

How Does China Manage Political Conflict Abroad? Insights from South Asia

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How Does China Manage Political Conflict Abroad? Insights from South Asia

China's single largest investment in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—China's strategy for expanding its trade and investment footprint—is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), intended to connect China's Xinjiang region with Pakistan's Gwadar port. However, Beijing's investment goals for CPEC have faced an important challenge from the rising threat of terrorism and insurgency in areas of Pakistan with a heavy CPEC footprint. This has generated new pressures on Islamabad, concerns in Beijing, and the possibility of a joint security mechanism aimed at protecting CPEC-related projects. Despite China's repeated emphasis on not interfering in the internal affairs of other countries, Pakistan is an important example of how China's economic and political investments in foreign states can enmesh it in those countries' complex domestic politics.

In this article, we explore how domestic conflicts and threats faced by Chinese partners can complicate China's influence abroad and create new forms of Chinese security partnership, potentially even directly involving Beijing in foreign conflicts. We examine how China is navigating intense civil conflicts in Pakistan and, more briefly, Myanmar to identify the toolkit of strategies that China is deploying or proposing in response to political instability and violence in these partner states. We then consider broader implications for China's

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expanding international footprint. This study adds to important recent research on Chinese approaches to internal security in foreign states.¹

Our findings present a nuanced picture. First, Chinese influence in these countries' politics is real and important; China is seen as a partner whose needs require attention and who has substantial resources to bring to bear. However, local conflicts present obstacles to achieving China's goals because violence can undermine development, infrastructure projects, and the stability of partner governments. The prospect of becoming more embedded in these wars is not desirable for Beijing, but is hard to avoid. Second, insurgent groups and armed militias can be serious political players whose interests must be accounted for in Chinese overseas strategy. In both Pakistan and Myanmar, a central

We are seeing new forms of Chinese involvement in internal security issues abroad

problem for China and its government partners is that there is no state monopoly on violence in strategically crucial areas. In some cases, these groups are actively hostile to China, while in others they are friendly or neutral; in either case, they still need to be dealt with by Beijing. Third, in the face of these challenges, we are seeing new forms of Chinese involvement in internal security issues abroad, ranging from pressure for joint security mechanisms with host governments to the growth of Chinese-owned private secur-

ity firms to direct engagements with non-state armed groups via mediation and negotiation. This toolkit of responses provides insight into how Beijing will seek to manage future cases of conflict within its overseas partners.

We begin with a study of trends in violence in Pakistan to show how growing insurgency has directly impacted the security of CPEC areas. We then explore the Chinese response, which has been to push for a joint security mechanism that would more directly involve China in Pakistani internal security. Next, we more briefly explore the case of Myanmar to identify China's response to a major civil war in which violence has made various Chinese-linked projects either more difficult or currently unworkable. There, China has adopted two strategies. First, it has been directly involved in negotiating with and/or coercing key insurgent groups in the country's north, trying to balance various interests in a context where non-state armed groups control large swathes of territory. Second, it has pushed for a recent legal change that opens space for Chinese-linked private security companies to operate in Myanmar.² Finally, we conclude with implications. Economics are embedded in politics, and local political violence as well as instability around Chinese investments, personnel, and infrastructure is drawing China more deeply into its partners' political arenas. The spread of

Chinese influence into zones of conflict is double-edged, as it helps Beijing pursue new opportunities but also exposes it to risks of entrapment as money and infrastructure become vulnerable to armed groups and shifting political tides.

Chinese Interests Under Fire in Pakistan

Since CPEC was launched in 2015, thousands of Chinese nationals have traveled to Pakistan to work on projects. According to Pakistan's National Counterterrorism Authority (NACTA), as of December 2024, there were approximately 20,000 Chinese nationals living and working in Pakistan, including those involved in CPEC projects. Starting in 2016, a significant number of Chinese nationals and CPEC projects have been targeted in terrorist attacks, coinciding with the rising threat of terrorism in Pakistan. Since 2021, twenty Chinese citizens have been killed and thirty-four injured in terrorism-related incidents.³

However, Pakistan has explicitly pushed back on the notion that CPEC is threatened by political violence and terrorism, with officials asserting that “there has been no direct terrorist attack on CPEC projects so far,” arguing that the majority of the terrorist attacks targeted non-CPEC projects and Chinese citizens traveling to different parts of the country.⁴ Yet, China has become visibly frustrated by political violence and Pakistan's failure to protect Chinese nationals, as expressed in a rare public criticism by the Chinese ambassador to Pakistan, Jiang Zaidong, after a suicide attack killed two Chinese officials in Karachi in November 2024. He called the attacks on Chinese nationals “unacceptable,” describing them as the biggest challenge to CPEC in Pakistan.⁵

