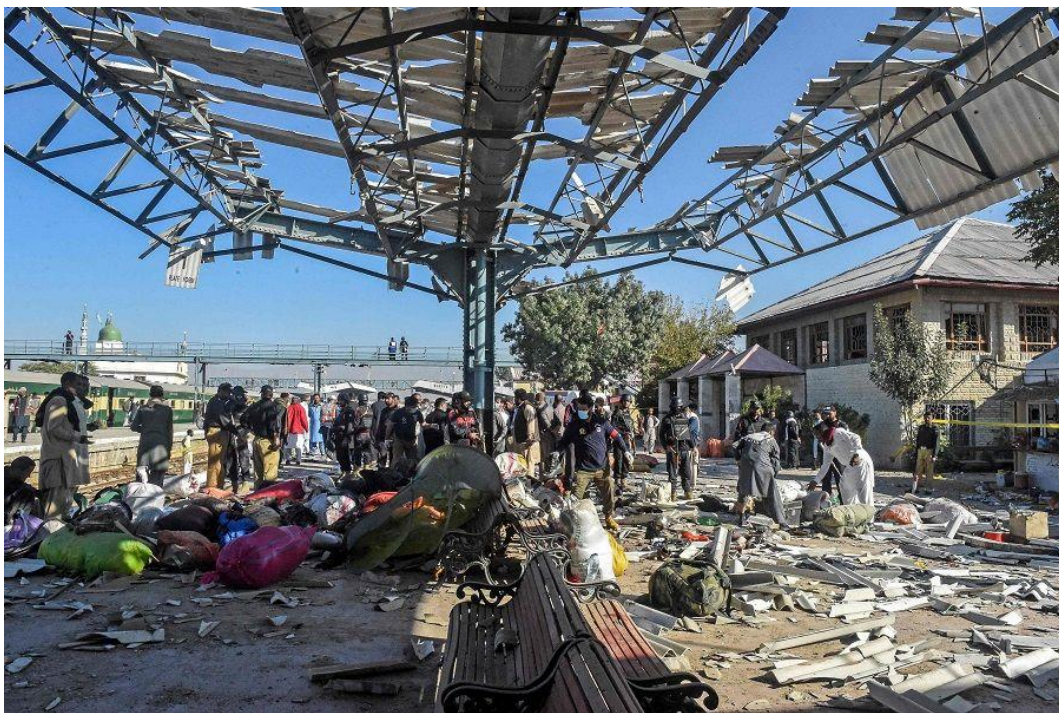
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Address: 1507B, EASTCORE1, No.398, Kwun Tong, Kooloon, Hong Kong  
Ph: 00852 2397 7886|Email: [hkrcas@163.com](mailto:hkrcas@163.com)|Web: [www.rcas.top](http://www.rcas.top)

## Protecting Chinese Workers in Pakistan: Should the PLA Intervene?

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Unabated terrorist attacks on Chinese workers in Pakistan have prompted policy circles to discuss the prospects of China's direct involvement in ensuring the safety of its workers in the country. While both governments have remained tight-lipped, the media has uncovered information about ongoing discussions between the two nations.



▲ Passengers' belongings are seen scattered on the platform after an explosion at a railway station in Quetta, in Pakistan's Balochistan province, on 9 November 2024. (Banaras Khan/AFP)

If these reports prove valid, it would represent a major shift in China's traditional policy of avoiding security roles in other countries. Furthermore, initiating such a role in a terror-hit Pakistan would serve as a litmus test for Beijing's capabilities.

### **Decreasing Chinese investment**

Under its "flagship" China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China has committed nearly US\$62 billion for projects in Pakistan, of which US\$25 billion has already been spent. In developing this project, China has faced severe security challenges due to relentless terrorist attacks on its workers engaged in various projects in Pakistan.

In 2024 alone, seven Chinese nationals lost their lives in two separate attacks. The Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), a terrorist outfit fighting against the Pakistani military for the independence of Balochistan, and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a religious extremist group demanding the implementation of strict Islamic laws and operating along the porous Pakistan-Afghanistan border, carried out these attacks.

