

Interview: Andrew Small on China-Pakistan Ties

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Discussing the regional implications of China's relations with Pakistan.

Andrew Small is an Asia expert at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. His research focuses on U.S.-China relations, Europe-China relations and Chinese policy in South Asia. Author of *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics*, he recently spoke with Muhammad Akbar Notezai about China-Pakistan relations.

What mutual interests do you see between China and Pakistan?

The longest-standing mutual interest for China and Pakistan has been the leverage that the two sides gain in their rivalries with India, which has underpinned Sino-Pakistani security cooperation for decades. Many other things have flowed from that, including the trust that China placed in Pakistan to act as a broker for establishing other critical relationships – most famously with the United States, but also with Saudi Arabia and the Taliban. Technological cooperation – particularly on the military and nuclear side – has also been an important area from which both sides benefited. Mutual diplomatic support and intelligence coordination round out the list. The weakest area, however, has been on the trade and commercial side – the basic deal should be that China benefits from Pakistan's strategic economic geography, including transport links to the Indian Ocean, while Pakistan benefits from Chinese investment. For a whole assortment of reasons that hasn't quite come off. The new China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is the best shot the two sides have at realizing these ambitions, and if they succeed, the security and political aspects of the relationship would also be considerably reinforced.

Is China opposing permanent Security Council membership for India for the sake of Pakistan?

There are areas where China is quite explicit about the fact that it is taking action at the UN on Pakistan's behalf – for instance, in protecting certain Pakistani nationals from sanctions. The UN Security Council calculations are much broader though, taking into account Japan's bid for membership, and the broader strategic trade-offs that would be involved in any UNSC reform – and for which there are certainly obstacles other than China involved.

To what extent has the ETIM (East Turkestan Islamic Movement) influenced relations between China and Pakistan? And has the Zarb-e-Azb operation carried out by Pakistan's military affected the capabilities of the ETIM in Xinjiang region?

There have been some strong statements made by Pakistani officials about Zarb-e-Azb, to the effect that the Uighur militant threat has been eliminated from Pakistan. China is still not completely convinced of that, though since North Waziristan was [the militants'] main base of operations, it will certainly have had a serious impact – and may well have displaced most of them into Afghanistan instead. The operation has also assuaged some of Beijing's concerns about the willingness of the Pakistani army to take serious action against Uighur safe havens, which had increasingly become a bone of contention between the two sides, albeit rarely in public. China still has its concerns but less so than two or three years ago.

Can China play a critical role in reconciliation in Afghanistan?

Its good relationship with all parties to the conflict, and its special relationship with Pakistan, means that China has been uniquely placed to play an important role in Afghanistan's political reconciliation process, and the fact that talks even started owed a fair bit to Beijing's involvement. China certainly exerted pressure on both Pakistan and the Taliban directly to get the process underway, which they duly started in Murree in July. The confirmation of Mullah Omar's death, and the tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan over the Taliban's escalating activities have put this on ice though. There is no doubt that Kabul was hoping for more decisive pressure from China, but Beijing has instead been willing to give Pakistan the space to consolidate the Taliban's leadership under Mullah Mansour. That won't last indefinitely though, and they will still expect talks to resume over the course of the coming year.

How do you see security situation in Balochistan affecting the Gwadar Port project?

The range and scale of investments involved in the corridor means that even if some of the projects don't take off for security-related reasons, there are plenty of others that still can. Nonetheless, Gwadar, and its connections through Balochistan, are certainly the biggest challenge for CPEC. While there are all sorts of energy-related projects, road-upgrades, and so on elsewhere in the country that can succeed even if the problems there aren't overcome, the biggest connectivity projects are still premised on Gwadar becoming a working commercial port, which is still some way from becoming the case. For China, the security question is not simply about specific projects either. The broader security context in the region matters to Beijing too, as China's objective is to develop a whole network of economic linkages, which is as much affected by spillover and civil war in Afghanistan as it is by direct threats in Pakistan. China is willing to live with some security problems though – it sees its investments as playing a long-term stabilizing role but understands that in the short-term, that will not be pain-free.

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