China has become visibly frustrated by Pakistan's failure to protect Chinese nationals

What should we make of these conflicting narratives? To illustrate the nature of this challenge to Chinese interests, we map out the key actors targeting CPEC and the Pakistani state and measure trends in targeting with a new dataset that measures not only direct militant and terrorist attacks on Chinese nationals, but also on CPEC-related infrastructure across the country. Attacks on the broader infrastructure that underpins CPEC have seen dramatic increases in recent years, especially in 2024 and into 2025 and 2026. The primary insurgents are the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA)—an ethno-separatist group in the vast, resource-rich province of Balochistan which borders Iran and Afghanistan—and the jihadist militant organization Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which has been at war with the Pakistani state for nearly two decades. The overall security environment within which CPEC is embedded has precipitously deteriorated.

Moreover, armed groups have explicitly branded China as an enemy and made disrupting CPEC a key goal. As we will see, this stands in contrast to Myanmar, where insurgent groups either work with China or try to ignore it, rather than explicitly targeting China-related projects and infrastructure.

We gathered data on terrorist attacks on Chinese nationals and CPEC infrastructure to understand the major trends of anti-China/CPEC terrorism in Pakistan. We use numerous open-source platforms, such as the South Asia Terrorism Portal, The Balochistan Post, Dawn, and other news reports. These data are not exhaustive—some incidents may not have been reported or documented—but we seek to use as many sources as possible to identify broad trends.

We include attacks on Chinese or Pakistani engineers and workers, CPEC-related infrastructure such as major CPEC highways, or machinery linked to CPEC projects as an attack on CPEC. To make sense of the broader trends, the attacks on CPEC are grouped into two broad categories. The first are direct attacks that targeted or were intended to target Chinese nationals. The second category, mostly excluded in the traditional literature and in official government statements, comprises attacks that did not target Chinese nationals but occurred around CPEC projects and related infrastructure. We refer to these as infrastructure attacks.

Direct Attacks

Since 2016, there have been at least twenty-six direct terrorist attacks carried out against Chinese nationals in Pakistan, resulting in twenty-seven Chinese fatalities. Among these attacks, at least eleven targeted Chinese engineers or officials involved in CPEC projects, killing more than eighteen Chinese personnel. The latest such fatal attack on personnel was carried out in November 2024 outside the Jinnah International Airport in Karachi, which killed two Chinese staff members of the Port Qasim Electric Power Company Limited.⁶ Most of these attacks were carried out in the provinces of Balochistan, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Some of the fatal attacks on Chinese nationals were driven by personal disputes, with no connection to terrorism.

There have also been direct attacks on Chinese interests and infrastructure critical to CPEC that did not kill Chinese personnel. In March 2024, insurgents targeted the Gwadar Port Authority and Turbat Naval Base (PNS Siddique), Pakistan's second-largest naval air station, near the China-run Gwadar Port, both of which are key components of CPEC. The Gwadar Port Authority houses Chinese workers and oversees the development of the Gwadar Deep Water Port. The Naval Base, which has been operational since 2017, was built as a vital link for air transportation to support CPEC projects.⁷ In some cases, while the attacks did not harm Chinese nationals, they targeted them. For

