

Attacks on Chinese Investments in Pakistan

Who, Where and Why?

By Juan Mary Joseph

Research Intern, School of Conflict and Security Studies, NIAS

With the rising frequency of attacks on Chinese people, property and resources in Pakistan, the iron - clad brothers are facing a long list of uncertain suspects.

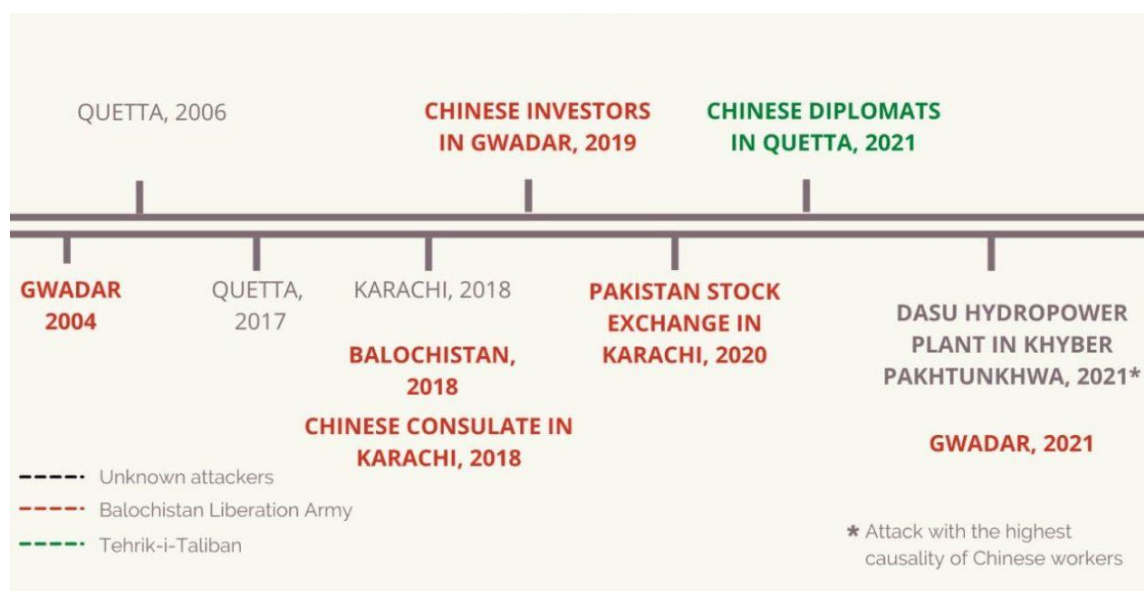


Image Source: Pakistan Reader

On 20 August, two children were killed and a Chinese national was injured in a suicide attack near Gwadar.¹ The Chinese national was part of a convoy who were working on the construction of the East-Bay Expressway construction, as part of the Arabian Sea port where the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) ends. The Majeed Brigade, an elite unit of the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) later claimed responsibility for the attack.

¹ "Suicide Bomb Attack in Pakistan Kills Two CHILDREN, INJURES Chinese National." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, 21 August 2021, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/suicide-bomber-pakistan-kills-chinese-national-roadside-attack-chinese-embassy-2021-08-21/>.

The history of attacks, violence and accidents involving Chinese nationals in Pakistan is however not new and dates back to more than a decade. The number of attacks on Chinese nationals rose to more than 44 in the period from 2014 to 2016.

Tracing the attacks: Who, Where & Why?

The first recorded attack was in May 2004 when a suicide attack by militant organisation Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), killed three Chinese engineers who were working on a project to develop port facilities in Gwadar. The project which was then valued at \$250million had around 400 Chinese engineers and construction workers working as part of it. This was also the first major attack on foreign workers since a suicide bomber killed 11 French engineers in Karachi in 2002. The BLA has, since 2004, waged a violent armed struggle against Pakistan for what it claims as 'self-determination' for the Baloch people. At the centre of the BLA's demand is the call for autonomy for the Balochistan province, thus separating the province from Pakistan. As a result, the Baloch militants have been involved in a larger struggle against the Pakistani Armed Forces, civilians and foreign nationals for decades. The militant organisation which has been deemed a 'terrorist organization' by the US and UK became publicly known during the summer of 2000, after it claimed responsibility for a series of bombings on Pakistani authorities.

