

China's Terror Dilemma in CPEC: A Xinjiang Strategy?

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ABSTRACT This brief aims to examine one of China's possible responses to the various extremist and terrorist activities that plague the internal security of Pakistan, given the necessity of securing its US\$62-billion investment in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Given that Pakistan is failing to control this problem, China will have to take measures of its own to secure CPEC. The response of China could possibly be inspired by its strategy in Xinjiang, where it has successfully managed to keep the insurgency under control with a mix of hard military power and wide-ranging measures aimed at clamping down on the religious rights of Muslims. Such strategy is, however, likely to clash with Pakistan, especially the elements of its 'deep state'. This brief explores how a strategy inspired from Xinjiang will operate in Pakistan and the resistance it is likely to meet.

INTRODUCTION

In November 2016, around 200 heavily guarded containers were transported to the port of Gwadar, in Pakistan, from where they were then shipped off to various destinations across the world.¹ This marked the beginning of trade activity on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) – a component of China's One Belt One Road project linking Kashgar in China

to the port of Gwadar. Often called a “game changer”² for South Asian geopolitics, CPEC is a US\$62-billion-dollar investment³ project by the People's Republic of China that aims to transform Pakistan's infrastructure and economy and facilitate bilateral trade. Comparisons are being made between CPEC and the Marshall Plan—the US-led aid to

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Western Europe following World War I. However, CPEC's financial viability is under a cloud of doubt, owing to issues related to the terrain, climate, and the overall security situation across the route.⁴ China, though, seems determined to endure these risks and the project has been making steady progress.

Discussions around the impact of CPEC have centered around a variety of issues. Scholars have discussed China's motivations and the benefits it is set to derive from this project. Some discussion has taken place around the impact on Pakistan's economy—while some say that it will bring economic prosperity, others have warned of its ill effects. Others dwell on the potential impact of CPEC on the geopolitics of the region, and there has been plenty of analyses of the project's security aspect. One of the most potent challenges that CPEC faces is from insurgents and terrorists in Pakistan. While China has used a variety of measures to control an insurgency in Xinjiang, Pakistan has been unable to control terrorism within its own borders. There are different methods that China could adopt to tackle this security threat to CPEC. One possible approach might be to

adopt a strategy based on its own experience in Xinjiang. China is likely to encounter many difficulties if it chooses to adopt this way forward, and this brief examines this possible strategic approach. It traces China's motivations in ensuring CPEC's success and describes the various security threats its faces. It highlights China's changing approach to combating terrorism, and how it has responded to the terror-related activities in Xinjiang. The brief then describes how China could, taking inspiration from its success in its own borders, respond to the insurgents in Pakistan; and the likely reaction in Pakistan.

THE PUSH FOR CPEC

The incentives for undertaking an endeavour as ambitious as CPEC can be seen in the larger global geopolitics. These large investment projects allow China to buy influence in its neighbourhood, where it is poised to overshadow the United States. Emboldening Pakistan also allows China to harangue India. Economically, it allows China to capture a new market as well as shift some of its manufacturing outside its territory, ensuring



Source: *The Economist*

its homeland is safe from some of its pernicious effects like pollution. Analysts in both India and the US have raised concerns that Gwadar might become a base for the Chinese Navy, allowing it to operate in the Arabian Sea. However, most importantly, CPEC appears to be China's way out of the Malaccan dilemma. China is heavily dependent on the Straits of Malacca to get access to oil from the Middle East and Africa, in order to fulfill its vast energy demands. In case of a conflict, Malacca could easily be blocked. This prompted China to look for alternative routes to access the Middle East. Since the Gwadar port is on the warm waters of the Arabian Sea, it has the potential of resolving China's security dilemma.