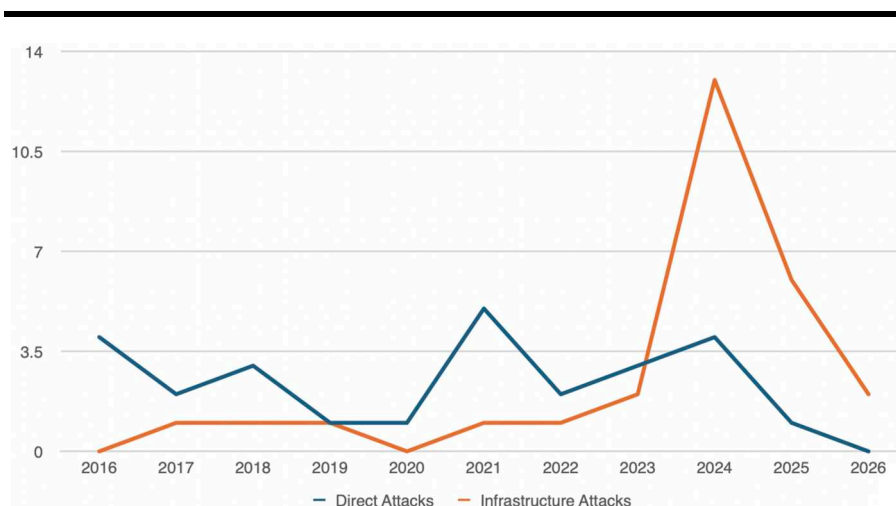
example, the TTP claimed that a suicide attack on the Serena Hotel in Quetta in 2021 targeted Pakistani police officers; however, it was later revealed that the Chinese ambassador to Pakistan, Nong Rong, who was visiting Quetta but was not in the hotel at the time of the attack, was the intended target.⁸ In another attack in 2019 on the Pearl Continental Hotel in Gwadar, which is frequently used by Chinese delegations, the ethnic separatist BLA claimed to have targeted Chinese and Pakistani officials and vowed to carry out more attacks.⁹

CPEC Infrastructure Attacks

In the second category of attacks, groups such as the BLA have targeted CPEC-related infrastructure or security forces guarding CPEC projects. In some cases, the attacks targeted Pakistani nationals, but the motivation behind the attacks was CPEC projects and Chinese presence in Balochistan. For instance, in October 2018, five Pakistani construction workers involved in a CPEC-related private housing scheme were shot dead near Ganz, 15 kilometers west of Jiwani town in Gwadar district.¹⁰ The BLA has frequently targeted construction machinery working on CPEC roads, as well as security forces guarding those projects. This category of attacks includes major terrorist attacks that occurred in proximity to the CPEC projects, which is significant as it reflects the militants' growing freedom of action in areas critical to CPEC.

Compared to the direct attacks on Chinese nationals and projects, the second category of attacks—which target CPEC-related infrastructure including major highways, construction machinery, and forces guarding these projects—are more common. For instance, in 2024 alone, at least thirteen such attacks were reported, while five occurred only in the first three months of 2025. [Figure 1](#) provides data on trends through July 2026. We see a major spike in infrastructure attacks in 2024, with the trend continuing into 2026. (Note that the 2026 data only extends to July, so the first half of 2026 alone has seen as many attacks as all of 2023.) Most attacks are concentrated in southwest Balochistan, though some attacks targeted Chinese nationals in Karachi, the country's main economic hub and port city.

The BLA's occasionally successful attempts to control major highways, erect roadblocks, and inspect public vehicles along CPEC routes show the group's ability to control vital highways. There have been numerous incidents where BLA fighters have blocked highways, including in critical areas such as in Gwadar, stopped passenger buses and trailers, and selectively identified and killed Punjabi workers based on their ethnicity.¹¹ In 2025 and 2026, the insurgents shifted toward launching larger and coordinated attacks targeting transport corridors, civilian infrastructure, and security forces. While direct attacks on Chinese nationals have declined, attacks on infrastructure have seen a consistent rise.

Figure I. Categories of Attacks, May 2016-July 2026

All of these attacks, whether directly attacking Chinese targets or targeting CPEC projects in their proximity, have affected the operations of CPEC projects. For example, after five Chinese engineers were killed in a suicide attack in Shangla, China's Power Construction Corporation suspended work on the 1530 MW Tarbela 5th Extension Hydropower project, and the Chinese manager laid off 2,000 Pakistani workers due to security reasons.¹² Similarly, operations at the Chinese-funded Gwadar International Airport were delayed in 2024 due to a series of attacks in August as part of the BLA's so-called "Operation Herof," though none of the attacks targeted Chinese nationals.

Who Is Attacking China in Pakistan?

The primary security threat to Chinese nationals and CPEC projects comes from ethno-nationalist militant groups in Balochistan and Sindh provinces who accuse China and the Pakistani government of exploiting their resources without benefiting the indigenous population. Apart from the ethno-nationalist groups, jihadists such as Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Islamic State of Khurasan Province (IS-KP) have their own sets of motivations for targeting Chinese nationals.

