

# A Costly Corridor

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## How China and Pakistan Could Remake Asia

As China expands its regional influence, its relationship with Pakistan [1] will be increasingly important. Last April, Chinese President Xi Jinping [2] and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif [3] signed a series of agreements cementing their partnership, including final plans for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, an economic initiative to connect the two countries through a web of railways, roads, pipelines, and other development projects. Once built, the nearly 2,000-mile-long corridor will shorten China's route to the Middle East by about 7,500 miles. No wonder China has invested \$46 billion in the project.

Yet for all its potential benefits, the corridor comes with political risks. It will pass through three restive regions: Kashmir [4] in India and Pakistan, Xinjiang in China, and Baluchistan in Pakistan. China and Pakistan's economic relationship will affect all three areas, likely for ill.

## A NEW POWER BALANCE

During the last UN Sustainable Development Summit, in September, Sharif said of the corridor, "It will bring huge economic and development benefits not just to our two countries but the entire region and beyond... This development strategy and framework offers new opportunity for Asia's transformation and prosperity."

Whether or not the corridor lives up to all those promises, it will certainly bring China and Pakistan closer together. Andrew Small, the author of *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics* [5], argues that the success of the corridor "would highlight and deepen the uniquely close friendship between China and Pakistan." The corridor will also strengthen China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative, intended to connect infrastructure and trade networks throughout Eurasia and help China spread its influence from its western borders to the Middle East.

Unsurprisingly, the corridor has been met with resistance, most notably from India [6]. During his visit to China in May, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi called the initiative "unacceptable." [7] New Delhi has also been taken aback by China and Pakistan's joint development of a naval base at Gwadar Port in Baluchistan because it sees the port as evidence of a ploy to encircle India by sea [8].

But most of all, New Delhi resents that parts of the new corridor will pass through contested regions of Kashmir. As Phunchok Stobdan, a former Indian ambassador to Kyrgyzstan, told me, "India's concerns are related to sensitivity of sovereignty. I don't think India is looking at the corridor from an economic perspective. It has taken a principled stand against China's activities in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir as a matter of concern for India."

From Pakistan's point of view, according to Mohammad Sadiq, secretary of Pakistan's National Security Division, India is attempting to sabotage the project by planning to deny China free waters through the Strait of Malacca. Yet India has good reason to voice concern. China has pursued economic and military

ties with all of India's neighbors, including Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar (also called Burma), Nepal, and Sri Lanka, which many Indian analysts see as part of a Chinese strategy to contain India. "China has long had the capacity to operate as an important strategic actor in what India perceives to be its backyard in South Asia," Small told me. "China is still ahead—as a far larger economy and military power—but the tendency is towards a growing mutual capacity to influence the other side's strategic environment."

## THE KASHMIR QUESTION

As the Sino-Pakistani relationship strengthens, perhaps the biggest loser will be Kashmir. Kashmiris want freedom from India and Pakistan, but both India and Pakistan have refused to relinquish control (China also occupies a part of the region). Now China's latest economic incursions leave the people of Kashmir to deal with the fallout.

The corridor will pass through the volatile Pakistani-controlled area of Gilgit-Baltistan. The resulting economic investment in the area could further strengthen Pakistan's control over it. And, in fact, in January, just before the signing of the deal with China, the Pakistani Ministry of Kashmir Affairs sent a formal proposal to the Pakistani government to make the area officially part of Pakistan.

Dibyesh Anand, head of the Department of Politics and International Relations at Westminster University, told me the corridor poses a challenge to Kashmiri nationalists: "On the ground, such developments will imply that the status quo of the territory being divided between two colonizing nation-states of India and Pakistan will become permanent."

Kashmiris will not likely benefit from the corridor. As with most Chinese overseas projects, Chinese workers will be primarily responsible for building the corridor, with few new employment opportunities for locals. And many oppose closer ties with Pakistan. The Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front, a political group that supports Kashmiri independence, strongly opposes the merger.

With that in mind, in August, Manzoor Parwana, chairman of the Gilgit Baltistan United Movement, voiced his opposition to the corridor, saying in a statement, "The people of Gilgit-Baltistan are being exploited socially and geographically."

The corridor is changing the political demography of Kashmir. The economic occupation of Kashmir by China, India, and Pakistan has decreased the possibility of any sustainable on-the-ground solution regarding the future of the region. Under Modi, a Hindu nationalist, India has taken a tough stand against Pakistan over the Kashmir dispute, halting any kind of dialogue and continuing to impose inhumane restrictions via its armed forces. And now Kashmir has become even more important as part of the economic battle between China, India, and Pakistan.