INSURGENCY AND RESPONSE

The success of CPEC is contingent on the security situation across the route, which is plagued by insurgencies throughout. Gwadar, located in Balochistan, is facing a separatist insurgency. The Baloch nationalists have complained of economic exploitation, inequality, immigration, and demographic imbalance. These tensions are bound to escalate as China brings its own companies and labour; estimates say that Chinese nationals are likely to outnumber the ethnic Baloch by 2048.⁵

Various terrorist organisations such as the Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan, the Lashkar e Jhangavi, and elements of the al-Qaeda and the Islamic State also operate in Pakistan and are a serious challenge to its national security. Both the IS and the al-Qaeda have declared China to be an enemy, and have targeted Chinese nationals. The Turkistan Islamic Party, the Islamic Extremist Separatist organisation

operating in Xinjiang, also allegedly has links to terror outfits in Pakistan, including the TTP and the al-Qaeda.

Pakistan's failure to control these insurgent groups had led it to being ranked as the 5th most affected country by terrorism.⁶ The reasons for this failure are far and wide; however, they are ostensibly linked to the predominance of Islam which, as the state religion, is followed by around 95 percent of the population. Islamist Parties and the clergy play an important role in the country's politics. Religion has been a source of various laws and is important in shaping societal norms. Moreover, Pakistan was established as a homeland for South Asian Muslims, and Islam has been a crucial part of Pakistani identity.

In sharp contrast, China has cracked down hard on religious terrorism in its end of the CPEC—the Xinjiang Province. For example, China has passed various laws that suppress the “peaceful expressions of cultural identity”⁷ of the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang. These include a ban on fasting during Ramadan, a ban on the face veil, and restriction on the length of beards. China has also prevented Muslims from being home-schooled, in an effort to crack down on religious education. Muslims are not allowed to give “religious” names to their children.⁸ The Chinese argument is that this will allow for greater assimilation of the Uyghur in Chinese society and will act as an overall solution to the Xinjiang issue. These measures, along with a heavy use of the armed forces, have allowed China to keep the insurgency under control.

To protect their strategically and economically important investment, the Chinese could possibly adopt similar measures in Pakistan, despite heavy resistance and difficulties. It is unlikely that any talks with

these extremist groups, of even the back-channel kind, would lead to a desired outcome for China. The success of CPEC runs antithetical to the fundamental grievances of the Baloch nationalists – demographic change, and economic exploitation. Moreover, organisations like the al-Qaeda and the IS are in ideological opposition to China and its policies and position, especially in the Xinjiang province. The killing in June 2017 of two Chinese nationals by the IS⁹ shows that it is unlikely that any financial incentives would stop these groups from targeting China or CPEC.

Similarly, the TTP has also raised its voice against the mistreatment of Muslims outside Pakistan. With respect to China, the TTP has had long-standing links with insurgent groups that are active in Xinjiang, such as the al-Qaeda-linked Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP). The TTP has often been accused of sheltering TIP militants, and providing them with training in areas under its control in the northwest of Pakistan.¹⁰ The TTP has also openly stated its intention to attack China. In 2013, the TIP (then known as East Turkestan Islamic Movement) leader Abu Zar al Burmi, in a sermon in South Waziristan stated, “it is obligatory for Muslims to kidnap and kill Chinese people and attack Chinese companies”, which Abu Zar says have “conquered” Pakistan like the British East India company did in India.¹¹ In 2014, in a video released by the TTP media arm called “Let's disturb China”, Abu Zar directed Taliban cadres to target China: “The pull-out of U.S. forces from Afghanistan is a victory for the Taliban movement in the region, and our next target will be China”.¹² The threats were followed by TTP attacks on Chinese interests in Pakistan. In 2012, the TTP killed a Chinese

tourist in Peshawar, which it said was in retaliation for the Chinese treatment of Muslims in Xinjiang.¹³ The TTP had also taken credit for the kidnapping of a Chinese tourist in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in 2014.¹⁴ These events show that no talks with these militant groups can guarantee the safety of Chinese interests or nationals in Pakistan.