The primary threat to China in this area comes from ethno-nationalist militant groups

Ethno-Nationalist Groups in Balochistan and Sindh

Ethno-nationalist groups claim to fight on behalf of their ethnic communities, arguing that their territorial and political rights have been violated by the Pakistani state. The Baloch insurgency stems from long-standing grievances over state exploitation, which have been exacerbated by Pakistan's poor handling of the Baloch insurgency. That insurgency, which was weakened by 2020 by numerous counterinsurgency operations, has rebounded since 2021 with a dramatic increase in attacks on Chinese and Pakistani interests in Balochistan. In 2024 data, the BLA emerged as the second-largest terrorist group targeting Pakistani interests, next only to the TTP.¹³ Islamabad has relied on a mix of military operations and intelligence crackdowns, forcibly disappearing Baloch youth as suspected militants, sometimes for years, without a trial, further aggravating Baloch grievances voiced by rights groups such as the Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC). Consequently, over time, the insurgency has shifted toward maximalist demands, from seeking autonomy to demanding complete independence from the Pakistani state. It is now gaining new strength with the formation of alliances among Baloch groups.¹⁴

To separatist groups, China stands on the side of the state, making Chinese nationals and projects seen as a legitimate target. Researchers Abdul Basit and Rafello Pantucci argue that “Sindhi and Baloch ethnoseparatist groups perceive China as a neocolonial power usurping their resources and partnering with their primary adversary: the Pakistani state.”¹⁵ For instance, after claiming responsibility for the attack on Chinese nationals in Karachi in November 2024, the BLA released a video message of the *Fidayeen* (self-sacrificer), Fahad Baloch, warning China to cease all “exploitative projects” in Balochistan, and stating that the BLA is prepared to strike Chinese interests “anytime and anywhere.”¹⁶ Describing CPEC as a “heinous conspiracy to further enslave the Baloch,” BLA spokesperson Jeeyand Baloch warned that “we will target all Chinese economic interests, investments, and military installations, knowing that there will be no safe haven for them on Balochistan soil.”¹⁷

In August 2024, the BLA released a video claiming responsibility for an attack on a Chinese convoy, and announced that the Majeed Brigade, an elite BLA formation, had created a special unit to target Chinese officials and CPEC installations. While addressing Chinese President Xi Jinping, the BLA spokesperson warned China to quit Balochistan or face consequences.¹⁸ Imam Shambay, leader of a small group, the Baloch National Army (BNA), who was later arrested in 2023, vowed that “armed struggle against Chinese investments in Balochistan will continue until Beijing realizes that these investments are not secure.”¹⁹

Similar sentiments, albeit with a more nuanced tone, are expressed even by mainstream Baloch politicians who believe that Chinese investments are not benefiting the Baloch people.²⁰ Mahrang Baloch, a Baloch rights activist and

leader of BYC, believes that “China wants to take control of Gwadar at any cost, and the decision-makers in Islamabad and Rawalpindi are stakeholders in Chinese investment.”²¹ The unprecedented security arrangements for Chinese workers resulting from these attacks further fuel resentment among residents, especially in areas around CPEC projects such as Gwadar. Additionally, many in the Baloch diaspora also criticize Chinese investment under CPEC and do not see it as beneficial for the Baloch population.²²

Baloch insurgent groups have also inspired ethno-nationalist Sindhi factions in Sindh province, such as the Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army (SRA), which has also targeted Chinese nationals in Karachi. In 2016, a year after CPEC was launched, the SRA attacked a Chinese engineer and left a note in the Sindhi language, stating that “as a rising imperialist power and supporter of Pakistan’s cause we consider China equivalent to Punjab ... we will oppose every anti-Sindh project including the China-Pakistan economic corridor.”²³ In September 2022, the SRA claimed responsibility for a gun attack on Chinese nationals in Karachi and warned Beijing to stop its “exploitative projects on our homeland and leave immediately.”²⁴ These groups have weaker capabilities, but remain a source of threat to Chinese nationals and CPEC projects by carrying out attacks in Sindh.

The Jihadist Threat

Jihadist groups are mainly influenced by the narrative of Beijing’s alleged persecution of the Uyghur Muslim community in China’s Xinjiang region. Abu Zar al-Burmi, a prominent Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) mufti and a close associate of the Pakistani Taliban, has viewed China as a neo-colonial power since 2015, saying that “Mujahideen should know that the coming enemy of the ummah is China, which is developing its weapons day after day to fight the Muslims.”²⁵ He warned that after the “Taliban’s victory in Afghanistan ... our next target will be China.”²⁶ The ISKP has been publishing propaganda articles condemning China’s mistreatment of Uyghurs and criticizing the Afghan Taliban for developing relations with China.²⁷ Pakistan, which shares a direct border with Xinjiang, has defended China’s alleged mistreatment of Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, adding to the anger against the Pakistani state, and attacks against CPEC present an opportunity for the militant groups to target the interests of both China and Pakistan.²⁸ China’s growing global stature and CPEC as the flagship project of the BRI provide added incentives, as attacks against these projects draw greater attention toward the causes of these terrorist groups.

