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Shih-Ting Lin



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About the Author: Shih-Ting Lin is a Mandarin language teacher at the Department of International Relations and Governance Studies, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Shiv Nadar University, Delhi NCR.

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Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence
NH-91, Tehsil Dadri, Gautam Budh Nagar District
Uttar Pradesh - 201314
INDIA
Ph: +91 120 7170100
E-Mail: chs.shss@snu.edu.in
Website: <https://snu.edu.in/centres/centre-of-excellence-for-himalayan-studies/>

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Shih-Ting Lin

Abstract

This article examines the lived experiences of Chinese residents and tourists in Pakistan, the security risks faced by Chinese nationals, and how Pakistan’s security cooperation for Chinese nationals is practiced at the grassroots level, encompassing not only physical protection but also digital surveillance. It argues that such extreme protective measures can be interpreted as a physical extension of the Chinese state’s surveillance over its citizens abroad. When considered alongside China’s efforts to export digital technologies and surveillance systems through the “Digital Silk Road,” the so-called “Iron Brother” friendship between China and Pakistan is gradually evolving into a transnational surveillance network that combines both physical and digital forms of control. As a result, Chinese citizens remain under close monitoring by state power even when overseas, transforming the celebrated “Iron Brother friendship” into what may instead resemble an Iron Cage for Chinese citizens.

Keywords: China-Pakistan relations; China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC); Terrorist Attacks; Digital Silk Road (DSR); Extraterritoriality.

Although the official discourse from both China and Pakistan has long emphasized their relationship as an “all-weather strategic cooperative partnership” characterized by what is often described as an “Iron Brother friendship” (鐵桿兄弟, *tiēgan xiōngdì*) the reality of bilateral interactions is far more complex than these official narratives suggest. In recent years, frequent terrorist attacks targeting Chinese enterprises, Chinese nationals, and projects related to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) have highlighted a significant gap between the grand official narrative and the actual conditions experienced by Chinese citizens in Pakistan. This article seeks to examine this contradiction by analyzing the real treatment of Chinese nationals in Pakistan and the security challenges they face.

Methodologically, the study focuses on contemporary China-Pakistan relations since 2018. It analyzes first-hand video records posted by Chinese tourists and Chinese residents in Pakistan on the social media platform *Douyin* (抖音).ⁱ Through these materials, the article investigates the everyday interactions between Chinese and Pakistani people at the grassroots level. The findings indicate that Chinese citizens in Pakistan face severe security threats. Their daily movements are subject to strict protection and restrictions under special security measures implemented by Pakistani police, suggesting that the lived experiences of Chinese nationals in Pakistan are far less stable and ideal than official narratives portray.

The article is structured as follows. First, it reviews the history of terrorist attacks targeting Chinese nationals in Pakistan in recent years and introduces the two major militant organizations responsible for attacks against the Chinese within the country. Second, it examines the evolution of the Chinese government’s responses to such violent incidents. Third, drawing on the aforementioned first-hand video materials, it analyzes the security measures imposed by Pakistani police on Chinese citizens under pressure from the Chinese government. Finally, the article further analyzes how these extensive security arrangements, although designed for protection, effectively restrict the privacy and personal freedom of Chinese

citizens. It concludes by arguing that measures aimed at protecting Chinese citizens in Pakistan can be seen as an extension of the Chinese state's surveillance of its citizens abroad.

Terrorist Attacks Targeting Chinese Nationals and Interests

2018 can be regarded as an important turning point in terrorist attacks within Pakistan. Prior to this year, attacks by militant organizations were largely directed at Pakistani government institutions, security forces, or religious and ethnic targets. After 2018, however, terrorist groups in Pakistan began to target Chinese enterprises and CPEC projects in a more systematic and frequent manner. In some cases, even diplomatic institutions were included among the targets, in an apparent attempt to exert pressure on the Pakistani government through international public opinion. It is also noteworthy that 2018 was the year in which the Majeed Brigade, the suicide attack unit of the separatist Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), re-emerged as an active force. Since then, the organization has played a key role in a number of attacks directed at Chinese targets (Basit 2022; Verma, Baloch & Valle 2025).

Terrorist attacks in Pakistan have resulted in significant casualties among both Chinese nationals and local Pakistani citizens. The most severe attack occurred in 2021, when a commuter bus transporting staff of the Chinese-constructed Dasu Hydropower Project in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province was struck by a suicide bombing. The attack claimed the lives of nine Chinese nationals and several Pakistani citizens (*BBC News Chinese* 2021b). In 2022, the Confucius Institute at the University of Karachi was targeted in a terrorist attack, resulting in the deaths of three Chinese teachers (*BBC News Chinese* 2022). In 2024, another attack occurred in the Besham area, targeting Chinese engineers; the incident killed five Chinese nationals and one Pakistani driver (*BBC News Chinese* 2024).

