



# RCAS Commentary

## **New Gwadar International Airport: Another China-Built White Elephant?**

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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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After several delays in its inauguration, the first flight finally landed at NGIA on January 20, 2025. A domestic ATR 42-500 flight—a small twin-turboprop plane operated by the national carrier, Pakistan International Airlines (PIA)—transported officials without any paying passengers on board. Since the inauguration of NGIA, no international airline other than PIA has expressed interest in launching flights to Gwadar.



▲ This photo taken on Sept 13, 2024 shows a terminal at the New Gwadar International Airport in Gwadar, Pakistan. (Xinhua/Ahmad Kamal).

The NGIA is Pakistan's largest airport by area, covering approximately 4,300 acres (17 sq km). It has a single runway measuring 3,658 m in length and 75 m in width, and its terminal building covers approximately 14,000 sq m. The airport can accommodate 400,000 passengers annually, with the potential for expansion to 1.6 million. This places the NGIA in the 4F category of airports, capable of handling various types of large, narrow-body, and small aircraft.

While this profile is impressive, what is the commercial use of the NGIA in a highly

security-fragile part of Pakistan?

China and Pakistan, which have maintained a strategic partnership for decades, launched the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in April 2015. The CPEC comprises a series of projects focused on energy, infrastructure, investment, and collaboration across various fields. Over the years, China has committed tens of billions of dollars in investment. Among the various projects China has pledged to build, the NGIA was funded entirely through grants.

When the CPEC was planned a decade ago, there was hope that Gwadar would become another “Dubai” or “Shenzhen”, turning Pakistan into a hub for regional connectivity. Based on this assumption, China agreed to provide a generous grant for a new international airport. However, these hopes proved to be miscalculations.

Instead of CPEC and Gwadar Port providing China access to the Indian Ocean and establishing a regional hub, they presented a significant threat to Chinese nationals in Pakistan. Most attacks on Chinese engineers in Pakistan were linked to China’s involvement in Balochistan, particularly in Gwadar.

### **China in the Crossfire**

The conflict in Balochistan, now in its fifth wave, traces back to the 1950s. It is fought between the Pakistan military and intelligence agencies on the one side and Baloch insurgents and political forces on the other. China, which has no concern regarding this insurgency, was caught in the crossfire.

China entered Balochistan to build Gwadar Port from 2002 to 2006. Once the port was completed in 2007, it left the region. The Pakistani authorities leased Gwadar Port to the Port of Singapore Authority (PSA). However, due to a dispute between PSA and the Pakistani authorities, both sides terminated the contract, and Gwadar Port was then leased to China in 2015 for 40 years.

While disgruntled Baloch factions do not hold direct grudges against China, Beijing is viewed as both a supporter of the Pakistani military and an exploiter of Balochistan’s natural resources, making it a target. Furthermore, due to the strategic nature of Sino Pakistani relations, attacking China could swiftly attract international attention, which the Baloch separatists seek. The Chinese have faced more attacks in Pakistan than in any other country.

### **Grievances of Gwadar Residents**

Balochistan’s people have long-standing grievances. Weak state-local connections have further deepened these issues, with development in Gwadar exacerbating tensions. Gwadar is heavily militarised, with police and military checkpoints at every corner, restricting the locals’ movement in their own areas.

Residents lack access to basic necessities such as clean water, healthcare, and education. They feel disconnected from development projects and express concerns over resource exploitation, persistent underdevelopment, and the erosion of their identity. Many fear that the rapid influx of outsiders, including Chinese workers and investors, will displace them from their homeland.

### **Commercial, Security, and Political Challenges**

The viability of NGIA's development can be evaluated from commercial, security, and political standpoints. Gwadar has a population of approximately 85,000, with the nearest major cities, Karachi and Quetta, located over 630 km and 970 km away, respectively. The city lacks a railway network-the most cost-effective means of transporting goods and people – linking it to the rest of the country.

Gwadar currently relies on a single major highway to Karachi and another to Quetta via Turbat. Both highways are heavily burdened by passenger and freight traffic, often exceeding capacity. These highways are not only congested but also susceptible to blockades and terrorist attacks.

On several occasions, the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), a terrorist group fighting the Pakistani military, has blocked roads, targeted individuals from other provinces, and carried out deadly attacks. Moreover, Pakistani expatriates primarily originate from other provinces, particularly those working in the Middle East. The local population hardly requires an international airport for overseas travel. For the outside world, Gwadar offers limited opportunities for commerce, tourism and business.

Perpetual security challenges remain the most severe impediment to Gwadar's progress. The most daunting is the insurgency led by the BLA, which has escalated both the frequency and intensity of its attacks on the military and Chinese entities in Pakistan. It has evolved from isolated strikes to coordinated assaults that undermine the military's capabilities.

In August 2024, while a visiting Chinese general met with Pakistani military leadership, the BLA launched its most audacious, coordinated attacks across multiple cities. A few days before Chinese Premier Li Qiang visited Pakistan in October 2024, the BLA carried out a suicide attack, killing two Chinese nationals. As a result, Premier Li was forced to inaugurate the NGIA virtually from Islamabad, over 1,000 km from Gwadar. The security situation in Gwadar is underscored by China's decision to bypass Gwadar Port to ship goods to Afghanistan, opting for Iran's Bandar Abbas instead. Given Pakistan's persistent security issues, Beijing is avoiding Pakistan and exploring alternatives, such as the Wakhan Corridor.

### **Conclusion**

Gwadar already had an international airport sufficient to meet demand; there was no need to build a new, larger airport in a desolate region. Due to a lack of commercial, tourism, and business opportunities, the NGIA is likely to remain underutilised, much like the Chinese-funded Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport in Sri Lanka.

Without any commercial use, it would be challenging for cash-strapped, technologically backward Pakistan to maintain such a large airport, risking it falling into disrepair. Like Gwadar Port, the NGIA could potentially become another white elephant adding to the woes of China's infrastructural projects in Pakistan.

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## About Author



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