About half of the attacks on Chinese nationals in Pakistan have been carried out by Baloch separatists. Some lethal attacks, such as the July 2021 attack in

Dasu that killed nine Chinese nationals working on a hydropower plant, were traced to the TTP,²⁹ though the group denied responsibility for the attack. The TTP has the incentive of plausible deniability, as the Taliban government in Afghanistan—close patrons of the TTP—are developing relations with China.³⁰ When Pakistan presented the findings of an investigation to the Afghan authorities, implicating the TTP in the March 26, 2024 attack on Chinese engineers, the Taliban government rejected it, accusing Pakistan of sowing distrust between Afghanistan and China.³¹

About half of the attacks on Chinese nationals in Pakistan have been by Baloch separatists

However, even if they have executed fewer attacks than Baloch insurgents, the TTP continue to threaten CPEC projects. In November 2023, the Gandapur faction of the TTP issued a threat warning that they would target the “machinery and staff” working on CPEC unless a 5 percent tax was paid to the militant group.³² The TTP is also responsible for a deadly attack on July 6, 2026, which killed at least twenty-seven police personnel guarding the Mangi Dam in Balochistan’s Ziarat district.³³ The TTP’s growing focus on Balochistan—though not its major theater of operations—signals the rise of a potentially severe security threat in a province that hosts vital Chinese interests and CPEC projects.³⁴ However, Pakistan remains the primary target of the TTP and operations in Balochistan are an effort to disrupt Islamabad’s economic lifeline. Unlike in the case of ethno-nationalist groups, there is no evidence to establish that the TTP has launched a concerted effort at specifically targeting Chinese interests in the country.

Chinese Reactions in Pakistan

China has put growing pressure on Pakistan to deal with these threats through pointed public statements and proposals for a joint security mechanism that would more directly involve China in Pakistani internal security including joint training, intelligence-sharing, and working groups.³⁵ It has also tried to directly engage in outreach with local political actors in Balochistan.

Chinese public expressions of concern have grown as the security situation has deteriorated and President Xi Jinping has faced pressure at home for failing to protect Chinese workers abroad.³⁶ A *Guardian* article in 2025 quoted Wang Shengjie, China’s political secretary to Pakistan, who expressed dissatisfaction over Islamabad’s counterterrorism strategy, stating that “if the security is not improved, who would come and work in this environment? There is hatred against the Chinese in Gwadar and Balochistan.”³⁷ Though the Chinese embassy later disavowed these comments, this has been a theme in recent

Chinese statements. For instance, after an attack in November 2024 that killed two Chinese officials in Karachi, China unusually publicly criticized Pakistan's failure in protecting Chinese nationals. The Chinese ambassador to Pakistan, at an event with Pakistan's foreign minister and Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar, criticized continued attacks on Chinese nationals as "unacceptable" and a challenge to CPEC projects.³⁸ Pakistan's foreign office expressed surprise over the statement, saying that "the statement of the Chinese ambassador is perplexing and is not reflective of the diplomatic traditions between Pakistan and China."³⁹ After a slightly turbulent patch, China reiterated its desire to "foil any attempt" to damage ties,⁴⁰ and the two countries kicked off their first counter-terrorism exercise in five years in November-December 2024.⁴¹

China has also attempted alternative measures to address domestic resistance to Chinese projects in Balochistan. Departing from its traditional principle of non-interference, China has at times attempted to engage Baloch politicians directly, bypassing the Pakistani authorities.⁴² In 2018, the *Financial Times* reported that China was even talking to Baloch separatist leaders in exile to end insurgency in Balochistan and secure CPEC,⁴³ although these efforts were unsuccessful.⁴⁴ China has denied these reports.⁴⁵ Chinese enterprises and workers working on CPEC projects donated money and humanitarian aid to flood victims in Balochistan in 2022, and the Chinese government is offering a greater number of scholarships to Baloch students.⁴⁶ In November 2024, China hosted a nine-member delegation comprising Baloch tribal elders, mostly from Turbat and Gwadar, which according to the Chinese ambassador was aimed at enhancing "correct understanding of China" among the people of Balochistan.⁴⁷