Traditionally, China has refrained from participating in multilateral military interventions such as those in Afghanistan or against the ISIS. In various statements, China has referred to these “double standards” as the “root causes”¹⁵ of terrorism. However, as China has come under the radar of Islamist terrorist organisations, its approach to interventions has undergone a paradigm shift. The protection of Chinese “overseas interests” has been recognised as a policy objective for the PLA. In another landmark change, Article 71 of the 2015 Counter-Terrorism Law reads, “The Chinese People's Liberation Army and Chinese People's armed police forces may assign people to leave the country on counter-terrorism missions”. Moreover, China has recently acquired its first overseas military base in Djibouti, opening the possibility of China deploying its troops in Pakistan to secure its assets in CPEC. The killing of two Chinese nationals in Pakistan had sparked a discussion in China about the possibility of such a deployment.

However, military power is one aspect. As CPEC would afford China influence in Pakistan, they may want to bring in the Xinjiang strategy or elements of it to control the insurgency that threatens the success of CPEC. China has attempted to justify the harsh measures it has taken in Xinjiang, as an attempt to control Islamic extremism in the region. Despite protecting terrorists that

target India,¹⁶ China has taken a hard stand, and they are particularly sensitive against Islamic extremists in Pakistan that have attacked Chinese interests. It was the Chinese pressure caused by the kidnapping of seven Chinese nationals that caused Pakistan to take action, albeit reluctantly, that led to the Lal Masjid Siege in 2007.¹⁷ China was also proactive in ensuring that Pakistan acted against Uhyghur militant groups;¹⁸ and Chinese pressure was a major factor in the launch of Operation Zarb e Azb.¹⁹ As Pakistan's purely military formula fails, and the economic stakes rise, China may soon run out of patience and adopt a broad-based strategy to tackle the problem of extremism in Pakistan. China's narrative is only strengthened by the fact that the Hui Muslims, an ethnic minority in China, have chosen assimilation and have supported the Chinese state and are seen to benefit from the economic progress in China. Therefore, China could look to try a broader counterterrorism strategy to ensure the safety of their investments.

XINJIANG STRATEGY AND THE REACTION

Given the multifaceted importance of CPEC, China could decide to export the Xinjiang strategy to Pakistan in order to tackle the security threats. However, this will likely be met with heavy opposition and resistance, and China will have to take a variety of measures to ensure that it succeeds. These would involve a crackdown on Islamist parties like the Jamaat e Islami, Jamiat Ahle Hadith, and the Jamaat Ulema e Islam, in order to marginalise and reduce their influence. As in Xinjiang, China might try to suppress or even abolish religious education. This would include a restriction on

home-schooling and monitoring and penetration of madrassas. China has previously voiced its concerns over this issue, notably when it spoke in support the 2007 Siege of the Lal Masjid. Another aspect of this might be the repeal of religious laws such as the blasphemy provisions in the Pakistan Penal Code. What might follow is a ban on the headscarf, and other such public expressions of religious affiliation. China's success in controlling the insurgency in Xinjiang might provide for both the motive and justification for these moves.

Such steps are even more severe than the Western laws aimed at separating religion and the state. An attempt to impose these is bound to be met with heavy opposition. Treatment of Muslims has often been used by terrorist organisations as a justification to target countries, including Pakistan itself. This includes not just the al-Qaeda, the TTP, and the LeJ; but also the Afghan Taliban, the Lashkar e Taiba, and the Jaish e Muhammad—organisations that allegedly have acted as Pakistan's militant proxies in India and Afghanistan. These organisations are likely to offer the fiercest resistance. Moreover, the madrassas and the clergy in Pakistan have emerged as powerful institutions. One example is Abdul Aziz, a controversial cleric at the Lal Masjid who has named a library in his mosque after Osama Bin Laden, declared his support for the IS' views, and allegedly built a militia to “solve” the “issue”²⁰ of Islamic law. He remains unapprehended. Islamic parties are also powerful institutions, despite their modest electoral performance. They have led protests on popular issues like American drone strikes; and have been in the forefront of others like the question of the Shariat court and other religious laws and legislation.