Less than 2 years later in February 2006, three Chinese engineers, assisting in the construction of a local cement factory (Attock) were shot and killed.²

In July 2007, unidentified gunmen killed three Chinese workers and wounded another near Peshawar, in what Pakistani officials said was a terrorist attack in the aftermath of the siege of the Lal Masjid incident. Lal Masjid was taken over by Islamic militants led by Abdul Aziz and Abdul Rashid – who openly called for the overthrow of the Pakistani government and took Chinese women as hostage. The resulting operation by the Pakistani army as a result of diplomatic pressure from China contributed to the retaliatory attack on Chinese workers.

Unknown attacks on the Chinese continued a decade later in May, 2017 when two Chinese nationals were abducted and later executed in Quetta. This was followed in by yet another attack on two Chinese employees of the Cosco Shipping Lines in Karachi (May 2018).³ A little more than a year later in August 2018, six people were injured in a suicide attack in Balochistan's Dalbandin.⁴ The attack was targeted at a vehicle in which Chinese engineers working on the Saindak project were travelling. The project, a joint venture between Pakistan and China was aimed at extracting gold, copper and silver from the Baloch area

² Shahid, Saleem. "3 Chinese Engineers Killed in Ambush." DAWN.COM, 16 February 2006, available at: <https://www.dawn.com/news/178957/3-chinese-engineers-killed-in-ambush>.

³ Hassan, Syed Raza. "Senior Chinese Shipping EXECUTIVE Shot Dead in Pakistan." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, 5 February 2018, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-china-shooting-idUSKBN1FP1UK>.

⁴ "Pakistan: Three Chinese among Six Injured IN Dalbandin Suicide Attack; Balochistan Liberation Army Claims Responsibility-World News , Firstpost." Firstpost, 12 August 2018, available at: <https://www.firstpost.com/world/pakistan-three-chinese-among-six-injured-in-dalbandin-suicide-attack-balochistan-liberation-army-claims-responsibility-4946571.html>.

close to the Iranian border. The BLA, which claimed responsibility for the attack, has also been a vocal opposer of China’s increasing involvement in Balochistan, the largest of Pakistan's four provinces. With the onset of the CPEC in Pakistan, the Baloch cities of Gwadar and Quetta has seen a large influx of Chinese nationals, to contribute to the infrastructural developments. The province, bordered by Iran and Afghanistan, boasts of a large amount of mineral wealth and is host to many Chinese economic projects. However, the Baloch people have consistently felt neglected and harbour a deep resentment for the Chinese as they remain at the failing end of the bargain, with little or no benefits from Pakistan-China collaborative projects. Despite diverse Chinese economic investment projects in various sectors within Pakistan, these don’t seem to be benefitting the local population. The reluctance of the Chinese to employ local Pakistani labour even while extracting minerals from the region has been widely criticized within the province. The BLA has therefore always strongly opposed the Chinese ‘exploitation’ of resources in the region.

When	Who	Where	Targets	Why	Casualty
2004	BLA	Gwadar	Chinese engineers	Call for autonomy for Balochistan	3 dead
2006	Unknown attackers	Quetta	Chinese engineers		3 dead
2007			Chinese workers	Retaliation for the Lal Masjid incident	3 dead, 1 injured
2017	Unknown attackers	Quetta	Chinese nationals		2 dead
2018	Unknown attackers	Karachi	Chinese employees of Cosco Shipping Lines		
	BLA	Balochistan	Chinese engineers working on the Saindak project	Opposition to Chinese extraction of mineral resources in Balochistan	6 injured
		Karachi	Chinese consulate in Karachi		3 terrorists, 2 Pakistani policemen and 2 civilians died

2019	BLA	Gwadar	Chinese investors at a hotel	Opposition to increased Chinese presence in Gwadar	5 Pakistanis died
2020	BLA	Karachi	Chinese investors at the Pakistan Stock Exchange in Karachi	Opposition to the Chinese ownership stake at the stock exchange	
2021	TTP	Quetta	Chinese ambassador to Pakistan	Create a diversion	4 died and 12 injured (All Pakistanis)
	Unknown attackers	Dasu	Chinese engineers working on the Dasu project.		9 Chinese engineers and 4 others died
	Majeed Brigade of the BLA	Gwadar	Chinese workers part of the East-Bay Expressway construction		2 children died and 1 Chinese national injured

In November 2018, an armed assault by suspected BLA militants was carried out on the Chinese Consulate in the Clifton area Karachi. The ensuing shootout led to the death of three terrorists, two Pakistani policemen and two civilians.⁵ According to the charge sheet registered before the Anti-terrorism Court in Pakistan, the attack was carried out by the BLA with assistance from India's Research and Analysis Wing to harm China - Pakistan relations. Pakistan regularly accuses India of funding and arming Baloch separatists, as well as targeting development projects in the province. However, Pakistan failed to prove the alleged Indian "involvement" in this case earlier during a hearing in May this year.