China's pressure has led to renewed efforts to negotiate a joint security mechanism with Pakistan

Finally, China's pressure has led to renewed efforts to negotiate a joint security mechanism to protect Chinese nationals, which Pakistan has repeatedly rejected as a possibility.⁴⁸ After China's response to the November 2024 attack in Karachi, Pakistan's National Assembly Standing Committee on Planning and Development was informed by the Pakistani government that the Chinese proposal for a joint security mechanism was under consideration.⁴⁹ In March 2025, Pakistani Ambassador to China Khalil Hashmi stated that

security talks between China and Pakistan to protect Chinese nationals are a work in progress.⁵⁰ This would be a major escalation of Chinese presence and operations in Pakistan.

Chinese pressure was confirmed by Mushahid Hussain Sayyed, former chairman of the Senate Standing Committee on Defense and current chairman of

the China-Pakistan Institute, who after his visit to Beijing stated that China is “disappointed” by Pakistan and that additional investment is on hold until the security situation improves for the Chinese nationals in the country.⁵¹ Pakistan has already established a Special Security Division (SSD) comprising 9,000 Pakistan Army troops and 6,000 paramilitary personal to protect Chinese citizens and infrastructure. In January 2026, Pakistan announced the creation of an additional Special Protection Unit exclusively for protecting Chinese citizens in the country.⁵² If these measures do not succeed, it is likely that China will push for a greater, even more direct role in securing Chinese citizens and projects.⁵³

The CPEC experience reveals how vulnerable Chinese investments, workers, and projects can be to domestic conflict within partner states. It remains to be seen what kind of joint security mechanisms might emerge in Pakistan, but the growing pressure on Islamabad shows just how problematic the violence has become, while Chinese outreach to local politicians shows a willingness to explore other strategies as well. Ethno-nationalist and jihadist conflicts are not easy to resolve, and China has little distinctive influence over the armed groups in Balochistan and elsewhere in Pakistan. These are not problems like infrastructure construction or financing; they cut to the core of Pakistan’s political system, often representing decades of past conflict. Rather than China being able to simply use its economic resources to overcome these challenges, Beijing now instead risks becoming enmeshed in an incredibly complicated conflict.

Conflict and Chinese Investment in Myanmar

Pakistan is not the only example of China’s goals being embedded in a third-party state’s internal conflict. In Myanmar, China has long sought to pursue infrastructure projects. Since 2017-2018, this has included the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), a proposed string of Chinese investments and projects in the country.⁵⁴ The escalation of civil war since the Myanmar military’s February 2021 coup, however, has posed new challenges to Chinese goals. Direct attacks on CMEC have been relatively rare, but the overall context has seen a dramatic increase in violence and instability. The coup and renewed war dramatically changed Myanmar’s landscape, with active warfare in key areas intended for CMEC activities.

China has also been forced to engage with Myanmar’s complicated and violent politics

While China retains a great deal of influence in Myanmar, it now must navigate both an embattled regime and various powerful local armed actors in ways

that make infrastructure development much more difficult than before 2021. Beijing has sought to manage this instability in three ways. First, it has sought to support the military government, most recently in providing diplomatic cover for sham elections in late 2025 and early 2026.⁵⁵ As in Pakistan, China seeks to keep the regime stable, though Beijing was not pleased with the 2021 coup and renewed descent into extended war.

Second, China has tried to work with and put pressure on various non-state armed actors, especially those along its border with Myanmar. It supported a set of rebel offensives in 2023-24 that eliminated “scam centers” in northern Myanmar targeting Chinese citizens. These scam centers had defrauded large numbers of Chinese and were sites of forced human trafficking.⁵⁶ In the last eighteen months, however, China began putting direct pressure on some of these groups to withdraw from strategic locations—for instance, it contributed to the withdrawal of a substantial ethnic armed group, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance’s (MNDAA), from Lashio in April 2025—and to enter into ceasefires with the Myanmar government.⁵⁷ Groups along the Chinese border are not Chinese proxies, but they are clearly vulnerable to Chinese influence.⁵⁸

