

The Inevitable U.S. Return and the Future of Great Power Competition in South Asia

by Thomas F. Lynch III



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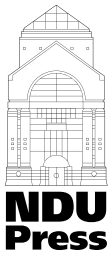
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Executive Summary

More than a year after America's painful Afghanistan withdrawal, the future of U.S. and Western security interests in South Asia no longer relates mainly to the terrorism threat from Salafi jihadism, which has receded and reoriented there to be most menacing toward Pakistan and China. Instead, American security interests now require the proper posture for long-term Great Power competition (GPC) with China. Such a posture in South Asia requires patient, persistent growth in the slowly maturing, overt strategic security partnership with India and a quiet regeneration of a transactional one with Pakistan.

The Indo-Pakistani security dilemma will continue to color Indo-Pakistani security perspectives across South Asia. The United States can have no doubts that this situation will persist. Yet Washington and its Indo-Pacific allies can navigate Indo-Pakistani bilateral tensions and enhance a growing geopolitical partnership with India while simultaneously regenerating a limited, tactical counterterrorism modus vivendi with Pakistan. India's advancement as an important regional security partner against Chinese strategic encroachment has been stolid: slow but steady and without need for major course correction. Pakistan's role has been rightfully questioned for some time.

But Pakistan now is ripe for cultivation as an American transactional security partner again despite its posture as a historic Chinese strategic partner. Throughout 2022, Pakistan—and particularly its military-intelligence leadership in Rawalpindi—has demonstrated that it seeks to sustain China's strategic partnership, but not to the point of wearing a Chinese strategic straitjacket. Its behavior is in keeping with its historic pursuit of its own peculiar national security interests by strategic tacking between the United States, the Gulf Arab states, and China. Pakistani leaders in the military and intelligence services today actively seek American assistance and support to balance its increasingly tense economic and security relationships with Beijing. They seek to leverage American technological prowess and to eliminate mutually threatening Salafi jihadist terrorists beyond Pakistan's reach.

Informed by Pakistan's emerging transactional political and security needs and by America's long-term geostrategic interests in posturing to succeed in GPC, Washington should quietly work to collaborate on Pakistan's residual counterterrorism aims. Washington and its Western partners then can leverage this new posture to improve long-term Western intelligence understanding of China's geostrategic activities as seen through Pakistan's eyes. Simultaneously, America should stay the course with India, persistently and patiently pursuing growth of a strategic

partnership framed around bilateral and multilateral security interactions that minimize the encroachment of coercive Chinese power in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region.

A failure to recalibrate American strategic posture in South Asia to this bimodal framework soon inevitably risks a more costly and traumatic American return to the region in the future, repeating the post-1947 pattern of full Western retreat and then belated, expensive return.

Introduction

August 2022 marked the 1-year anniversary of the American and Western military and diplomatic departure from Afghanistan and a nontrivial turning point for U.S. and Western political and diplomatic presence across South Asia. Almost 20 years of American-led Western security, diplomatic, economic, and social engagement in Pakistan and especially in Afghanistan came to a messy, abrupt end. It was far from the first time, and is certainly unlikely to be the last time, that Washington's substantive departure from a key swath of the South Asia region has set the stage for an inevitable future return into what already is an altered geopolitical environment.

When America again returns in strategic focus and substantial numbers to South Asia, whether that be in 2023, 2033, or 2040, it will confront one security feature that has been dominant across the region since 1947 and will remain of critical importance: the Indo-Pakistani security dilemma. Washington also will find significant regional changes to two important geopolitical security paradigms. The first is that of the global war on terror, which had been the major geostrategic security overlay across the region since the mid-1990s. The second is the emerging geopolitical security paradigm featuring the three-state Great Power competition (GPC) between the United States, China, and Russia. This geostrategic paradigm has been evolving across South Asia for much of the past decade even as that of the war on terror has been fading from regional importance, much as it has globally, since at least 2015.

A major question for U.S. policy since the country's departure from Afghanistan is: Does American strategy require an ongoing security relationship with Pakistan to achieve major South Asian security aims despite a positive and growing strategic relationship with India? Citing the historic dramas featured in U.S.-Pakistan security relations, some analysts say no.¹ However, a detailed assessment of limited but meaningful American and Pakistani overlapping security interests in the war on terror and in interactions with China leads to the opposite conclusion. What follows in this report is an assessment of the key historic and contemporary factors that support recalibration of a U.S.-Pakistan security relationship that is tactical in nature even as Washington continues its major focus on enrichment of the growing strategic Indo-American security partnership.

American Comings and Goings: Regional Constants and Shifted Geostrategic Paradigms

Before establishing the key elements of the three security paradigms of greatest importance across South Asia today and into the future, it is useful to remember the comings and goings of American strategic attention and security presence across South Asia since 1947.

