

As the US pivots away, China bets on Pakistan by Daniel Twining

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Chinese President Xi Jinping has just concluded an important state summit in Pakistan. Given that much of Pakistani diplomacy revolves around securing foreign assistance, the government in Islamabad is celebrating Chinese commitments of \$46 billion agreed during the visit in new financing for infrastructure investments – especially as American interest diminishes amid the US troop reduction in Afghanistan. Pakistan's role as a hub in China's "New Silk Road" initiative to enhance economic connectivity between Asia and Europe could benefit the whole region. But Beijing's interests go beyond Pakistan's development: the country is the gateway to a bigger Chinese strategic role in the Indian Ocean and the Middle East. China's "Go West" policy is part of its breakout of East Asia to become a more global power, and Pakistan is at the center of that transformation.

In Islamabad, Xi and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif finalized agreements on \$28 billion in new infrastructure projects, from electric plants and pipelines to roads and railways, as part of a \$46 billion Chinese commitment to help stabilize Pakistan and make it a gateway to the sea for China's landlocked western region of Xinjiang. Sharif was appropriately grateful, [saying that](#) "Pakistan considers China's security as important as its own" in light of worries that terrorism and extremism emanating out of Pakistan could threaten China. The two countries even agreed to stand up a special security force to protect Chinese investments in Pakistan against terrorist attacks.

For all its problems of misgovernance and extremism, Pakistan actually has enormous economic potential. A decade ago, Goldman Sachs identified it as one of the ["Next-11" big emerging economies](#). Pakistan sits in between India, the world's fastest-growing large economy; China, the biggest driver of global growth; and Central Asia and the Persian Gulf, with the world's biggest oil and gas deposits. The newly inaugurated China Pakistan Economic Corridor is designed to leverage these geographic advantages to make Pakistan a gateway to these markets. As Pakistan's Planning Minister, Ahsan Iqbal, said before Xi's visit, "If we become the bridge between these three engines of growth, we will be able to carve out a large economic bloc of about 3 billion living in this part of the world... nearly half the planet."

Expansive as that vision is, China's ambitions for Pakistan go beyond it – in part because they are about much more than

Pakistan itself. As the German Marshall Fund's Andrew Small writes in his excellent new book, [The China-Pakistan Axis](#):

Pakistan is a central part of China's transition from a regional power to a global one. The country lies at the heart of Beijing's plans for a network of ports, pipelines, roads, and railways connecting the oil and gas fields of the Middle East to the megacities of East Asia. Its coastline is becoming a crucial staging post for China's takeoff as a naval power, extending its reach from the Indian Ocean to the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea. Penetration by Pakistan's intelligence services into the darkest corners of global jihadi networks are a vital asset to China as it navigates its growing interests in the Islamic world, and seeks to choke off support for the militant activities that pose one of the gravest threats to China's internal stability.

And, of course, Pakistan has been a highly effective way for China to checkmate the power of its great Asian rival, India – including by midwifing Islamabad's nuclear weapons program. China's infrastructure investments in Pakistan are this week's big news. But behind the scenes, the two countries are finalizing a deal for Chinese delivery of eight attack submarines [described by the Naval War College's Lyle Goldstein](#) as "very quiet, capable and lethal." Pakistan is to pay China \$6 billion for the submarines – an amount roughly equal to the amount of US civilian assistance provided to Pakistan under the historic Kerry-Lugar-Berman aid package of 2009. The purpose of the submarines is, of course, to counter the Indian Navy. Meanwhile, Chinese sponsorship to develop the deep-water port of Gwadar, at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, renders it the leading contender to be China's first overseas naval station.

US officials have been exasperated dealing with their Pakistani friends for the past 15 years. Perhaps China will have better luck promoting stability and growth there while countering the violent extremism that threatens it. However, Chinese officials have a mixed record when it comes to state-directed investment abroad in pursuit of wider geopolitical interests.

China has lent over \$56 billion to the crumbling regime in Venezuela, with little hope of repayment. Its economic penetration of Myanmar led the military regime there to cancel an enormous Chinese dam project and to pivot toward the West, to escape Beijing's clutches. In Sri Lanka, Beijing bankrolled the strongman regime of Mahinda Rajapaksa, leading the candidate who beat him at the polls, Maithripala Sirisena, to make China a wedge campaign issue. [As now-President Sirisena put it](#), "If this trend continues for another six years our country would become a colony and we would become slaves." One of his first acts on taking office was to suspend several large Chinese investment projects.

Pakistanis with bigger problems are unlikely to worry about becoming Chinese "slaves" any time soon. But as China

deepens its involvement in Pakistan, it will encounter the same obstacles that have plagued US efforts to promote the country's reform and development. Pakistani officials will also discover that China's growing equities with India – and India's growing power – will make Beijing more reluctant to be dragged into subcontinental rivalries. Nonetheless, make no mistake: after millennia as an East Asian power, China's new "Go West" policy is part of a more global grand strategy in which Pakistan is but the launching pad.

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