

MP-IDSA

Issue Brief

Security Threats to the Chinese Nationals in Pakistan

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S*ummary*

China has not publically admonished Islamabad for the consistent security lapses against its workers in Pakistan. The March 2024 attacks are the latest in the string of attacks against the Chinese that have occurred over a period of time mostly claimed by Baloch rebels. Dedicated forces that Pakistan has raised for CPEC are consistently falling short in guaranteeing security to Chinese workers.

At least five Chinese workers were killed in a suicide bomb attack while their convoy was approaching the Dasu dam project in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) in Pakistan on 26 March 2024. The grisly attack occurred on the Karakoram Highway that connects Pakistan, Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and China.¹ The explosive-laden vehicle ambushed the security convoy dashing into the one carrying the Chinese workers in Shangla district in KP. Two Pakistanis were also reported dead in the incident.

The latest militant attack is seen as an intensification of the security threat to the Chinese nationals in Pakistan which is mired today in political problems alongside its raging tiff with the Afghan Taliban. The attack was third in a series of attacks within a week, two of which occurred in Balochistan—first at a naval base in Turbat and another one at the port city of Gwadar.² The suicide bombing is a grim reminder of the chain of attacks on the Chinese workers and civilians in Pakistan over the last several years.

China is engaged in numerous hydropower projects in Pakistan and PoK. The Dasu project, unlike the Diamer Bhasha dam in Gilgit (PoK), is less controversial given its location in Upper Kohistan in KP and free of funding woes with the World Bank as its principal donor.³ It is part of the multi-billion dollar CPEC.⁴ It was also once envisaged as part of the string of dams that would form the North Indus Cascade to be potentially subsumed under the CPEC.⁵ The July 2021 bus attack killing several Chinese engineers also occurred in the vicinity of the Dasu project.⁶

Repeated attacks on Chinese nationals on Pakistani soil is seen as a critical challenge for continued China–Pakistan economic cooperation. Given its gravity, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif paid a condolence visit to the Chinese Embassy in the aftermath of the incident. Sharif was accompanied by his Foreign Minister, Ishaq Dar, Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi and Information and Broadcasting Minister, Attaullah Tarar. After meeting the Chinese Ambassador, Jiang Zaidong, Sharif stressed his government’s “firm resolve to bring the perpetrators of this heinous act to justice”.⁷ Naqvi, the Minister of Interior, condemned the incident as “attack on

¹ Salman Masood and Christina Goldbaum, “[Suicide Bomber Kills 5 Chinese Workers in Pakistan](#)”, *The New York Times*, 26 March 2024.

² Saleem Ahmed, “[Six Killed in Militant Attack on Pakistan Naval Base, Say Officials](#)”, *Reuters*, 26 March 2024.

³ “[Dasu Hydropower Stage I Project](#)”, The World Bank, Updated 23 January 2023.

⁴ “[Defying All Odds, Work on Dasu Dam in Full Swing](#)”, China Pakistan Economic Corridor, 28 October 2021.

⁵ Discussed in detail in author’s *MP-IDSA Issue Brief* titled: “[China-Pakistan Water Axis on the Indus](#)”, 19 July 2017.

⁶ “[Pakistani FM Visits Injured Chinese Nationals in Dasu Bus Blast](#)”, Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 18 July 2021.

⁷ “[PM Shahbaz Sharif post on X \(formerly Twitter\)](#)”, 26 March 2024.

Pakistan itself”.⁸ Later on his visit to the attack site in Bisham, Sharif resolved to “leave no stone unturned” in providing security to the Chinese nationals in Pakistan.⁹ Notably, China’s Envoy, Jiang Zaidong, accompanied Sharif on the visit.

Pakistan’s military ISPR expressed solidarity and alleged that

Strategic projects and sensitive sites vital for Pakistan’s economic progress and the well-being of its people are being targeted as a conscious effort to retard our progress and sow discord between Pakistan and its strategic allies and partners, most notably China.¹⁰

Surge in Attacks

The March 2024 attacks are the latest in the string of attacks against the Chinese that have occurred over a period of time mostly claimed by Baloch rebels, particularly the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA).