In addition to attacks on Chinese-funded projects and personnel, Pakistan has also experienced multiple terrorist incidents directly targeting Chinese diplomatic missions and senior officials. In 2018, the Chinese Consulate General in Karachi was attacked by armed militants (*BBC News Chinese* 2018). And in 2021, the Serena Hotel in Quetta - where the Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan, Nong Rong, was staying - became the target of a terrorist attack (*BBC News Chinese* 2021a).

The security challenges posed to the CPEC by terrorist forces within Pakistan can be broadly categorized into two major types of violent actors - ethnonationalist separatist groups and religious extremist organizations. Among the former, the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) serves as the principal representative, while the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) constitutes the primary example of a religiously motivated extremist group (Xiu 2021). Together, these two forces have gradually formed a dual security threat pattern within Pakistan, with separatist violence concentrated in the south and religious extremism in the north.

The BLA maintains that CPEC constitutes an exploitation of Balochistan's natural resources and argues that local communities have failed to derive substantive benefits from these projects. On this basis, the organization has launched and supported armed activities aimed at achieving the independence of Balochistan. Its operations are primarily concentrated in Balochistan Province and the port city of Karachi (*DW Chinese* 2024).

By contrast, the TTP Pakistan is an Islamist militant organization whose activities are largely concentrated in Pakistan's northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province. According to Zhu

Yongbiao, Director of the Afghanistan Research Center at Lanzhou University, the TTP targets Chinese nationals due to the close relationship between the Chinese and Pakistani governments; the group perceives China's support for the Pakistani state as detrimental to its own separatist objectives (HKCNA 2024). Meanwhile, Xiu Guangmin, Deputy Director of the Pakistan Research Center at Sichuan University, argues that China's de-extremification policies in Xinjiang have drawn attention from certain segments of the Islamic world. Within this context, organizations such as the TTP have framed their attacks against Chinese targets as acts of "defending" Islam and Muslims, thereby justifying retaliatory violence against China (Xiu 2021).

China's Official Position

Following terrorist attacks, the Chinese government typically issues statements at the earliest opportunity, expressing "strong condemnation" (强烈谴责, *qianglie qianzhe*) of the incidents and reiterating its opposition to "all forms of terrorism" (MFA of the PRC 2026).ⁱⁱ At the same time, Beijing conveys its firm support for Pakistan,ⁱⁱⁱ endorsing the Pakistani government's efforts to combat terrorism^{iv} and to safeguard national security and social stability (MFA of the PRC 2022a).

In these official statements, the Chinese side consistently distinguishes terrorist organizations operating within Pakistan from the Pakistani government itself. It repeatedly emphasizes support for Pakistan's counterterrorism operations and underscores the importance of the enduring "ironclad friendship" between China and Pakistan. This discursive approach serves a dual purpose: on the one hand, it avoids directly attributing responsibility for terrorist attacks to the Pakistani government; on the other, it helps preserve the stable tone of bilateral strategic cooperation.

However, a comparison of public statements issued by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs between 2022 and 2024 reveals a discernible shift in emphasis. In November 2022, following the court verdict related to the Dasu attack, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning stated, "China will continue to firmly support Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts and take concrete measures to ensure the safety of Chinese citizens, institutions, and projects in Pakistan" (MFA of the PRC 2022b).^v At this stage, the primary emphasis remained on affirming and supporting Pakistan's counterterrorism measures.

By March 2024, after the Besham attack, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian reiterated, "China firmly supports Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts and resolutely safeguards the security of Chinese citizens, institutions, and projects overseas. China and Pakistan have the determination and capability to make terrorists pay the price" (MFA of the PRC 2024).^{vi}

Thus, while the second statement continues to emphasize support for Pakistan, its tone becomes more resolute, shifting more firmly from "take concrete measures to ensure" to "resolutely safeguards," and further stressing that terrorists must "pay the price". This rhetorical shift suggests that, while continuing to uphold the overall tone of bilateral friendship, Beijing has placed greater emphasis on security protection and adopted a comparatively firmer tone in its public discourse.

Security Measures for Chinese Visitors and Citizens in Pakistan

On social media platforms such as Douyin, travel videos shared by Chinese tourists reveal the security arrangements they encounter upon arrival in Pakistan. According to these accounts, once Chinese travelers land in Pakistan, their passports are temporarily retained by local authorities, and they are permitted to leave the airport only under the escort of armed police officers. Subsequent travel itineraries likewise require continuous police protection, whereas travelers from other countries are reportedly allowed to depart freely.