Great Britain rapidly abandoned the Indian subcontinent in the late 1940s just as global attention turned to reckoning with the major post–World War II geostrategic contest between a communist world dominated by the Soviet Union and a Western one organizing under the leadership of the United States. The departure of British occupational forces ended Western security presence across South Asia for almost a decade.² When strategic attention from the outside world returned to the Indian subcontinent in the 1950s, it did so in the guise of American military and intelligence presence supporting its Cold War struggle with the Soviet Union and Moscow's major communist ally, Mao Zedong's China.³ Pakistan accepted Washington's assistance for its long-embargoed military forces, welcomed American intelligence and military aviation units, and formally joined the anti-communist Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) security alliances.⁴ India proved a less enthusiastic partner. It accepted a limited American strategic intelligence presence for a short time when that presence complemented Indian concerns with Chinese military behavior, especially after the Sino-Indian November 1962 border war. But India mainly pursued a strategy of non-alignment with either side in the Cold War.⁵

The United States embargoed all military aid to Pakistan and India during and immediately after their 1965 border war, enraging both governments. American military presence in Pakistan wound down between 1965 and 1972. It did so because of a combination of improved national technical means to monitor the Soviet Union, improved Sino-U.S. relations, and then American frustration with Pakistan's untidy war with India over East Pakistan, followed by Islamabad's post-1972 pursuit of nuclear weapons despite strong Western objections.⁶ India never hosted a very robust U.S. military or intelligence presence and, after a brief dalliance in the 1963–1965 period as New Delhi sought assistance to reequip its military following the Sino-Indian late-1962 border war disaster, steered far away from U.S. military presence or assistance.⁷ The 1971 Soviet Union–India 20-year Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation terminated American military interactions for the remainder of the Cold War.⁸ American military entanglements on the subcontinent focused toward the west: Pakistan and Afghanistan, where by the mid-1970s Washington had no military presence either.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 exposed the West's strategic vulnerability and limited defensive options across South Asia. Bereft of sufficient on-ground human and signals intelligence, Washington and its allies were caught flat-footed when Moscow made its surge into Kabul. A creative and enormously expensive military and security scheme to support Afghan counterinsurgency forces from Pakistan, supported by Chinese equipment and Muslim-world fighters and funds, returned American security forces to South Asia. The return was necessary to counter not only the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan but also the ultimate threat, of Soviet access to an Indian Ocean port through southwestern Pakistan.

When the Soviets left Afghanistan in 1989, America again rapidly wound down military and intelligence presence in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the wider South Asia. Shortly after, Washington reimposed—and even extended—a series of military, economic, and political sanctions against Pakistan and India, in a failed bid to constrain the nuclear weapons programs of each. Less than a decade later, this strategic estrangement from the region contributed to a security crisis that gave rise to al Qaeda as a nonstate, catastrophic terrorism threat. The surprise terrorist strikes on the U.S. homeland of September 11, 2001, led to another hasty and eventually expensive strategic intervention costing billions of dollars and thousands of lives in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The point of this historical excursion is to situate the departure of America's security presence from Afghanistan and South Asia in August 2021 in the context of past episodes of wholesale withdrawal. Invariably, Western military withdrawal with little residual intelligence or security interaction results in costly, post-traumatic return to South Asia. With Afghanistan under Taliban control and out of bounds for the foreseeable future, Western security attention must again concentrate on Pakistan and India.

Understandable frustration with Pakistan's role in safeguarding the Afghan Taliban during its 20-year insurgency makes some argue that the West should again disengage fully from Pakistan.⁹ But there is a strong case to be made that America should not strategically isolate Pakistan. Instead, a smarter strategic approach would be to reframe a transactional security interaction with Islamabad and Rawalpindi that manages common counterterrorism aims in a collaborative fashion while simultaneously cultivating strategic security relations with New Delhi. So constituted, such a relationship—shaped in the near term and nurtured into the future—might properly posture Western intelligence and military infrastructure to generate the capabilities necessary to win the U.S.-China GPC now evolving across South Asia.

The Indo-Pakistani Security Dilemma: The Security Constant With Updated Context

As it has for 75 years, the India-Pakistani security dilemma remains the dominant strategic frame of reference on the subcontinent.¹⁰ This security dilemma colors how each party views the strategic opportunities and risks posed by intraregional security challenges and the overlay of global geostrategic dynamics in the region. Pakistan's fears of Indian strategic gains in Afghanistan provided its main rationale for supporting the mujahideen in the fight against New Delhi's Moscow partner after the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Similarly, Islamabad's, and more specifically Rawalpindi's, concerns about nefarious Indian influence penetrating Afghanistan through northern Afghan non-Pashtun tribes with historic relationships in New Delhi proved an important impetus for Pakistani rhetorical and covert material support for the Pashtun Afghan Taliban counterinsurgency after 2003.

