

## China steps in to protect its Pakistan project

Financial Times. The Exchange October 28 2016

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China's diplomats have taken the unprecedented step of intervening in Pakistan's complex domestic politics to ensure the smooth passage of its \$45bn investment in infrastructure projects as part of its One Belt, One Road program.

In recent weeks the [Chinese embassy](#) in Islamabad has twice issued press statements calling on Pakistan's bickering politicians to resolve their differences over the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Beijing is growing increasingly frustrated on a number of fronts at a time when Islamabad faces increasing international and regional pressure for continuing to host militant groups and is having to depend on China's sole support in international groupings such as the UN. And if Beijing needed a reminder of the precarious security situation, an [attack by terrorists](#) this week on a police training college in Quetta, Baluchistan, left 60 police cadets dead and 120 wounded. Several militant groups active in the province claimed credit for the attack.

The [IMF has warned](#) that Pakistan is building up huge debt and repayment obligations are building up as a result of Chinese loans for CPEC but this investment is crucial for Islamabad – outside CPEC, foreign investment in the country is at an all-time low. Once completed, the project has the potential to turn around Pakistan's economic fortunes but all the country's political parties must agree to use the scheme's benefits judiciously.

For now, the government and the army are at odds over who controls foreign policy, and opposition parties are determined to create mayhem for Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Earlier this month, in a rare move [Sun Weidong](#), China's ambassador to Pakistan, met the opposition leader Imran Khan, chairman of Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI), seeking assurances that his protest march planned to bring Islamabad to a halt on November 2 will not affect his support for CPEC. Mr Khan's opposition to Mr Sharif is threatening the stability of the government, and he is also demanding a judicial investigation into the corruption of leading figures in the administration named in the Panama leaks scandal.

Beijing's investment over 10 years is part of the One Belt, One Road initiative that will eventually link the country with China and Europe. In Pakistan it will entail building a highway, energy pipelines, power generation and industrial parks from the western port of Gwadar on the Gulf 3,000km north to the Chinese border.

The route the corridor will follow and who will benefit from the large industries that will be built alongside are contentious issues. Leaders from the small provinces of Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa say Mr Sharif has hijacked the highway to go through his home province of Punjab – already Pakistan's wealthiest region – rather than a more westerly route through the much poorer Baluchistan and KP provinces.

Speaking in Islamabad on October 17, the Chinese ambassador attempted to [cool tensions](#) between the provinces. "As we see it, all the routes lead to development and prosperity," he said. He said construction on 16 "early harvest" projects across the country with an investment of \$13.6bn had already begun.

China also has to navigate the growing tension between the army and the civilian government as to who will exercise overall control over the CPEC project and who will run a 10,000-strong security force that is to be trained to guard Chinese engineers but has been delayed due to internal squabbling.

Pakistan is already in debt to China on several fronts. It was the only country to defend Islamabad at the recent Brics summit in India, after India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi called the country "a [mother-ship of terrorism](#)". Earlier, at the UN Security Council China defended Pakistan against attempts to force it to take action against Masood Azhar, who is on the UN terrorism list. Mr Azhar leads the extremist Jaish-e-Mohammad group, which India accuses of launching terrorist attacks in Indian Kashmir. To reap the full benefits of China's massive investments, Pakistan needs to improve its [foreign policy](#) and address the charges from its neighbors that it harbors terrorists.

For its part, Beijing needs peace in the region if CPEC is to be successful. Civil war in Afghanistan, the Afghan Taliban leadership still ensconced in Pakistan and a spluttering insurgency in Baluchistan that has lasted more than a decade all threaten the project. The recent terrorist attack in Quetta shows the perils. Islamabad has also claimed that Indian and Afghan intelligence are trying to sabotage CPEC by using [extremist groups to attack](#) important construction projects.

Beijing is trying to help improve relations between India and Pakistan. It has already given Bangladesh \$30bn in loans for a new

corridor from the sea through the country and Burma into China and is prepared to fund infrastructure in India to link it with the corridors in both Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Continued instability, lack of regional co-operation and terrorism could endanger the future of CPEC. Beijing cannot indefinitely rescue Pakistan at international and regional forums and how it handles this cauldron of long-running disputes will determine the success of the ambitious project.

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