



RCAS Commentary

Gwadar Port Highlights Precarity in Pakistan's Geopolitical Balancing Act

Muneeb Yousuf

Nonresident Fellow, The Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS)

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About RCAS

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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|Web: www.rcas.top

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Eight months after the February 2024 general elections, Pakistan's politics continue to be marred by political, economic and security challenges. The country's most popular politician, Imran Khan, remains in jail, the coalition government lacks legitimacy and the military establishment continues to hold veto power over the government's policies.



▲ Security officials examine at the site of an explosion which occurred near Karachi airport in Karachi on late Oct 6.(AFP).

Pakistan is also facing acute security challenges. Terrorist attacks have increased in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan since October, targeting Chinese nationals working on critical infrastructure projects.

In September 2024, leaked military and diplomatic documents claiming that Pakistan has privately agreed to grant China approval for a military base at the strategic port of Gwadar in Balochistan surfaced. Both Pakistan and China have denied these claims, but the accusation sheds light on Pakistan's internal security problems and its delicate relations with China and the United States.

Pakistan's foreign policy is under significant economic and geopolitical pressure. While Islamabad shares longstanding military and investment ties with Washington, it has also cultivated a strong relationship with Beijing predicated on mutual animosity toward New Delhi.

US–Pakistan relations have deteriorated since the 2020–21 US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The Pakistani government and military's attempts to repair ties with the United States have failed to yield meaningful dividends, such as securing a crucial International Monetary Fund (IMF) package. These diplomatic manoeuvres have visibly frustrated China, which views such overtures as a potential shift in allegiance to Washington.

Pakistan's motivation behind potentially approving a military base would stem from the country's economic and security problems. Reliance on IMF loans to keep the economy afloat, mounting debt repayments and persistent difficulties to raise capital have pushed Pakistan to renegotiate loan terms with China. Unlike previous years when Pakistan extracted strategic rent from the United States which paid for its exports and military modernisation, the country now finds its geopolitical significance substantially diminished.

If Pakistan were to grant a military base to China, it would face a dilemma. Beijing's access to the base could alleviate Pakistan's economic crisis and ensure that a continuous supply of advanced military hardware enters the country. But it would also lead to further deterioration of ties with the United States and affect Pakistan's strategic autonomy.

If a military base were to be approved, internal security challenges would also be exacerbated. Baloch insurgents and other militant groups could be encouraged to increase attacks targeting Chinese nationals and development infrastructure. The Balochistan Liberation Army views the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor as a mechanism which furthers the economic marginalisation of the Baloch community. Baloch insurgents could exploit the situation to strengthen regional sentiments, which have long viewed the Pakistani state as unfairly appropriating mineral and gas reserves.

Rising attacks on Chinese infrastructure projects and workers have prompted Beijing to push for joint military mechanisms with Pakistan to safeguard Chinese citizens and projects in the country. Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan Jiang Zaidong has maintained that security threats are the primary constraint behind the slow progress of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor and has exhorted the Pakistani government to strengthen the security of Chinese personnel, institutions and projects.

But this push is unlikely to lead to a resolution, as there is little clarity on the role of Chinese guards in Pakistan if joint security were to be implemented and whether they would be able to participate in combat operations in case of attack.

There would be a score of foreign policy and internal security implications for Pakistan if the claims made by the Drop Site portal-based on leaked military and diplomatic documents-are accepted at face value. The aim is not to assess the merits of these claims, but to speculate about what implications such developments may have upon Pakistan's relationship with the United States, China and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Given this, it would not be prudent for Pakistan to take sides in the US-China rivalry, which is set to intensify with the re-election of former US president Donald Trump. Islamabad is not a likely priority for the Trump cabinet, yet Washington would not wish for Islamabad to fall into Beijing's lap.

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About Author



Muneeb Yousuf is Nonresident Fellow at Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies(RCAS), Hong Kong. He is currently associated with South Asia Centre, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), New Delhi, India. He submitted his Ph.D. at MMAJ Academy of International Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi, India. He is co-editor of *Kashmir after 2019: Completing the Partition* (SAGE Publishers, 2021). He is also a Deputy editor of *South Asia Research*. His peer-reviewed articles have appeared in *Studia Islamica*, *Journal of Research: The Bede Athenaeum*, *South Asia Journal*, *The Indian Journal of Politics*, *South Asia Research* among others. His critical book reviews have appeared in *Contemporary South Asia*, *India Quarterly: A Journal of International Affairs*, *Strategic Analysis*, *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* among others. Apart from contributing to various journals his work has appeared in reputed media houses such as *Foreign Policy*, *The Telegraph*, *The Diplomat*, *Aljazeera*, *The Caravan*, *The Wire* among others. Email: muneeb155046@st.jmi.ac.in.