Other groups engage with China but are much less exposed to Chinese coercion. Whether dealing with major ethnic insurgents like the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), the Arakan Army (AA), and the Karen National Union (KNU), or the various local, primarily ethnic majority-Bamar groups that make up the People’s Defence Forces (PDF), among others, China is forced “to hedge its bets in a situation whose dynamics it cannot control.”⁵⁹ Both China and India have been forced to talk to a variety of armed groups, including those fiercely opposed to the military government that both India and China support. Indeed, in Rakhine state in southwestern Myanmar, the insurgent Arakan Army has advanced toward sites crucial to Indian and Chinese development plans in Myanmar.⁶⁰ Elsewhere, back-and-forth battles rage between armed groups and the Myanmar military, including regions of China’s current and planned future areas of investment.⁶¹

In a third, newer strategy, China has begun to explore establishing a local security presence as a way of protecting its goals in Myanmar.⁶² The Myanmar government has legalized foreign-owned private security firms to operate in Myanmar, which may lead to their use for protecting Chinese infrastructure projects.⁶³ Analysts note that this will be helpful to the regime: “While it is unclear what the rules of engagement will be, or whether PMC [private military company] forces can provide anything other than static defense, this is a huge assistance to the resource-stretched SAC [State Administration Council, the title of the 2021-25 junta], which can deploy needed manpower elsewhere.”⁶⁴ China and Myanmar researcher Amara Thiha argues that “this model has gained traction,

particularly around Chinese-backed infrastructure projects where private security supports Beijing's strategic goals without formal military deployment."⁶⁵

We have seen a possible preview of what could unfold in Myanmar in Central Asia, where Chinese private security firms have been deployed to protect Chinese interests. As Chinese foreign policy expert Odil Gafarov argues, since "China's noninterference policy restricts Beijing's options for intervening in the domestic affairs of foreign states or deploying conventional troops ... these entities potentially present an attractive instrument for advancing Beijing's geopolitical agenda."⁶⁶ The use of private security in Myanmar would be a creative solution for Beijing's desire to secure Chinese investment without having to put boots on the ground, which would be unpopular in Myanmar and undesirable for China. Unlike in Pakistan, direct attacks on China and Chinese-linked economic activities are uncommon, reducing the level of security needed for protection. Nevertheless, a number of these projects exist in areas of insurgent group influence or even control, raising the possibility that security firms will clash with armed actors or need to cooperate with them when in insurgent-controlled terrain.

In general, as China expert Pascal Abb notes, "the need to navigate Myanmar's fragmented political landscape has resulted in mounting conflicts of interest between the involved Chinese actors, a fraying of the 'BRI' label and its connection to extractive and illicit business activities, and constant renegotiation with changing power holders across the country."⁶⁷ China has been forced to engage with the country's complicated and violent internal politics, including dealing with powerful armed actors it doesn't control and the prospect of Chinese private security personnel on the ground in war zones, in addition to its recurrent frustrations with the military government.

As the International Crisis Group notes, China's efforts to manage the conflict and protect its interests "has pushed it further into Myanmar's crisis, and its involvement is likely to deepen."⁶⁸ Rather than carefully being able to control events, Southeast Asian security expert Morgan Michaels argues that "China's approach has been to shield itself from the chaos next door and ensure that only its most vital interests are upheld."⁶⁹ This is a challenging environment for China, and there is some evidence that opinion in Myanmar has become increasingly dissatisfied with China's support for the regime and efforts to limit insurgent gains. For instance, the International Republican Institute's January-February 2024 survey of Myanmar found that 58 percent of respondents had a somewhat or very unfavorable opinion of China.⁷⁰ ISP-Myanmar's survey of stakeholders in 2024 also "reveals a significant rise in negative perceptions of China within Myanmar's policy community." Though not a representative mass survey, it also found negative perceptions of the CMEC initiative.⁷¹

The recent fig leaf elections of December 2025 and January 2026 were reportedly done under Chinese pressure, showing China's deep involvement in trying to find a sustainable new status quo for its interests in the country.⁷² These elections were not free or fair, but the Myanmar military claimed they marked an end of military rule, in hopes of ending its political isolation. Moving forward, China looks likely to continue its multi-pronged strategy in Myanmar, seeking to maximize its sources of influence in hopes of creating a China-friendly form of political and military stability.