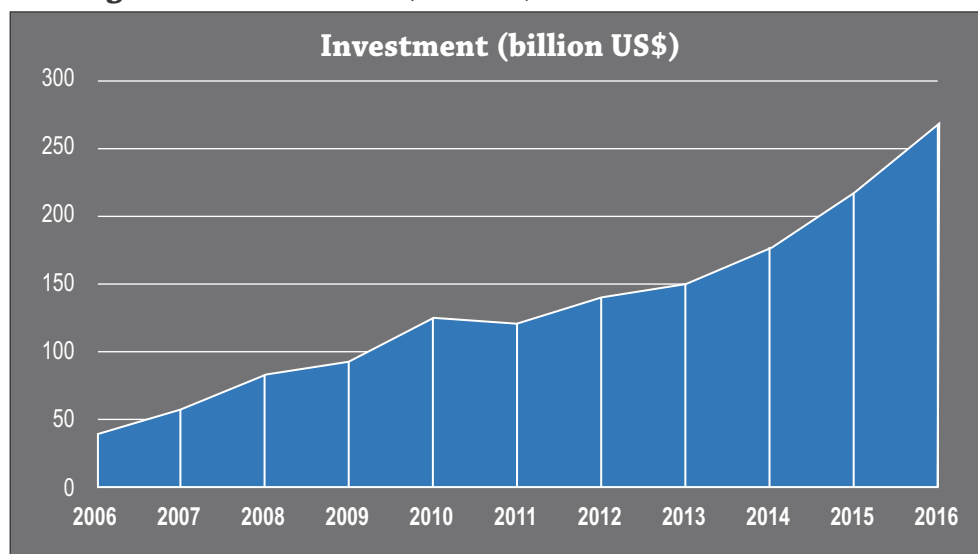
Despite not being electorally successful, they have managed to become disruptive and have significant influence in the politics of Pakistan.²¹ Religious laws like the blasphemy provisions have popular sanction as can be seen by the reaction received by Mumtaz Qadri for murdering Salman Taseer.²² The latest example of the power of Islamist forces in the politics of Pakistan can be seen in the violent protests of November 2017²³ led by the Tehreek-e-Labaik; it culminated in the resignation of the Law Minister Zahid Hamid.²⁴

Religion has played an important role in shaping Pakistani society. The country was founded as a homeland for South Asian Muslims and religion has formed an important part of its identity. The 95-percent Muslim population is likely to perceive Xinjiang-style policies in their region as an attack on their religion and fundamental way of life. Therefore, such policies are likely to receive resistance from a wide spectrum of Pakistani society. The crucial question, however, will be whether Pakistan can resist such an imposition given that it is vastly dependent on CPEC and

its loans, and its own policies are failing to control the insurgents.

The economic benefits of CPEC also raise red flags. Despite publicity, the terms of the CPEC loans are still not publicly available and concerns have been raised about Pakistan's ability to repay them. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has stated that CPEC comes with its risks. "Over the longer term, Pakistan will need to manage increasing CPEC-related outflows... CPEC-related outflows could reach about 0.4 percent of GDP per year over the longer run."²⁵ Moreover, the structuring of the projects creates doubts about CPEC's benefits to the Pakistani economy. "All materials (except cement, which is sourced from Pakistan), equipment, and manpower are being brought from China, with little or no participation by the local communities. The Chinese approach of not partnering with local companies will not help Pakistan create job opportunities for millions of its youth."²⁶ As a result, the IMF observes, despite an increase in FDI in the early phase of the project, the rise in imports "will likely

Growing Chinese Investment (2006-16)



Source: China Global Investment Tracker, the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation

offset a significant share of these inflows, such that the current account deficit would widen."²⁷ It is due to such fears of CPEC becoming a debt trap that could potentially compromise Pakistan's sovereignty, that commentators have compared it to the East India Company.²⁸ Such comparisons are not isolated. Chinese infrastructure loans and their impact on the economies, in Sri Lanka²⁹ and in Africa,³⁰ also resemble elements of colonialism.