- In August 2023, a purported attack on the Chinese workers was foisted where casualties were prevented by timely action from the Pakistani security forces killing two militants.¹¹ Chinese workers in the police-army escorted convoy survived with minor injuries.¹² The attempted suicide attack occurred in East Bay Road in Gwadar where Chinese are involved in multiple construction and infrastructure projects. The BLA claimed responsibility for the attack.
- In April 2022, three Chinese educators were killed in a suicide bomb attack carried on by a female member from the Majeed Brigade of the BLA.¹³ The Brigade is the group’s elite Special Forces comprising commando teams and suicide bombers.¹⁴ The Chinese nationals were associated with the Confucius Institute at the Karachi University.¹⁵ The BLA later justified the attack on the

⁸ Kashif Imran, [“Beijing Seeks ‘Thorough Investigation’ After Five Chinese Nationals Killed in Pakistan Suicide Attack”](#), *Arab News*, 26 March 2024.

⁹ [“PM Says Govt will Leave ‘No Stone Unturned’ in Ensuring Security of Chinese Nationals”](#), *Dawn*, 1 April 2024.

¹⁰ Sophia Saifi and Nectar Gan, [“Chinese Workers Killed in Suicide Bomb Blast as Pakistan Grapples with Attacks on Beijing’s Interests”](#), *CNN*, 27 March 2024.

¹¹ Asim Khan and Sophia Saifi, [“Pakistani Militants Attack Convoy of Chinese Engineers”](#), *CNN*, 14 August 2023.

¹² Gul Yusufzai, [“Two Killed in Suicide Bombing Targeting Chinese Nationals in Pakistan”](#), *Reuters*, 20 August 2021.

¹³ [“Anti-China Militancy Sharpens in Pakistan”](#), *The Economic Times*, 28 April 2022.

¹⁴ Riccardo Valle and Lucas Webber, [“Rising Anti-China Sentiment in Balochistan Threatens Increased Attacks on Chinese Interests in Pakistan”](#), *Terrorism Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, Vol. 22, No. 1, 12 January 2024.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

institute that stood as “symbol of Chinese economic, cultural and political expansionism”.¹⁶

- In July 2021, a bomb blast in a bus carrying workers claimed lives of nine Chinese nationals and two Pakistani soldiers.¹⁷ While Islamabad initially called it “vehicle failure”, the Chinese acknowledged there was a bomb explosion.¹⁸ There was an attempted cover-up as Pakistan’s Foreign Office blamed “a mechanical failure” leading to “gas leak” causing an “explosion”.¹⁹ The *Global Times* editorial called for “plugging loopholes” in Pakistan’s security apparatus and also “resolutely curbing the increasing momentum” of attacks on Chinese within Pakistan.²⁰
- The luxury Serena hotel in Quetta, Balochistan’s capital, was ambushed by militants in April 2021 killing five people and injuring a dozen.²¹ There were reports speculating that the target was Chinese Ambassador Nong Rong who was travelling to Quetta. However, at the time of the attack, the Envoy was noted to be not present in the hotel premises.
- The BLA’s 2020 attack on the Karachi Stock Exchange was a “retaliation” against China’s “exploitative plans in Balochistan”, it is noted.²²
- In May 2019, the Zaver Pearl-Continental Hotel in the port city of Gwadar was attacked by armed men in which four hotel staff and a security personnel were killed.²³ Though no Chinese were actually killed, the hotel is said to be frequented by Chinese working on several projects in Gwadar, CPEC in particular.²⁴ The BLA that claimed the attack in its post threatened “more attacks China and Pakistan”.²⁵ The Chinese Embassy in Islamabad condemned the attack even as Imran Khan Government called it “sabotage”.²⁶

¹⁶ Sophia Saifi, Saleem Mehsud and Azaz Syed, “[Female Suicide Bomber Behind Karachi Attack that Killed 3 Chinese Citizens: Police](#)”, *CNN*, 27 April 2022.

¹⁷ “[Pakistan Bus Blast Kills 13, Including 9 Chinese](#)”, *Tolo News*, 14 July 2021.

¹⁸ Jibrán Ahmad and Yew Lun Tian, “[Pakistan Bus Blast Kills 13 Including Chinese; Beijing Blames bomb](#)”, *Reuters*, 13 July 2021.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ “[Those Who Terrorize Our Compatriots Will Pay: Global Times Editorial](#)”, *Global Times*, 16 July 2021.

²¹ “[Pakistan Hotel Bomb: Deadly Blast Hits Luxury Venue in Quetta](#)”, *BBC*, 22 April 2021.