Chinese residents living in Pakistan have similarly indicated that local security regulations require Chinese nationals to be accompanied by armed security personnel and to travel in bulletproof vehicles when going out, with prior authorization sometimes required before departure. A Chinese influencer currently based in Faisalabad, Punjab, further reported that the police restricted his movements and assigned four officers to provide 24-hour protection, including accompanying him while shopping.

In such travel videos, Pakistani police officers are frequently heard telling Chinese tourists, “You cannot leave, because the safety of Chinese nationals comes first”.^{vii} In addition, Pakistan has established dedicated units responsible for safeguarding the security of Chinese citizens within its territory.

One Chinese traveler attempting to travel from Gilgit in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir to Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, was required to sign a written guarantee before being permitted to proceed. This procedure reportedly applied exclusively to Chinese nationals, while travelers from other countries were allowed to move freely. The video description quoted a police officer stating, “It is your country that requires us to protect you”.^{viii}

Terrorist attacks targeting Chinese citizens have prompted the Chinese government and Chinese enterprises to exert pressure on the Pakistani government to enhance protective measures. In response, Pakistan has been required to deploy substantial numbers of military and police personnel across various regions to safeguard Chinese nationals.

To strengthen security protection for Chinese nationals and CPEC projects, the Pakistani federal government has established the Special Security Division (SSD), a specialized security force composed primarily of military personnel. The SSD has been mainly deployed in high-risk areas such as Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. According to Nawab et al. (2025), the Division comprises approximately 10,000 troops, organized into nine army battalions—including elements of the Frontier Corps and Rangers—as well as six paramilitary wings.

To some extent, this extensive allocation of security resources may divert and strain Pakistan’s existing administrative and security capacities. This might be one reason why apart from the assignment of dedicated security personnel to CPEC-related projects, security arrangements and regulations concerning Chinese citizens in other provinces of Pakistan appear comparatively ambiguous and lack standardized procedures. Implementation often depends on the discretion of local police authorities. Video evidence suggests that frontline officers may not be fully familiar with relevant regulations and frequently need to seek instructions from their superiors. Even within the same city, different Chinese travelers encounter varying security requirements and levels of escort.

The process of seeking authorization from higher authorities can be time-consuming, often requiring visits to multiple police stations and resulting in significant expenditure of time and

effort. Chinese residents and tourists frequently express feelings of frustration and helplessness in response to these procedures. Such institutional opacity and inconsistency have imposed considerable inconvenience on the daily lives and mobility of Chinese nationals in Pakistan.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that the mobility of Chinese citizens in Pakistan is subject to substantial restrictions. A Chinese rice farmer based in Pakistan, for example, advised compatriots against pursuing opportunities in Pakistan without adequate security guarantees. Such concerns have, in turn, led certain business actors to adopt a cautious stance toward investment or commercial expansion in Pakistan due to safety concerns. Over time, such conditions may constrain the scope of development and engagement available to Chinese nationals in Pakistan.

Protection or Surveillance?

The stringent protective measures adopted by Pakistan toward Chinese nationals not only reflect the genuine security risks faced by Chinese citizens within the country, but also suggest that some Chinese individuals may not attach significant importance to restrictions on privacy and freedom of movement. The videos examined for this article often begin by conveying confusion or unease on the part of Chinese tourists but there are also expressions of curiosity and even appreciation for what is described as a form of “special treatment” afforded exclusively to Chinese nationals. What is more, the narratives frequently conclude with affirmations such as “Pakistan-China friendship is truly ironclad”^{ix} or “Long live China-Pakistan friendship”.^x

Alternatively, these online travel narratives may already operate within a discursive framework regarded by Chinese authorities as the “appropriate” or “correct” mode of representation. In other words, content creators may feel compelled to provide testimonial support for the officially endorsed narrative of China-Pakistan friendship. Expressions that deviate from this framework risk being perceived as undermining bilateral amity. As a result, even when dissatisfaction exists, it is often articulated only indirectly or in attenuated form. For instance, when a Chinese resident remarks that “you can only be imprisoned”,^{xi} both the Chinese and English subtitles soften the phrasing to “you can only stay indoors”,^{xii} thereby avoiding more sensitive or negatively charged terminology.

Apart from the question of physical surveillance and control, there is also the digital aspect of these. In recent years, China has actively advanced the development of the Digital Silk Road (DSR), exporting digital technologies and infrastructure to other countries. These exports include surveillance systems, network infrastructure, big data technologies, and related equipment.

The DSR entails not only the export of technology and capital, but also the diffusion of digital governance models. To a certain extent, the DSR transmits Chinese regulatory norms and governance philosophies to participating states, reinforcing institutional frameworks characterized by extensive state oversight of cyberspace and the normalization of large-scale surveillance practices. In this sense, the DSR facilitates the international projection of a model of digital governance centered on a tightly controlled internet environment and comprehensive monitoring mechanisms in partner countries (Patil & Gupta 2025).

