

# MP-IDSA

## *Issue Brief*

# China's Private Security Personnel in Pakistan: Implications for Regional Stability

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## **S***ummary*

Pakistan faces the challenge of balancing its sovereignty with the imperative of securing Chinese investments that it perceives as being vital for its economic development. Given the simmering anti-China sentiment, an expanded Chinese security presence may inadvertently lend weight to separatist narratives, fuelling unrest rather than alleviating it.

## Introduction

Reports concerning the deployment of 60 Chinese personnel from three Chinese Private Security Companies (PSCs)—Dewe Security Frontier Service Group, China Overseas Security Group, and Huaxin Zhongshan Security Service—to jointly safeguard two power projects under the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in Sindh, if confirmed, mark a significant shift in the security dynamics of the China–Pakistan relationship.<sup>1</sup> Although Chinese PSCs have been operating in Pakistan for some time, their operations thus far have relied exclusively on local Pakistani nationals.<sup>2</sup> This latest development represents the first instance<sup>3</sup> of Chinese nationals being deployed on the ground for security operations in Pakistan.

Although neither the Chinese nor the Pakistani government have confirmed this deployment, Pakistani outlets have repeatedly reported<sup>4</sup> China's demand to allow personnel from its private security firms to protect CPEC-related infrastructure. This deployment reportedly marks the initial phase of a broader plan, with additional personnel expected to be dispatched in subsequent stages based on evolving security requirements.<sup>5</sup> Chinese PSCs operate in close coordination with the Chinese government. It was in fact governmental encouragement that initially propelled these PSCs to expand their operations overseas.<sup>6</sup>

The move comes amid rising security threats to Chinese interests in the region, most notably the October 2024 attack on Karachi's Jinnah International Airport, in which two Chinese nationals were killed. This incident strained Sino-Pakistani relations and prompted a series of diplomatic engagements, during which China even proposed deploying its own security personnel to protect its citizens abroad. Relations were eventually restored following high-level discussions.<sup>7</sup>

In February 2025, Pakistan's security situation deteriorated significantly when the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) hijacked the Jaffar Express, resulting in the deaths of 26 individuals, including 18 security personnel. Although no Chinese nationals or investments were directly affected, the incident prompted renewed

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<sup>1</sup> Shivani Sharma, [“In a First, China Deploys Security Forces in Pak amid Terror Attacks: Sources”](#), *India Today*, 26 March 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Devendra Kumar, [“Securitisation of Economic Projects: A Case of Chinese Private Security Companies \(PSCs\) in Pakistan”](#), *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1, May 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Huma Siddiqui, [“China Deploys Private Security Firms to Safeguard Citizens in Pakistan Amid Rising Attacks”](#), *Financial Express*, 22 November 2024.

<sup>4</sup> [“Beijing Pushes to Join Security Efforts for Citizens in Pakistan, Sources Say”](#), *Dawn*, 12 November 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Shivani Sharma, [“In a First, China Deploys Security Forces in Pak amid Terror Attacks: Sources”](#), no. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Devendra Kumar, [“Securitisation of Economic Projects: A Case of Chinese Private Security Companies \(PSCs\) in Pakistan”](#), no. 2.

<sup>7</sup> [“China Security Ties”](#), *Dawn*, 14 November 2024; [“Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lin Jian's Regular Press Conference on November 11, 2024”](#), [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People's Republic of China](#), 11 November 2024.

discussions between China and Pakistan regarding the enhancement of security measures for Chinese-led infrastructure projects.<sup>8</sup>

## Military Operations Other Than War

The deployment of Chinese security personnel in Pakistan aligns with China's broader doctrine of 'Military Operations Other Than War' (MOOTW), as outlined in the 2013 Defence White Paper.<sup>9</sup> This doctrine legitimises overseas interventions aimed at safeguarding national interests, particularly in volatile regions where Chinese investments are exposed to security threats.<sup>10</sup>

Following the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, the Chinese government actively encouraged the global expansion of its PSCs.<sup>11</sup> These entities have served as instruments of discreet intervention, enabling China to secure strategic assets and personnel without the direct projection of state military power. In countries like Djibouti, South Sudan, and Iraq, Chinese PSCs have often deployed personnel—both Chinese and locals—to protect workers and infrastructure critical to the BRI's success.

Hiring local personnel has typically been China's preferred model for its PSCs, as it allows for smoother integration and helps avoid diplomatic friction. In Pakistan, too, Chinese PSCs initially relied on local hires to safeguard personnel and infrastructure working on the CPEC.<sup>12</sup> However, the escalating number of attacks on Chinese workers and key CPEC installations has convinced Beijing that this approach is no longer viable. According to data from Pakistan's National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), between 2021 and 2024, a total of 20 Chinese citizens have been killed and 34 injured in 14 terrorist attacks targeting Chinese interests.<sup>13</sup>

## Persistent Security Lapses

Despite public displays of camaraderie, China–Pakistan relations are facing growing undercurrents of strain, largely fuelled by persistent security lapses on

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<sup>8</sup> Baqir Sajjad Syed, [“Military Vows to Crush Balochistan Terrorists, Abettors”](#), *Dawn*, 15 March 2025.