The inevitable backlash resulting from the imposition of such policies is likely to be wide ranging—from popular protests to an increase in insurgent attacks. The Pakistani people have been sensitive to the treatment of Muslims around the world, and also towards their own sovereignty. Protests have been held against perceived violations of sovereignty even when they have led to the killing of terrorists that have targeted Pakistan—notably the drone strike that killed Hakimullah Mehsud,³¹ and the raid that led to the death of Osama bin Laden.³² Thus, the Pakistani civil society and the state will resist any imposition seen as an infringement on their sovereignty. Further, such Chinese high-handedness could cause alarm among other states that are hosting Chinese infrastructure projects, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This might make it difficult for China to convince other countries to join the BRI project. However, despite the well-publicised economic dependency created by Chinese investments in Africa and Asia, which also act to dilute sovereignty, Chinese investment in the world has only grown from US \$122.65 billion in 2011 to \$269.82 billion in 2016.³³ Furthermore, efforts to combat terrorism in Pakistan are likely to be positively received internationally. Therefore, it is unlikely that Chinese high-handedness will become a

problem for international acceptability of the BRI, and thus will not serve to deter China from attempting to impose its policies in Pakistan.

The extent to which the Pakistani state will be able to contain the reaction needs to be investigated. The Panama leaks and the agitation that followed has led to the resignation of the prime minister, and caused instability for the current government. The security apparatus in Pakistan, which is dominated by the Army, is stretched between fighting an active insurgency in its northwestern border, maintaining internal security, and operating on a hostile border with India. Thus, the Pakistani state will find it difficult and burdensome to control any popular reaction against CPEC.


The disapproval of the Pakistani populace is beginning to show. The population in Gwadar complains about the presence of the Chinese workers and its social effects. There is a "culture clash" that is happening, and the locals are complaining of behaviours that they see as "un-Islamic".³⁴

CONCLUSION

CPEC is China's largest foreign investment project till date. This multibillion-dollar project has created a lot of conversation around its financial viability. However, CPEC is important to China for a variety of reasons that go beyond economics. It has a variety of long-term economic and strategic advantages that range from access to new markets, to an answer to its Malaccan dilemma. However, the project is faced with a variety of threats and challenges and the most potent of those is the assortment of insurgencies that plague Pakistan. Given that Pakistan itself has failed

to control their internal security problem, this burden is now on China if it wants to ensure the success of CPEC. In contrast to Pakistan, China itself has been able to control various armed insurgencies in its own territory, most notably in Xinjiang. They have achieved this with a heavy deployment of armed forces, accompanied by a wider policy of restricting the religious rights of Muslims in Xinjiang.

China might leverage the influence that CPEC affords it, to export this strategy to Pakistan. If China decides to do so, it would not only deploy its own troops, but also impose a wide social policy that would aim to limit the role of Islam in Pakistani society. This could include a crackdown on religious education and madrassas, an attempted marginalisation of Islamist parties and

organisations, reducing the influence of the clergy, and a repeal of religious laws. This would prove difficult, as Islam is an important part of Pakistani society and identity. Moreover, the Islamist parties and the clergy have huge influence in Pakistani society. Islam is also the state religion and is followed by over 95 percent of the population. Thus any attempt to curb the role of Islam in Pakistan, is bound to face stiff resistance. This is likely to pose difficult questions for the Pakistani state as to what limits it places on Chinese influence on its internal matters. Pakistan's desire to reap the economic and strategic benefits of CPEC might come at a cost where it has to compromise on its Islamic identity. What remains to be seen is whether the powerful elements of Pakistani society will allow it. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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