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The Limits of China's Influence in Pakistan

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On October 6, Cyril Almeida, a veteran journalist with Pakistan's *Dawn* newspaper, authored one of the more tantalizing news stories in recent Pakistani history: a fly-on-the-wall account of a contentious meeting between Pakistan's civilian leadership and General Rizwan Akhtar, the head of its military intelligence bureau, the Directorate General for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). According to the report—since denied by the Prime Minister's Office—Pakistan's foreign secretary told General Akhtar that Pakistan faced growing isolation due to the activities of militant groups operating from its soil. Most importantly, close ally China was beginning to tire of blocking moves at the United Nations to place Pakistani militants on the list of global

terrorists. As written, the article suggests that the mention of China finally shifted the mood of the delegates in khaki; following an accusation that the military had prevented civilian law enforcement from arresting militant leaders, General Akhtar announced that he would personally order regional ISI branches not to interfere with civilian law enforcement moves against Pakistan-based terrorist groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Muhammad. Almeida has since reported (via Twitter) that he has been placed on Pakistan's Export Control List.

The events described in the article, which was unsourced, may be an invention meant to serve the agendas of any of the parties in the room (they make the civilians look tough but also place the onus on them to carry out future arrests). Or the conversation may in fact have taken place but with the implicit understanding that any terrorist arrested under this new dispensation would spend a short, comfortable stay in jail (or under house arrest) before being released on his own recognizance. This is a strategy that Pakistan has successfully employed in the past when international pressure became too great to resist.

The most plausible portion of the article, however, is the implication that everyone in the room fears the wrath of China and that China is increasingly striving to be, in essence, an offshore balancer in Pakistani politics. Recent events show that, while China is agnostic on Pakistan's form of government, it understandably wants a quieter, more efficient, less divided Pakistan, one that keeps terrorists on a shorter leash, offers a better security environment for Chinese-funded infrastructure projects, and is less vulnerable to centrifugal forces. Given the size of China's promised investment in Pakistan and Pakistan's lack of alternative partners, no Pakistani leader, civilian or military, can afford to entirely ignore China's wishes.

The meeting Almeida describes comes in the context of increasingly public Chinese pressure on Pakistan's leaders to put internal divisions aside in order to place all of Pakistan's resources at the service of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The *Global Times* reported that "the increasing cost of security is becoming a big problem in efficiently pushing forward" CPEC. Pakistan responded by proposing that the \$220 million cost of raising a dedicated security force be incorporated into the eventual tariff for power from CPEC power projects. When civilian and military powers squabbled over who would control the CPEC security force, China's Foreign Ministry responded with a well-timed press conference in which it expressed its confidence that "Pakistan will heighten precautions against security risks." A Communist Party vice minister even told a visiting delegation from Pakistan's main opposition party, the Pakistan People's Party, that "that there are more chances of political division when there are multiple political parties" and that the execution of CPEC requires "unity."

Given China's prominent role in encouraging Pakistan to take action against militant groups in Operation Zarb-e-Azb—the joint military offensive conducted by the Pakistan Armed Forces against various militant groups—and its known distaste for cross-border terrorism, its increasing influence on Pakistan's internal affairs could be seen as a positive development. China indeed offered a restrained response to Pakistan-based terrorists' attack on an Indian army base in Jammu and Kashmir, indicating that it did not approve of the provocation. But Pakistan is a complex operating environment, and we should not assume that China possesses a secret to effectively exerting leverage that eluded the United States for 15 years.

There are many signs that China can exert pressure but not control outcomes in Pakistan. Operation Zarb-e-Azb was flashy and kinetic, but the military had given advance warning of the

campaign to top terrorist leadership, allowing them ample time to escape to Afghanistan or Dubai. In a more recent example, China apparently failed to convince the Pakistan military to allow normalization of the status of Gilgit-Baltistan, the Pakistani territory that is home to the border crossing between China and Pakistan. A brief look at that imbroglio gives a clear portrait of the limits of Chinese influence.

Gilgit-Baltistan, part of the former princely state of Kashmir, is currently controlled by Pakistan but is not mentioned in the Pakistani constitution. Historically staunchly pro-Pakistan, Gilgit-Baltistan's attempts to become a formal part of that country were always rejected by Pakistani leaders who wanted to ensure that the inhabitants would be able to vote in a future referendum on the status of Kashmir—hopefully tipping the vote count in Pakistan's favor. Integrating all of Kashmir into the Pakistani state is part of the Pakistan army's *raison d'être*, and Gilgit-Baltistan's perpetual limbo is a key part of the military's long-term strategy.

Thus it was surprising to see reports surface in the Pakistani media that the civilian government was considering granting Gilgit-Baltistan some sort of constitutional status. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's party does well in the territory's rather meaningless elections, so there is a clear political rationale for the project. But the true mover behind the proposal, it appears, was China, which was apparently leery of investing billions in a corridor whose lynchpin lies in legally contested territory that is claimed by India and controlled, but not claimed, by Pakistan. The drive to constitutionalize Gilgit-Baltistan thus found China allying with the civilian government against the military.

In an effective measure of where true power lies in Pakistan, the proposal appears to have gone nowhere despite its powerful advocates. Instead of constitutional status and representative government, Gilgit-Baltistan has been promised development projects, while Chief of Army Staff Raheel Sharif assured China that a dedicated CPEC security force would protect the route beginning at the Khunjerab Pass in Gilgit-Baltistan. Indian prime minister Narendra Modi's specific mention of Gilgit during his Independence Day address probably put the nail in the coffin.

The United States has sought for years to use its considerable leverage—\$33 billion in military assistance over 14 years—to effectively pressure Pakistan to abandon its support for militant proxies. It has had little success. China is now entering the fray, with similar, if perhaps more limited, ambitions. It has succeeded in convincing Pakistani leaders to pay lip service to its concerns, but whether it can achieve actual change remains to be seen.