

China's influence on Pakistan



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Strategic analysts are paying more and more attention to China's growing activities in Pakistan which have been increasingly worrying the international community since the last few years. Having maintained a rather 'behind-the-scenes' support for Islamabad for decades, today Beijing is exercising its influence more publicly.

Generally, Pakistan and China share a relatively long relationship. In other words, since Pakistan came into existence in 1947 it kept a close diplomatic eye on China. Faced with the need for allies as a result of the confrontation with India, Pakistan became the first Islamic country to recognize the People's Republic of China in 1950 (one year after India). The Pakistanis also voted in favour of granting China a seat in the United Nations and sided with Beijing in the then newly appeared issues over Taiwan and Tibet. This marked the beginning of mutually supportive relations, which considerably increased after the Sino-India War of 1962. Since then, Pakistan and China have regularly exchanged high-level visits resulting in numerous agreements. For example, both countries resolved their border disputes, signing a border agreement in 1963, to the dismay of the Indian government which accused Pakistan of illegally ceding territory of Pakistan-administered Kashmir to China. Furthermore, both countries started cooperating in major development projects on Pakistani soil, most noteworthy of which is the construction of the 1,200 km-long Karakorum Highway, the highest international road connecting China and Pakistan. This infrastructure project is not only of enormous commercial but also tremendous strategic value, especially for Beijing. In this context one should state that, the ongoing Gwadar port project on the Mekran coast in the province of Balochistan is another remarkable example that showcases the way in which China combines development projects with clear strategic and security interests. However, it also demonstrated the disturbing impact Chinese enterprises have on Pakistan's political and socio-economic developments.

Regarding the negative effects on the political landscape, several observers state that Chinese activities are reinforcing the manifold of inequalities that already exist between Islamabad and the provinces in all spheres of state and society. There is rising criticism among the people of Baluchistan and other regions like Gilgit-Baltistan, that they get systematically

excluded from decision-making in matters regarding their own land and are deprived of a fair share of revenues from their resources. In Baluchistan, sentiments of neglect and exclusion are gaining momentum as the local population increasingly feels exploited from two sides; the government in Islamabad and increasingly through Chinese development activities. The recent transfer of management of Gwadar from Singapore's PSA International to the state-owned China Overseas port Holding company on January 30, 2013, is paradigmatic for several reasons.

First, regarding Balochi criticism, the transfer is unconstitutional because the decision was made in Islamabad and not by the Council of Common Interest (CCI) which would include the provinces (Chief Ministers) in the decision-making process, a requirement following the 18th Amendment. Article 154 (1) of the constitution states that major ports, as listed in Part II (5) of the Federal Legislative List, are a subject in the domain of CCI. Therefore, it is argued by the antagonists of the transfer that the exclusion of the Baloch from the transfer of Gwadar to the Chinese is a breach of constitutionally guaranteed provincial decision-making power. The government, in response, claims that for the very same reason, i.e. the fact that Gwadar is a port, it automatically falls under the authority of the Ministry of Ports and Shipping in Islamabad and therefore is not of any concern to a provincial government – a legal technicality that is highly debatable. Clearly, this is a case that needs unbiased clarification by the Supreme Court. But here the question arises how far the Supreme Court is willing to go. A verdict that challenges the transfer would not only provoke the executive/government, which conducted the deal, and the armed forces, which are hoping to improve their navy base facilities, but also the national establishment in general of whose members include most of the judiciary which. In the past, it seemed that the judges were busier with matters relating to their own cause – especially when it comes to improving their status in the political power structure of the country – instead of taking care of the concerns of the provinces. Such matters would include strengthening federalism, revenue distributions, protection of minorities, tackling religious fundamentalism, education, and corruption. It will be interesting to observe to which extent the constitution is used by the Supreme Court as an instru-

ment in its attempt to keep the executive and the soldiers in check or to enhance the stability of the political system as well as to grant all people in Pakistan their legitimate rights, even if it is against the partial interest of the 'own folks'. The Baloch leaders want to rely on the constitution in order to solve the Gwadar problem and related issues. No matter what the Supreme Court's actions will be, the transfer



has once again enhanced the impression among many Baloch that Islamabad is doing everything to ensure and protect Chinese interests in their province at the locals' expense.

Second, based on the assessments of several Baloch groups and international observers it has become increasingly apparent that there is a strong correlation between Chinese activities in Pakistan and human rights violations. There are strong indications that in order to protect Chinese interests in Balochistan, Islamabad and its security apparatus won't hesitate to apply extra-legal measures to eliminate any opposition towards Chinese activities in the region. According to international human rights reports, various kinds of repressive tactics are applied including abductions, arbitrary arrests, torture, and unlawful killings. Some of the latest dramatic examples of 'kill and dump' activities were Mehboob Wadela and Arif Rehman, both key figures in the Baloch movement who were critical of China's role and presence in Balochistan. It comes as no surprise for many unbiased Baloch experts, that these crimes are committed with 'flagrant impunity'. Journalists who are trying to shed light on these occurrences are frequently subjects of so-called 'target killings'. Having this in mind,

the proclaimed 'new freedom of press' in Pakistan needs a careful assessment when it comes to provinces in Pakistan in which China exercises its interests. It seems that the Chinese don't mind oppression of the Baloch movement because they pose a threat to Chinese workers in the region, Chinese commercial and security interests. The latter relates to Beijing's fear of spill-over of secessionist-