Half a year later, in May 2019, gunmen from the BLA stormed a five-star hotel in port city of Gwadar and killed at least five people, including a Pakistani Navy soldier. The attack was targeted at Chinese and other foreign investors who were staying at the hotel as part of the CPEC project. All guests at the hotel were however safely evacuated and Prime Minister

⁵ "Karachi Attack: China Consulate Attack Leaves Four Dead." BBC News. BBC, 23 November 2018, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-46313136>.

Imran Khan termed the attack as “efforts to sabotage Pakistan’s economic projects and prosperity”.⁶

In June last year, the BLA further claimed responsibility for another attack on the Pakistan Stock Exchange in Karachi.⁷ The attack is believed to have been carried out because China had acquired 40 per cent of the shares owned by a consortium of three Chinese bourses in 2016, and had also taken over the management controls. A little more than a year later, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) or the Pakistani Taliban made an entry into this turmoil in April this year, when an attempt was made on the lives of Chinese diplomats in Balochistan. A Pakistani Taliban suicide bomber blew himself up outside a luxury hotel in Quetta, killing at least 4 and wounding 12.⁸ The attack was targeted at the Chinese ambassador to Pakistan, Nong Rong, who had checked-in to the same hotel. The ambassador although was not in the building at the time of the explosion and was safely evacuated. The TTP, was formed by Baitullah Mehsud, a former ‘mujahideen’ recruited to fight the Russians, and later the Afghan Taliban. Described as an umbrella movement of militant groups linked to al-Qaeda and Islamic State, the TTP has been involved in a bloody series of attacks, primarily against the Pakistani Army, including one on the ISI headquarters. Mehsud’s death in a US drone attack in 2009 led the TTP to splinter into small groups until it was revived recently during the assassination attempt on the Chinese ambassador in the Peshawar. However, contrary to the general perception, the TTP doesn’t seem to harbour any anti – China sentiments as observed by the Global Times, a mouthpiece of the Chinese government. China perceives the TTP’s acts of violence as a move to “create bigger noise by targeting Chinese nationals...in a bid to advance a malicious domestic agenda.” The TTP’s larger agenda has revolved around the resentment surrounding the controversial merger of various tribal regions with the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018.

As a result, it came as a surprise when the Pakistan government attributed the Dasu incident, dubbed as the largest attack on Chinese nationals in Pakistan to the TTP. In July this year, 13 people, including nine Chinese engineers were killed and close to 33 Chinese nationals were injured in an explosion near the Dasu hydropower plant in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa’s Upper Kohistan district. The initial reports from the incident presented conflicted results surrounding the cause for the explosion. While Pakistan blamed the explosion on a mechanical failure, the Chinese ministry spokesperson was quick to clearly refer to it as an “attack.” Pakistan later altered their stance to say that since traces of explosives were

⁶ “Gwadar Attack a Bid to Damage Economy, Sabotage Prosperity: PM Imran.” The Express Tribune, 12 May 2019, available at: <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1971287/gwadar-attack-bid-damage-economy-sabotage-prosperity-pm-imran>.

⁷ Shah, Saeed. “Gunmen Attack Pakistan Stock Exchange, Citing Its Link to China.” The Wall Street Journal. Dow Jones & Company, 29 June 2020, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/gunmen-attack-pakistan-stock-exchange-11593427896>.

⁸ “Pakistani Taliban Carried out Suicide Blast at Hotel Hosting Chinese Ambassador.” South China Morning Post, 22 April 2021, available at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/south-asia/article/3130525/car-bomb-kills-4-pakistan-hotel-where-chinas-ambassador-was>.

detected, the possibility of it being an attack could not be ruled out. An investigation team was constituted which also comprised of 15 Chinese officials sent by the PRC.

Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi termed the attack as a suicide bombing with a "nexus of Indian RAW and Afghan NDS"⁹. The minister mentioned that, with data, from the video footage, cell phone data analysis, investigation of local handlers and facilitators, and forensic examinations, the attack was concluded to be the work of Islamist militants backed by the Indian and Afghan intelligence agencies. Indian government officials termed the charge baseless and said that Pakistan has made similar accusations repeatedly in the past. The TTP in a telegram message to a Reuters reporter also denied carrying out the attack. Pakistan's conclusion is questionable as the Dasu hydropower station project is not a part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) energy projects and hence an unlikely target for either the BLA or the TTP. The project is helmed by the China Gezhouba Group, with five other Chinese companies financed initially by the World Bank.