²² Sophia Saifi, “[Multiple People Dead After Attack on Pakistan Stock Exchange in Karachi](#)”, *CNN*, 29 June 2020.

²³ “[Pakistan Attack: Gunmen Killed Five in Balochistan Hotel](#)”, *BBC*, 12 May 2019.

²⁴ “[Gunmen Attack Pakistani Hotel Used by Chinese and Vow Further Violence](#)”, *The New York Times*, 11 May 2019.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ “[PM Imran Slams Gwadar Hotel Attack as Bid to Damage Economy](#)”, *Dawn*, 12 May 2019.

- The BLA ambushed the Chinese Consulate in Karachi in 2018 in which four persons died. Soon after, the group referred to China as an “oppressor”.²⁷ It further reiterated the group’s aversion to “Chinese military expansionist endeavours”.²⁸
- A group of workers including three Chinese engineers were injured in a suicide bombing in Dalbandin in August 2018. The site of attack was located more than 300 kms from Balochistan capital Quetta. The Chinese engineers working on a mineral project were attacked while being ferried to the site.²⁹

Aversion towards China

The disquiet/unease against the omnipresence of the Chinese projects and the workers has agitated the popular mindset in Pakistan. This is mainly because Pakistan continues to struggle on the social and economic fronts despite heavy doles of projected investments from China. People are now gradually grasping that Chinese money has made no difference to their lives. And this is nearly ten years since the ‘game changer’ CPEC was announced.

Balochistan

It is the restive north-western province of Pakistan that majorly centrifuges the anti-China sentiments to the rest of Pakistan including Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. This is mainly as Gwadar, CPEC’s centrepiece, is located there. Gwadar, a port on the Arabian Sea, has been projected as a solution to undercut Beijing’s Malacca dilemma. More importantly, strong secessionist tendencies have sustained in the region leading to a perennial war with Pakistan since 1948.

Given the Pakistani military’s inability to douse the secessionist movement in the region despite unleashing brute force against Baloch group and outfits, the rising presence and role of China is dreaded as an attack on resources the region owns. China’s economic heft is considered a purveyor of Pakistani intention to bulldoze its agenda on Baloch population. It is, therefore, not surprising that the Baloch outfits mainly the BLA figures in majority of the attacks against the Chinese workers. Owing to such strong undercurrents of anti-China sentiments, “China as the largest foreign

²⁷ [“Attack on Pearl Continental Hotel in Belt and Road Port was Bid to Damage Economy, Says Pakistan PM Imran Khan”](#), *South China Morning Post*, 12 May 2019.

²⁸ Sophia Saifi, Saleem Mehsud and Azaz Syed, [“Female Suicide Bomber Behind Karachi Attack that Killed 3 Chinese Citizens: Police”](#), no. 16.

²⁹ Wendy Wu, [“Beijing Condemns Suicide Attack on Bus Carrying Chinese Engineers in Pakistan”](#), *South China Morning Post*, 11 August 2018.

stakeholder in Balochistan is regarded as Islamabad’s partner in the alleged exploitation and occupation of the province”.³⁰

Not long ago in December 2023, the surrender of Sarfaraz Bangulzai, the leader of the Baloch Nationalist Army (BNA) was much publicised given the group’s notoriety in attacking Chinese interests in Pakistan. Bangulzai’s surrender was close on heels of arrest of Gulzar Imam, another prominent BNA leader in July 2023.³¹ Imam’s arrest was hailed by Beijing as “a great success”.³² It was Gulzar Imam who once declared that “armed struggle against Chinese investments in Balochistan will continue until Beijing realizes that these investments are not secure”.³³

The BNA was formed in November 2018 after amalgamation of some splinter groups that operate under the aegis of the Baloch Raji Ajoji Sangar (BRAS) alliance. The alliance focusses on attacking and thwarting Chinese interests in the region.³⁴ Groups such as BNA view the Chinese expansion of activities “as exploiting the province’s resources and its Port of Gwadar”.³⁵

Control over Resources

The separatist groups of Balochistan aspire for “independence” from Pakistan and “accuse” the Pakistani government and China “of exploiting Balochistan, one of Pakistan’s poorest provinces, for its gas and mineral wealth”.³⁶ Groups such as BLA consider Pakistan an “occupier” and “exploiter” of Balochistan’s rich resources.³⁷ One can find parallels to Balochistan’s resentment against the Chinese presence in Xinjiang and Gilgit Baltistan that, too, are beset with strong undercurrents of hate towards the Chinese.³⁸

At the root lies the fundamentals of resource ownership and ethnic sensitivities. In all these regions, the prevalent fear is that the Chinese are there to overtake resources for selfish interests, which locals believe belong to them. The three main

³⁰ Syed Fazl-e-Haider, “[Why Baloch Separatists in Pakistan Want China's BRI Out](#)”, *Think China*, 28 August 2023.