driven instability in its own troubled Xinjiang region. An independent Balochistan would most likely embolden independence movements in territories under China's control. Third, Chinese activities in Pakistan have severe implications for the latter's civil-military relations. After the ousting of Pakistan's latest military ruler, Pervez Musharraf, and the subsequent elections in 2008, it seemed that the troubled civil-military relations were improving. At least, there were rudimentary signs that civilians were trying to reclaim decision-making power in a significant number of policy fields, which had traditionally been dominated by the all-powerful army. However, since January last year after a six-day visit of General Kayani in Beijing the Chinese started a policy of boosting the image of the army by emphasizing the contribution of the soldiers for strengthening the strategic ties and cooperative partnership between both countries and appreciating the tremendous efforts of the armed forces in fighting terrorism. This is a clear indication that the Chinese are quite comfortable with a Pakistani military being in charge of strategic and security related aspects of governance. This is not a new phenomenon, it can be observed in China's relations with states where it deems the

army the most reliable and influential political actor. In spite of the fact that China has refrained issuing official statements that could be interpreted as its siding with the Pakistani army, it is disturbing the civil-military equation in Pakistan. Undoubtedly, this is to the detriment of the decision-making ability of civilians. The exercise to build up the soldier's prestige and crucial role in strategic affairs is cre-

ating a political climate in which it will be easier for the army to undermine the position of the democratically elected political leaders as supreme authority in all policy fields. In other words, China is indirectly supporting the notion that decisions in strategic and security matters should be reserved domains for the soldiers. In consequence, this is challenging the notion of civilian control of the military which is a necessary ingredient for liberal democracy and its consolidation.

Forth, in the recent years, it was obvious that China was holding back to initiate new mega project in Balochistan because of the instability and threats towards Chinese workers in Balochistan. It preferred to extend its engagements in Pakistan to 'safer' areas like Gilgit-Baltistan where the Islamabad has granted Chinese companies numerous mining licences and the permission to build up all necessary infrastructure for the exploitation of the region. Also here, Islamabad did not deem it essential to consult the local people and institutions.

But it is important to note, that China's scepticism in Pakistan's military capabilities to suppress the Baloch national movement was certainly encouraging Baloch militants as well as political leaders to continue their struggle.

However, the current mas-

sive moral, diplomatic and material support by the Chinese for Pakistan's army will not help to convince Islamabad to look for a political solution and to continue the repressive tactics of the past in Balochistan. In contrast, it will further enhance the unwillingness of the national elite to implement policy in accordance with the 'Aghaz - Huqooq - i - Balochistan' (the Beginning of Rights of Balochistan). This so called 'Balochistan Package' was supposed to reduce the sense of deprivation and alienation and to ensure political, economic, and cultural rights for the Balochi.

Besides these dramatic impacts on the political sphere, China's role in Pakistan is responsible for far-reaching socio-economic distortions in the country too. Here too again Gwadar serves as an extraordinary example. Basically there is a general consensus that Gwadar is a non-starter until today. Islamabad has put the blame of Gwadar's disappointing performance on the Balochi insurgents and on the former port authority, PSA International from Singapore. However, one major cause of commercial failure, namely lacking road and rail connections and the omission to establish a special economic zone, can hardly be blamed upon the Singaporeans. In fact, the acquisition of land that is necessary for the construction if such vital infrastructure was blocked by civilian and/or military authorities. Hence, the accusation from Islamabad that the local political opposition and militant insurgencies are largely responsible for Gwadar's economic difficulties lacks substance and is a distortion of facts, causes and consequences. If the establishment would grant the Baloch their legitimate political rights, introduce an appropriate mechanism of sharing the revenues of resources exploited in Balochistan, and enhancing local ownership in development projects, there would be most likely much fewer objections against Gwadar. But Islamabad appears not to have used any of these options in its policy approach towards Balochistan and other regions. In contrast, the federal government worsened the situation by issuing work permits and licenses for the Chinese. As a result, Gwadar and other Chinese projects in the country are not creating a noteworthy amount of jobs for the unemployed Pakistani youth.

Additionally, instead of pushing joint ventures with local entrepreneurs foreign companies get favored significantly. Consequently, the Baloch get no fair access to business and job opportuni-

ties in their own province. And as if this were not already enough, the Baloch are getting more afraid to be confronted with enhanced 'guided migration'. In other words, Islamabad is encouraging workers from Punjab or Sindh to settle down in Balochistan, and especially in Gwadar, to take over the jobs that are left to Pakistanis. With the Chinese takeover this process will most likely be enhanced.

To sum up, China's activities in Pakistan have an extraordinary influence on the country's domestic development, in political and socio-economic terms. But most important is the high leverage into the decision-making process dominated by the country's establishment, represented by the civilians in Islamabad and the military top brass in Rawalpindi. Having this in mind, an extremely worrying factor for the people in the regions is, that a country which is perceived critically by most of international surveys - China is for example categorized as 'not free' by Freedom House - has such an extent of influence on Pakistan which is still struggling to establish a sustainable democratic order. This is gaining significance, since there is today a rising demand of the people towards the establishment of a functioning democracy. But taking into account the deplorable state of human rights and the authoritarian style of Chinese governments, there is no doubt that China is not interested in supporting any improvements in this direction in its neighborhood, especially not in Pakistan. Being able to establish cordial working relationships with Pakistan's various military regimes (or military backed and controlled civilian governments) and benefiting from their respective options to enforce major development projects such as sidelining regions in decision-making, use of force in suppression of oppositional movements, there might be not much interest by China in enhancing any democratic transition.

In consequence, the phenomenon of hampering democracy through outside powers, which started with the military-to-military-contact based US-Pakistan relations would be just continued by an autocratic guided development policy pushed by China's economic interests. In sum, the Chinese activity in Pakistan makes it more difficult to restore peace and stability in the country.

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SEVERAL OBSERVERS STATE THAT CHINESE ACTIVITIES ARE REINFORCING THE MANIFOLD OF INEQUALITIES THAT ALREADY EXIST BETWEEN ISLAMABAD AND THE PROVINCES IN ALL SPHERES OF STATE AND SOCIETY