The Kashmiris will not be the only victims of the Sino-Pakistani relationship. The Uighurs [9], a Muslim population in China's far west, will also suffer. In the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, the Uighurs have been demanding independence from China, not more interconnectedness. The region's Kashgar city is the main point of the corridor in China. The city will have several connecting ports, including services for bonded warehousing, logistics, manufacturing, customs clearance, air freight, and exhibition halls.

In November, the World Uyghur Congress and the Uyghur Human Rights Project submitted a lengthy report to the UN accusing China of violating Uighur rights. The report highlighted many grievances, including the forced extradition of Uighurs from countries that have diplomatic and economic ties with China, including Cambodia, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan. More than 450 people were killed in the Xinjiang region last year, with Uighurs accounting for three times as many deaths as ethnic Han Chinese [10].

Seeking to strengthen its relationship with China, Pakistan has joined in against the Uighurs. Some 3,000 Uighur families live in Pakistan, primarily in the cities of Gilgit, Islamabad, Karachi, and Rawalpindi, according to a Radio Free Asia report. Further, Kaiser OzHun, former president of the International PEN Uyghur Center in Sweden, told me that many Uighurs flee to Pakistan in the hope that they will be welcomed in a Muslim country. Not so. During a visit to Beijing in September, Pakistani President Mamnoon Hussain told Xi that a recent Pakistani antiterrorism operation, code-named Zarb-e-Azb, had successfully eradicated all members of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, an Uighur militant group, from Pakistan. China and Pakistan have vowed to support each other “with great zeal.”

Pakistani intelligence has also been continuously providing support to China. In 2009, after an attack in Kashgar city, Pakistan extended its “full cooperation and support” to China against Uighur militants. Pakistan’s Foreign Office spokesperson Tehmina Janjua said that the country is confident that the patriotic people of Xinjiang autonomous region and the Chinese government “will succeed in frustrating evil designs of the terrorists, extremists, and separatists, who constitute an evil force.”

## A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

Meanwhile, turmoil in Baluchistan [11] poses a major threat to the corridor. During the construction of a road in Baluchistan that will be part of the corridor, armed rebels killed 25 workers in roughly 200 attacks.

The roots of the violence go back to the colonial era. Until 1947, Baluchistan was composed of four princely states: Kalat, Kharan, Las Bela, and Makran. During the partition of India, the British offered the princely states a choice: join India or Pakistan. Kharan, Las Bela, and Makran chose to join Pakistan, but Kalat went for a third option—independence. This was unacceptable to Pakistan, and in April 1948, the newly formed country deployed an army to Kalat, and the province acceded. Yet Baluchistan continues to be highly volatile, home to many violent nationalist insurgencies.

To this day, whenever Pakistan builds infrastructure with the United States or China, it is seen as taking away resources from Baluchistan without the Baluchi having a say in the matter. Qalandar Memon, editor of the *Naked Punch Review*, told me, Baluchi “have resisted this. They have attacked Chinese workers, and they have attacked American oil workers in the 1970s to stop drilling and exploration. [Baluchi] argue that once they are a sovereign nation, they will be able to decide [for themselves] how to use the land.”

Still, the construction of the corridor continues. In November 2015, the Pakistani government allotted China 923 hectares of tax-exempt land [12] on a 43-year lease to develop the deep-sea port of Gwadar. China is also building Gwadar Airport, which will be Pakistan’s largest. The airport will spread over 4,000 acres and is expected to be complete within the next three years.

## WHAT REMAINS TO BE SEEN

The Sino-Pakistani relationship has already begun to shift power dynamics in the region. From the Pakistani perspective, the corridor is a sign of progress after decades of turmoil. Pakistani Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed said that the corridor brings “a glimmer of hope that the region is being stabilized and that Pakistan has made progress in the campaign against terrorism and extremism, common enemies of both China and Pakistan.”

Yet Stobdan, the former Indian ambassador, is not optimistic. “The overall success of the corridor will depend on the dynamics within Pakistan,” he said. “[But] China has been investing in Pakistan for decades, and the trade between the two is still struggling at \$8 billion to \$9 billion annually.” It remains to be seen who is right. But if the corridor is a success, China will continue to rise, burying the political aspirations of millions of people under its sand and bricks.

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