³¹ Adnan Aamir, “[Anti-China Pakistan Separatist Group Dissolves as Leader Surrenders](#)”, *Nikkei Asia*, 28 December 2023.

³² Akbar Notezai, “[Pakistan Arrest of Anti-China Rebel May Not Protect Belt and Road Billions](#)”, *The China Project*, 3 July 2023.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Adnan Aamir, “[Anti-China Pakistan Separatist Group Dissolves as Leader Surrenders](#)”, no. 31.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ “[Pakistan Hotel Bomb: Deadly Blast Hits Luxury Venue in Quetta](#)”, no. 21.

³⁷ Syed Fazl-e-Haider, “[Why Baloch Separatists in Pakistan Want China's BRI Out](#)”, no. 30.

³⁸ Discussed in Priyanka Singh, “[CPEC: Corridor of Discontent](#)”, Issue Brief, MP-IDSA, 23 November 2016.

regions in the CPEC’s trajectory have reported high dislike against the Chinese and the projects they helm.³⁹

Predates CPEC

The popular revulsion towards the Chinese in Pakistan, particularly Balochistan, predates CPEC. Notably, the current spell of insurgency in the restive region is attributed to the time the Chinese were proffered the licence to mine in Chagai hills.⁴⁰ The lucrative contract was given to China’s state-owned China Metallurgical Group Corporation (MCC) “with scant independent monitoring”.⁴¹ In 2013, the advent of China in the administration of the Gwadar Port sowed further seeds of anti-China sentiments in Pakistan. From 2007–13, the port was managed by Singapore’s PSA International (PSA.UL), a port operating company under Singapore government investment holding Temasek (TEM.UL).⁴² Singapore later withdrew making way for China’s control.

Cultural angst/gap

There have been incidents in Pakistan that showcase the cultural divide between Pakistan and China. In this regard, it is important to consider a Chinese perspective on the Lal Masjid siege in July 2007. Days before the confrontation between the Pakistan military and the militants occurred at the mosque site, at least seven Chinese people were abducted by a vigilante group from the Red Mosque on charges that the parlour/clinic they ran in a posh neighbourhood of the country’s capital was involved in unethical activities.⁴³ The “treatment” meted out to its overseas citizens was of “acute sensitivity” to China.⁴⁴ The China angle provoked the military’s assault against the militants in the mosque.⁴⁵

More recently in September 2022, a dental clinic in Karachi was attacked by armed gunmen in which a Chinese dual citizen was killed.⁴⁶ The deceased was assistant to an elderly Chinese dual citizen dentist and his wife. Notably, the Pakistani patients present in the clinic were spared.⁴⁷ A lesser known ethnic-national outfit Sindhudesh

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Akbar Notezai, “[Pakistan Arrest of Anti-China Rebel May Not Protect Belt and Road Billions](#)”, no. 32.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Faisal Aziz, “[Singapore's PSA Takes Over Pakistan's Gwadar Port](#)”, *Reuters*, 10 August 2007.

⁴³ Andrew Small, *The China–Pakistan Axis: Asia’s New Geopolitics*, Hurst, London, Hardback, 2015, p. ix.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. x.

⁴⁶ Chris Giles, “[Pakistan Attack: Chinese National Shot Dead at Karachi Dental Clinic](#)”, *BBC*, 28 September 2022.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

People’s Army claimed the attack in resistance to “China’s resource extraction projects in Sindh and Balochistan”.⁴⁸

Impact on Bilateral Ties

Attacks against the Chinese on Pakistan soil is bound to put their bilateral ties on a defensive. This is obvious as the two countries have remained steadfast allies for decades. Besides, they also consciously re-fashion their partnership using conspicuous, catchy adjectives, latest being “iron-clad”.⁴⁹ The two sides strive to maintain bilateral sobriety and immediately go into a damage control mode every time there is a challenge to their engagement.