<sup>9</sup> [“The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces”](#), Information Office of the State Council, The People's Republic of China, April 2013.

<sup>10</sup> James Siebens and Ryan Lucas, [“Military Operations Other Than War in China's Foreign Policy”](#), *Stimson Center*, 3 October 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Helena Legarda and Meia Nouwens, [“Guardians of the Belt and Road: The Internationalization of China's Private Security Companies”](#), *Merics China Monitor*, 16 August 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Devendra Kumar, [“Securitisation of Economic Projects: A Case of Chinese Private Security Companies \(PSCs\) in Pakistan”](#), no. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Sanauallah Khan, [“20 Chinese Citizens Killed, 34 Injured in 14 Terrorist Attacks Since 2021: Nacta”](#), *Dawn*, 10 December 2024.

Pakistani soil. The situation has worsened in the aftermath of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, which unleashed a new wave of militant activity in the region.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the BLA has openly opposed Chinese investments, viewing them as an extension of Islamabad’s longstanding exploitation of Balochistan and its natural resources. This perception has fuelled repeated and deadly attacks on Chinese personnel and strategic infrastructure linked to the CPEC.

Thus, Beijing’s confidence in Islamabad’s ability to secure its interests is waning. In 2024 alone, nine Chinese nationals were killed in separate attacks across Pakistan—including high-profile assaults on critical sites such as the Dasu Hydropower Project and Karachi’s Jinnah International Airport (see Table 1). These incidents have prompted serious reassessments within Chinese strategic circles, with growing concern over Pakistan's reliability as a security provider to Chinese nationals.

**Table 1: Major Targeted Attacks on Chinese Personnel and Interests Since 2016**

Date of Attack	Location	No. of Casualties		Claim	Source of Claim	Type of Attack
		Pakistan	Chinese			
23 November 2018	Chinese Consulate	4 (killed)	-	BLA	BLA Spokesperson	Gunfire
22 April 2021	Serena Hotel, Quetta	5 (killed), 12 (injured)	-	Pakistani Taliban	Taliban Spokesperson	Suicide attack
14 July 2021	Dasu Hydropower Project	2 (killed)	9 (killed)	TTP	n/a	Suicide attack
20 August 2021	East Bay Road, Gwadar	2 (killed), 3 (injured)	-	BLA	BLA, Spokesperson	Suicide attack
26 April 2022	Confucius Institute, University of Karachi	1 (killed)	3 (killed), 1 (injured)	BLA	BLA, Spokesperson	Suicide attack
20 March 2024	Gwadar Port Authority Complex	2 (injured)	-	Majeed Brigade, BLA	BLA Spokesperson Jeeyand Baloch	Multiple Explosion and Gunfire

<sup>14</sup> Alessandro Arduino, “[Chinese Private Security Companies: Neither Blackwater nor the Wagner](#)”, *War on the Rocks*, 1 December 2023.

26 March 2024	Turbat Naval Air Base, PNS Siddique	1 (killed)	-	Majeed Brigade, BLA	BLA Spokesperson Jeeyand Baloch	Multiple Explosion and Gunfire
26 March 2024	Dasu Hydropower Project	1(killed)	5 (killed)	TTP	n/a	Suicide attack
31 March 2024	Ankara Dam	2 (killed), 4 (injured)	-	n/a	n/a	Gunfire
6 October 2024	Jinnah International Airport, Karachi	1 (Killed), 10 Injured	2 (Killed), 1(Injured)	Majeed Brigade, BLA	BLA Spokesperson Jeeyand Baloch	Explosion
5 November 2024	Karachi	-	2 (Injured)	Private Security Guards	n/a	Gunfire

Source: Compiled by the author from media reports.

In response to Beijing’s mounting concerns, Islamabad revamped its counter-terrorism posture and, in June 2024, launched *Azm-e-Istehkam* (translated as ‘Commitment to Stability’). This marked a new phase following the earlier campaign *Radd-ul-Fasaad* (‘Rejection of Strife’), which ran from 2017 to 2024.<sup>15</sup> Since 2016, the Pakistani military has also created specialised security formations—namely the 34<sup>th</sup> and 44<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry Divisions—tasked with protecting CPEC projects. These units, supported by the local police, are mandated to provide route security, gather intelligence and ensure rapid response to emerging threats.<sup>16</sup>

Despite these measures, Pakistan’s security apparatus has struggled to contain the threat, particularly from the BLA’s, Majeed Brigade and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which has repeatedly and successfully targeted Chinese personnel and infrastructure (See Table 1). The TTP has targeted Dasu Hydropower Project twice. These failures have underscored the systemic vulnerabilities in Pakistan’s internal security framework and prompted China to press for a more direct role.