Rising Powers and Unstable Politics Abroad

Rising powers often spread their influence abroad—but in so doing, they can become entangled in the complicated politics of neighbors and client-states. This was certainly true of the United States, which became involved in the domestic politics of foreign states from the Caribbean to Korea to Vietnam as it pursued global power. The Soviet Union was a player in internal political competition across large swaths of the globe, whether imposing regimes in Eastern Europe or trying to prop up favored factions in Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa, or the Middle East during the Cold War. For both superpowers, growing commitments abroad were a double-edged sword, often providing new forms of influence and access, but also sometimes pulling these powers into local conflicts they were unable to stabilize, much less resolve. At present, India is involved in trying to advance its interests in neighboring Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar, while Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, the UAE, and Qatar jockey for position within other states across much of the Middle East and North Africa.

China may follow a similar trajectory. Chinese economic projects in the twenty-first century are inextricably linked to the politics of its partner states, meaning that the PRC's global ambitions cannot be separated from the local conflicts in which its projects are embedded. These politics can thwart or complicate Chinese ambitions. China, like the United States, Soviet Union, and other great powers who have operated abroad, has a limited ability to end foreign insurgencies, stabilize unstable political systems, or easily create environments that are amenable to economic investment.

China's experiences in Pakistan and Myanmar provide insights into the challenges it faces in projecting influence overseas. While there is no doubt that China is a major player in both countries, it has been forced to deal with unexpected and unwanted setbacks and challenges within each. Its government partners lack a monopoly on state violence, while coups and protests have added an irreducible element of uncertainty. Armed groups in Pakistan directly attack

China, while those in Myanmar often are not under Chinese control. Chinese efforts face the direct and indirect consequences of large-scale insurgency, military coups, and recurrent political instability.

We should be careful to not linearly project out Chinese influence based on its foreign presence; this presence can enmesh China in unpleasant local politics rather than necessarily serving to expand its power. We may be seeing similar, though much more muted, dynamics in Central Asia as well. In January 2025, a Chinese worker was shot dead in Afghanistan's Takhar province, an attack claimed by IS-KP [Islamic State – Khurasan Province] fighters, a terrorist group operating in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and parts of Central Asia. Moreover, in Tajikistan in November 2025, two separate cross-border attacks originating from the Afghan territory involving the use of drones killed at least five Chinese citizens working on gold mine and infrastructure projects.⁷³

China's Future Risk Management

China does have options for managing these risks. The first are direct state-to-state partnerships, which we have seen with both Myanmar and Pakistan. Diplomatic support, coordination, and consultation over security concerns, military sales, and economic aid are all efforts to stabilize local politics. China has invested heavily in Pakistan and Myanmar's governments, and more broadly this is its primary form of security outreach.⁷⁴ Thus far, these investments have had limited effect on big-picture stability in both countries, since some of the key challenges to Chinese goals come from armed actors opposed to these governments, though they may deliver greater stability over time.

As a result, in Myanmar, China has also engaged with a broad range of armed actors, including insurgents and militias. These are important players for advancing or undermining Chinese influence in the country. Beijing has sought to work with, coerce, and establish dialogue with a number of these armed groups. State-to-state diplomacy is thus only part of the ways that China needs to engage with unstable political environments abroad. Its relationships with non-state armed actors are murkier and less publicized than its interactions with foreign countries but reflect crucial calculations about how to protect Chinese influence. We need to broaden our aperture beyond standard state-to-state politics to also take account of how rising powers may seek—or be forced—to do business with armed groups that control territory despite their lack of official political power. Doing so requires delving into the often messy and violent domestic politics within which foreign powers are operating, rather than assuming that partner governments control all of the relevant territory or can pursue desired policies.

A final response exists in between government-to-government ties and interacting with non-state armed groups—the use of Chinese-owned or -linked private security companies. As discussed above, new legal mechanisms in Myanmar are opening space for a more direct Chinese presence. These private security firms are symbols of both Chinese influence and potential vulnerability,

These are extremely difficult challenges that could undermine Chinese power projection

since attacks on Chinese nationals or Chinese-owned firms could pull China more deeply into murky local political waters in response to both quotidian criminality and higher-level insurgent threats.

This diverse array of policy options gives China flexibility in its efforts to manage political instability abroad, but these are ultimately extremely difficult challenges that could undermine Chinese power projection. Scholars

and analysts of international relations need to pay careful attention to how domestic political conflicts abroad can shape the ability of rising and regional powers to achieve their goals, ranging from imposing mild additional costs to enmeshing these powers in foreign quagmires.

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