So far, China has not publically admonished Islamabad for the consistent security lapses against its workers. Its statements in the aftermath of attacks on nationals are rather tangential, bromide and upholding of its decades-old relationship with Pakistan. Pakistan, on the other hand, goes out of its way to reinforce Pakistan’s sincerity in dealing with Beijing’s enemies on its soil.

However, the fact that Prime Minister Sharif visited the Chinese embassy in the aftermath of the March 2024 attack proves there is now increased pressure. That Sharif is due to visit China after his re-election may also be behind his swift diplomatic move to prevent the possibility where the recent attack stifles prospects of him seeking investments with China during the visit.

In the past, there have been attempts to bring in conspiracy theories to prove that there is an enemy hand in the attacks on Chinese, at times hinting at the role of the Indian and Afghan intelligence agencies in fomenting trouble against China. Days before the Taliban takeover of Kabul, when the Pakistani establishment was hand in gloves with the Taliban, the then Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, blamed the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) and the Indian Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) of commissioning the Pakistani Taliban in Afghanistan to carry out the bus attack killing Chinese in the Dasu area in July 2021.⁵⁰

Before this, in the wake of the Pearl Continental attack, Prime Minister Imran Khan noted that such “attempts especially in Balochistan are an effort to sabotage our economic projects and prosperity”.⁵¹ Similar to the trend, in the wake of the recent

⁴⁸ [“Rising Anti-China Sentiment and Attacks on Chinese in Pakistan”](#), *Colombo Gazette*, 21 February 2024.

⁴⁹ [“Ambassador Jiang Zaidong: Forging Ahead to Enhance China-Pakistan Ironclad Friendship”](#), Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 14 September 2023.

⁵⁰ Sophia Saifi and Ben Westcott, [“Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Blames Afghanistan and India for Suicide Attack on Chinese Workers”](#), *CNN*, 13 August 2021.

⁵¹ [“PM Imran Slams Gwadar Hotel Attack as Bid to Damage Economy”](#), no. 26.

attack, the Pakistan Foreign office asserted that the “attack was orchestrated by the enemies of Pakistan-China friendship”.⁵²

While China affirms that “No attempt to undermine China-Pakistan cooperation will succeed”,⁵³ it is important to note that the state-owned Power Construction Corporation of China suspended work on the Tarbela Dam extension in the aftermath of the Shangla attack of 26 March 2024.⁵⁴ The company has also discontinued civil work on the Dasu Dam and Diamer Bhasha Dam due to “security concerns”.⁵⁵

The CPEC has not brought about a fundamental or meaningful change in Pakistan’s economic and social status. The targeting of CPEC from within Pakistan has augmented its fragility. Pakistan is mired in security, economic and political woes and it may be not easy to solely focus on preserving the CPEC. It has a long-standing bilateral logjam with India. Standoff with the Afghan Taliban and problems with Iran are additional challenges staring the horizon.

China, on its part, has been cautious about taking the responsibility of providing security to its infrastructure projects and workers rather than leaving it to Pakistan. With myriad ongoing projects in Pakistan, China’s hands are seemingly full. There are few signs to suggest that it will deviate from this line in future.

What Lies Ahead?

Both China and Pakistan have put up brave faces in the aftermath of the attacks on Chinese workers. Notwithstanding, the attacks against the Chinese have put Pakistan in a weak spot. The unending cycle of attacks on the Chinese has the potential to pose an unprecedented challenge to the age-old bilateral equanimity. Pakistan has raised a special security force to provide security to the Chinese workers. Even then, these dedicated forces for CPEC are consistently falling short in guaranteeing security to Chinese workers. If the crisis continues, it remains to be seen if China will take on the mantle to ensure its workers’ security.

⁵² [“Terrorist Attack Against Chinese Nationals in Besham”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, 26 March 2024.

⁵³ [“Foreign Ministry Spokesperson’s Remarks on the Dasu Bomb Attack in Pakistan”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 27 March 2024.

⁵⁴ Muhammad Sadaqat, [“Chinese Company Suspends Work on Tarbela Extension Project”](#), *Dawn*, 28 March 2024.

⁵⁵ [“Chinese Firms Suspend Work on Multiple Dams Days After Terror Attack Killed 5 in Pakistan”](#), *The Indian Express*, 29 March 2024.

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