The latest news of Islamabad allowing Chinese security personnel marks a departure from Pakistan’s existing legal norms (since 2012) which prohibit foreign PSCs from operating independently and mandate that only local personnel be employed if such firms are permitted. This move reflects Beijing’s growing

<sup>15</sup> Baqir Sajjad Syed, “[Govt Unleashes Offensive to 'Decisively' End Terrorism](#)”, *Dawn*, 23 June 2024.

<sup>16</sup> S. Sukhankin, “[Chinese PSCs in South Asia: The Case of Pakistan](#)”, Jamestown, 14 July 2023.

impatience with Islamabad’s inability to deliver on promises. Much of this is rooted in Pakistan’s longstanding policy of tolerating or supporting militant groups for strategic leverage, particularly in Afghanistan and Kashmir. Many of these groups have since splintered or radicalised, redirecting their violence inward and destabilising Pakistan itself.

China’s increasing involvement in intelligence and domestic security operations within Pakistan signals a deeper mistrust. For instance, in the 2021 attack on Dasu Hydropower Project, Pakistani government sources had initially attributed this to an accident, with Beijing pointing out a few hours later that it was, in fact, a terror case.<sup>17</sup> Such direct interference reveals not only the fragility of Pakistan’s internal governance but also the shrinking space for sovereign decision-making.

In 2024, multiple rounds of high-level discussions eventually led to Islamabad acquiescing<sup>18</sup> to allow a Chinese security footprint on Pakistani soil. This represents a recalibration of Beijing’s strategic posture. More importantly, it raises urgent questions about the possibility of Pakistan’s eroding decision-making capacity, growing dependency, and its capacity to maintain control over its own security landscape.

## Regional Implications

China’s expanding security presence in Pakistan, particularly through PSCs, is introducing new layers of strategic complexity in South Asia. Should the number of Chinese security personnel increase at additional CPEC sites, regional concerns are likely to intensify. Of particular note is the fact that the CPEC passes through Pakistan’s illegally occupied regions of Jammu and Kashmir—territory claimed by India—and culminates at the strategic Gwadar Port near the Strait of Hormuz. The deployment of Chinese PSCs in these sensitive areas may heighten regional tensions.

Strategically, the presence of Chinese PSCs near critical maritime chokepoints such as the Gwadar Port also raises significant concerns. Gwadar's proximity to the Strait of Hormuz—a crucial artery for global energy supplies—amplifies these apprehensions. In 2022, approximately 21 million barrels of oil per day transited through the strait, accounting for around 21 per cent of global petroleum liquids consumption. This figure represents nearly 30 per cent of the world’s seaborne oil trade, with 70 per cent of these exports bound for Asian markets.

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<sup>17</sup> [“Pakistan Bus Blast Kills Chinese Nationals in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa”](#), *BBC News*, 14 July 2021; S. Masood and S.L. Myers, [“Chinese Nationals Among Victims of Deadly Bus Blast in Pakistan”](#), *The New York Times*, 16 July 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Bhashyam Kasturi, [“Enter the Chinese: A Deal Pak Can't Refuse”](#), *Deccan Herald*, 27 November 2024; [“Pakistan, China in Talks About Security for Chinese Nationals”](#), *Dawn*, 26 March 2025.

Moreover, the Strait of Hormuz is a vital corridor for liquefied natural gas (LNG) shipments. All LNG exports from Qatar and the United Arab Emirates pass through it, comprising about 20 per cent of the global LNG trade.<sup>19</sup> Given this strategic significance, any increase in Chinese security or military presence in the area could substantially alter maritime security dynamics. Such developments are likely to influence regional alignments involving Gulf states and Western naval powers, with potential ramifications for international trade routes and broader geopolitical stability.

## Conclusion

Pakistan faces the challenge of balancing its sovereignty with the imperative of securing Chinese investments that it perceives as being vital for its economic development. Allowing foreign security entities to operate within its borders risks undermining Islamabad’s control over internal security affairs.

This is not a new situation for Pakistan. It experienced a similar phase with the US, when American private contractors operated freely within the country, compromising both sovereignty and public safety. The situation reached a flashpoint in January 2011 with the arrest of Raymond Davis, a CIA contractor involved in the fatal shooting of two Pakistani nationals in Lahore.<sup>20</sup> The incident triggered widespread public outrage and raised questions about foreign overreach, leading to a restrictive ban on foreign PSCs. However, foreign PSCs continue to operate illegally within Pakistan.

A similar scenario could play out again—this time with China. Anti-China sentiment is already simmering, particularly in insurgency-prone regions like Balochistan, where foreign involvement is often viewed with deep suspicion. An expanded Chinese security presence may inadvertently lend weight to separatist narratives, fuelling unrest rather than alleviating it.

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<sup>19</sup> [“The Strait of Hormuz is the World's Most Important Oil Transit Chokepoint”](#), *Today in Energy*, U.S. Energy Information Administration, 6 December 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Jane Perlez, [“U.S. Offers \\$2 Billion Package to Pakistan”](#), *The New York Times*, 17 March 2011.

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