Such challenges have led China to reduce its investment in Pakistan by 74% in 2023, despite an increase in its post-pandemic investments worldwide. Chinese Premier Li Qiang made no commitments to new projects or to initiating the second phase of the CPEC during his maiden visit to Pakistan in October 2024.

### **China a soft target**

Notably, both BLA and TTP, fighting against the Pakistani military, harbour no direct grudges against China. Moreover, these terrorist groups are a result of the flawed policies of the Pakistani state.

The pernicious seeds of religious extremism in Pakistan were sown by military dictator General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq (1977-88), who imposed strict Islamic laws in the country and joined the Afghan jihad against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan during the 1980s. Subsequent military leadership also used religious proxies expeditiously.

The TTP is an offshoot of those policies. Most of its demands-implementation of Islamic laws, withdrawal of the military from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, provincial autonomy and the release of prisoners-are directed at the military. None of these demands is related to China.

Similarly, the insurgency in Balochistan is largely a reaction to oppressive military policies, marginalisation, denial of a share in the province's abundant natural resources, the establishment of military cantonments and the enforced disappearances of thousands of local Balochis. The roots of this insurgency, now in its fifth wave, trace back to the independence of Pakistan.

China's role in Balochistan began in 2002 with the construction of Gwadar port. Even after the completion of the first phase of the port, China withdrew, and the port was handed over to the Port of Singapore Authority (PSA). The differences between the Pakistani government and PSA were resolved by transferring administrative control to China in 2015.

Both terrorist groups are fighting against the Pakistani state, specifically the military. China is merely caught in the crossfire. China's significance to Pakistan, due to its historically strong strategic relationship, makes it a soft target. Any attack on the

Chinese in Pakistan would bring these groups into the international limelight, which they seek for attention.

### **China's security role in Pakistan: PSCs or the PLA?**

To counter these attacks, proposals for China's direct role in Pakistan's security have emerged. These include the deployment of China's private security companies (PSCs) or the People's Liberation Army (PLA), strengthening the capabilities of Pakistani security agencies, and establishing a joint security management system with Chinese security officials participating in security meetings.

China's PSCs, although having grown to thousands with millions of employees, have limited experience in international operations. According to reports, at most 40 of them have overseas operations. Furthermore, PSCs do not carry firearms, lack high-risk operational capabilities and operate under limited authority. Their role primarily consists of intelligence gathering, escort services, security training, risk assessment, site protection and emergency evacuation.

The deployment of PSCs or the PLA would require amendments to the existing laws of both countries, as they prohibit security roles in other countries. While amendments may not be difficult, as both states are involved, the fundamental question is whether China's security role, through PSCs, the PLA, or other security operatives with a direct presence in Pakistan, will help ensure the safety of its citizens.

### **China should think twice**

If PSCs or the PLA are deployed in the outer security circles around Chinese compounds or alongside vehicles carrying Chinese engineers, it would directly expose them to terrorist targets. As terrorists employ suicide attacks, which are the ultimate form of ambush, this reduces the chances of survival. Chinese deployments would hardly enhance security, given that they are unfamiliar with Pakistani culture and geographic conditions.

At the same time, deploying China's regular or paramilitary forces would contribute to the Baloch militants' narrative that China is assisting the Pakistani military in the exploitation of the province's resources, representing a new form of colonisation. On the global stage, it would reinforce the perception of China's expansionist agenda driven by its military power.

Considering that the Pakistani military and intelligence agencies, with all the resources at their disposal (equipment, access to information, and control over state machinery), have failed to ensure the safety of Chinese workers, how could small contingents of Chinese troops succeed in doing so?



The failure of Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts is not merely due to a lack of financing, equipment or intelligence sources. Following its entry into the US-led "war on terror" in 2002, the Pakistani military received substantial aid, equipment, and intelligence support from the US. Yet terrorist incidents in the country continued unabated.

China should think twice before entering into Pakistan's security quagmire, which is a product of the Pakistani military itself. Sending any form of troops to Pakistan offers no guarantee of safety for its citizens and would likely expose them further to terrorists. China can strengthen Pakistan's counterterrorism measures while simultaneously questioning the will of the Pakistani military in this fight.

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## 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.