The international human rights organization ARTICLE 19, in its 2025 report *Cybersecurity with Chinese Characteristics*, points out that Pakistan's digital development under the framework of the CPEC has made it a testing ground for China's influence. At the legal level, laws such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) draw heavily on China's 2017 Cybersecurity Law, which strengthens centralized regulatory oversight, mandates data localization, and grants the state surveillance powers, while simultaneously restricting dissent and freedom of expression. Pakistan has adopted Chinese technologies to construct its Web Management System. Its operational model mirrors China's "Great Firewall," symbolizing a move toward centralized control over internet access and content moderation (ARTICLE 19 2025). This suggests that while physical control over Chinese nationals in Pakistan is largely exercised by Pakistani authorities, digital control is increasingly shaped and extended by the Chinese state, together forming a dual system of transnational surveillance.

Chinese Extraterritoriality

Upon entry into Pakistan, Chinese citizens are reportedly required to register their passports, and their movements within the country are often conducted under the escort of armed police officers. Such arrangements enable Pakistani authorities to maintain comprehensive awareness of their whereabouts. If, as some police officers have indicated, these protective measures are implemented at the request of the Chinese government, this would suggest that Beijing does not object to the Pakistani state possessing detailed knowledge of its citizens' movements. Indeed, it may be interpreted as an extension—beyond China's territorial boundaries—of the Chinese Party-state's broader practice of maintaining a high degree of oversight and control over its nationals.

Terrorist attacks targeting Chinese citizens in Pakistan, while generating significant security risks, have simultaneously been transformed into a catalyst for the expansion of surveillance and governance. On the one hand, Chinese nationals have become targets due to the close political and economic ties between China and Pakistan, reflecting the tangible security threats they face. On the other hand, these threats have further driven the expansion of protective measures and surveillance mechanisms. In this sense, what would ordinarily be understood as a source of risk is, in practice, reconstituted as a driving force for the extension of governance and control. For the Chinese government, such a situation enables it to promote the outward extension of its surveillance technologies and governance models under the banner of bilateral or international security cooperation.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that the close China-Pakistan relationship not only exposes Chinese citizens to risk but also enables the Chinese state to exercise greater surveillance and control over them. In this sense, the celebrated "Iron Brother friendship" might, for Chinese citizens, function less as a symbol of solidarity than as an Iron Cage of transnational surveillance and constraint.

Meanwhile, with the Pakistani government's introduction of additional legal frameworks - Chinese-style surveillance mechanisms not only apply to Chinese citizens in Pakistan but may, now, also extend to the local population and other foreign groups. This contributes to enhancing China's strategic position in the domains of digital governance and information control outside its borders.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ The videos referenced in this article are available with the author and can be shared on request.

ⁱⁱ “中方坚决反对一切形式的恐怖主义” (*Zhongfang jianjue fandui yiqie xingshi de kongbu zhuyi*).

ⁱⁱⁱ “中巴铁杆友谊牢不可破” (*Zhong-Ba tiegan youyi laobukepo*).

^{iv} “中方坚定支持巴方反恐努力” (*Zhongfang jian ding zhichi Bafang fankong nuli*).

^v “中方将继续坚定支持巴方反恐努力，切实保障在巴中国公民、机构和项目的安全” (*Zhongfang jiang jixu jian ding zhichi Bafang fankong nuli, qieshi baozhang zai Ba Zhongguo gongmin, jigou he xiangmu de anquan*).

^{vi} “中方坚定支持巴方反恐努力，坚决维护海外中国公民、机构和项目安全。中巴双方有决心、有能力让恐怖分子付出应有代价” (*Zhongfang jian ding zhichi Bafang fankong nuli, jianjue wei hu haiwai Zhongguo gongmin, jigou he xiangmu anquan. Zhong-Ba shuangfang you jue xin, you neng li rang kongbu fen zi fuchu ying you dai jia*).

^{vii} “中国人的安全第一” (*Zhongguoren de anquan diyi*).

^{viii} “‘是你们国家要求我们保护你们的’这些是他们的原话” (*‘shi nimen guojia yaoqiu women baohu nimen de’ zhexie shi tamen de yuanyuan*).

^{ix} “巴铁是真的铁” (*Batie shi zhende tie*).

^x “中巴友谊长存” (*Zhong-Ba youyi zhangcun*).

^{xi} “你只能在屋里被囚禁” (*ni zhineng zai wuli bei qiujin*).

^{xii} “你只能在屋里待着” (*ni zhineng zai wuli dai zhe*).

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