The Dasu attack came weeks after the BLA set fire on installations made by Chinese telecom companies in Balochistan's Quetta and detained six officials who were involved with the projects.¹⁰

Implications

The latest attack near the East-Bay Expressway is the third attack targeting Chinese nationals in the current year. Previous attacks in the past were less frequent with lower casualties. However, this has changed after 2016 when there was at least one serious attack in a year. The casualties have also risen with recent attacks targeted at Chinese diplomats, engineers and investors unlike construction workers in the past. Despite Pakistan's effort to strengthen the security of Chinese nationals with special task forces, attacks continue to occur. There are considerable doubts on the future of China's ambitious projects in Pakistan and the neighbouring Afghanistan, with renewed concerns over the safety of the Chinese personnel in the region.

Operations in the Aynak Copper Mine in Afghanistan has been stalled due to the current political situation in the region.¹¹ Similarly work on the Dasu hydropower plant was also temporarily suspended¹² due to the gruesome attack and its aftermath. Yet another one of

⁹ Shahzad, Asif. "Pakistan Says Attack That Killed Chinese Was a Suicide Bombing." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, 12 August 2021. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-foreign-min-says-bus-attack-that-killed-9-chinese-workers-was-suicide-2021-08-12/>.

¹⁰ "BLA Says It Set on Fire Chinese Telecommunication Companies, Captured 6 Workers in Pakistan's Balochistan." ANI News, 3 July 2021, available at: <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/bla-says-it-set-on-fire-chinese-telecommunication-companies-captured-6-workers-in-pakistans-balochistan20210703185110/>.

¹¹ Krishnan, Ananth. "Suicide Bombings Cast Doubt on China's Pakistan Projects." The Hindu. The Hindu, 22 August 2021, available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/suicide-bombings-cast-doubt-on-chinas-pakistan-projects/article36037023.ece>.

¹² "Dasu Project Suspended after Attack but Pakistani Workers Still Employed: CHINESE FM." Global Times, 19 July 19, 2021, available at: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202107/1229055.shtml>.

China's concerns is the possibility of a spill over from the Afghani Taliban to the separatist groups in Pakistan. The Taliban joining hands with the BLA and the TTP, as well as contribute to reviving the Uyghur separatist movements could be on the top of China's fears. However, it could be of a little respite to China that the separatist groups have only been targeting Chinese investments in Balochistan with little impact on other investments in the Sindh and other regions.

It may therefore be inferred that these attacks could just be a ploy for the groups to bring larger attention to their actual causes for conflict with the Pakistani government. Though the attacks have mostly been against Chinese nationals, there may not be a very clear anti – Chinese sentiment in the country. However, what does seem to be of concern is how the governments of both countries would now safeguard their people and assets from any future attacks. Chinese resources and assets have been a larger target for attacks in many countries around the world. The financial value of the Chinese investments, often worth billions of dollars, make them an unlikely target. The larger impact and the attention that China itself promises has been a motivating factor in most of these cases.

For China, the attacks are a temporary hindrance that seeks to threaten the larger picture that the investments promise. Some of these attacks, such as in Dasu, even prompted China to temporarily shut down the operations at the plant. The recent attempted military coup in Guinea was yet another threat to Chinese interests. The coup sought to threaten the Chinese supply chain for aluminium and hence prompted statements surrounding the political situation there from the Chinese foreign ministry, a clear indication of the importance that China attaches to each of their resources abroad. As a result, there are very less chances for China to abandon any of their overseas projects, especially in Pakistan, even if there are continued attacks on projects or people. Each of these projects form a larger part of the BRI project and therefore the larger imperative move from China would be to engage in greater cooperation with Pakistan on strengthening security efforts. This may therefore lead to greater Chinese engagement with separatist forces as seen in Afghanistan before the Taliban capture and the US withdrawal from the region. It remains to be seen if Chinese diplomatic efforts can contribute to specific results that the US military efforts for more than two decades couldn't.

About the author

Juan Mary Joseph is a Research Intern at the School of Conflict and Security Studies, National Institute of Advanced Studies. She is a post graduate in International Studies from Christ (Deemed to be) University. Her research areas of interest are China and East Asian studies.

Email: juan.mjoseph@gmail.com

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