Geostrategic security dynamics are filtered and processed into policy by states through their security dilemma narratives. Pakistan is smaller than India by a factor of between 5 and 6 in population and military size since independence and a factor of between 8 and 9 in annual gross domestic product over the past decade. Thus it constantly seeks external security and economic partnerships to inhibit what it believes to be India's strategic aim to collapse Pakistan by either economic overmatch or military conquest.¹¹ Beginning with the ascension of general-turned-president Mohammad Ayub Khan in the early 1950s, through the loss of East Pakistan to Indian invasion and the creation of the new state of Bangladesh in 1972, Pakistan viewed the Cold War as its opportunity to secure American protection and support against Indian malevolence.¹² Islamabad joined two formal American-led, Western anti-Soviet security alliances—CENTO and SEATO. Pakistan welcomed extensive American economic investment programs with the aim of outgrowing India. It also began courting China as a parallel security partner after observing a schism between Beijing and New Delhi during the Sino-Indian border war in late 1962. Disappointed by the absence of direct American support during its wars against India in 1965 and 1971–1972, Pakistan nonetheless persevered with security and economic relations, albeit chilled ones, with the United States in the 1970s. Simultaneously, it expanded security ties with China to enhance deterrence against India, and it secured significant fraternal Muslim economic support from the newly rich Arab Gulf oil states when America and the West sanctioned it for its nuclear weapons program. Pakistan then leveraged Cold War tensions by serving as the platform for and co-sponsor of the mujahideen insurgency against the Soviet Union after Moscow's late-1979 invasion of Afghanistan. Islamabad undertook this action as much to

thwart Indian encroachment into Afghanistan via New Delhi's 1971 treaty with Moscow as to prevent a Soviet communist takeover of its immediate neighbor to the west.

The geostrategic paradigm changed in 1989–1991 with the end of the Cold War and the military and intelligence departure of America from the region as Washington focused on the dawn of an era of American global dominance. Pakistan initially exploited Chinese diplomatic top cover and military equipment support along with Gulf Arab financial largesse to complete its nuclear weapons program and to underwrite its accelerating use of insurgency and terrorism against India and Indian regional interests, especially in Jammu and Kashmir.

American global distractions and unhappiness about Pakistan's nuclear weapons program and exploitation of terrorism against India abruptly pivoted on September 11, 2001. Washington quickly took a laser-like focus on Afghanistan's and Pakistan's roles in enabling global terrorism to develop. Sensing both danger and opportunity from America's return, Pakistan again adapted its security dilemma imperative to an evolved geostrategic reality. President Pervez Musharraf opted to become America's ally in the global war on terror and against Pakistan's patron in Kabul, the Afghan Taliban government. Musharraf did so to prevent the United States from seeing Pakistan as an enemy and siding with India's approach to fighting terrorism, which would brand Pakistan as the region's number one state sponsor of terrorism.¹³ Notably, Pakistan made this under-duress security adaptation without ever tactically abandoning the Afghan Taliban as one of its main security hedges against Indian encroachment from the west.

India's strategic narrative stems from its position of relative strength on the subcontinent—a status that encourages pursuit of strategic autonomy, freedom from entangling strategic alliances (security or economic), and the refusal to compromise with Pakistan on matters of principle. This Indian restraint mainly owes to the unacceptably high costs likely potentially inflicted by Pakistan's nuclear arsenal or China's possible military response. New Delhi's security dilemma narrative framed Indian strategic choices during the Cold War and the era of American global dominance, and it frames it now, in the evolving era of multipolar GPC between the United States, China, and Russia.

During most of the Cold War's first decade, India struggled to consolidate several of its fractious domestic federal territories and wrestle with crushing national poverty. It fought Pakistan to a stalemate over the fate of Jammu and Kashmir during the late 1940s, isolating and ignoring it as much as possible otherwise. New Delhi refused to pick a side in the Cold War, rejecting international alliances and striving to become leader of a nonaligned international movement. Through most of the 1950s, India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, aspired to have Mao's China as a co-leader of this nonaligned movement. That objective crashed on the

rocks of disagreements about the autonomy of Tibet. Then it fully shattered over an intractable border dispute in the Himalayas that culminated in the short, sharp Sino-Indian war in October and November 1962, in which Mao's army embarrassed the Indian military in a swift assault on a wide front before withdrawing to a line of actual control that remains disputed today. New Delhi's late-breaking request for American assistance against China failed to spare the Indian military its sad fate and did not inspire closer strategic relations between the United States and India.¹⁴ Neither did Washington's neutral stance during the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War, when American arms embargos of each side coupled with appeals for an immediate cease-fire only infuriated India and Pakistan equally.

Wary of American Cold War alliances with Pakistan and of Islamabad's courting of a Chinese security partnership since 1963, and cognizant of a growing rift between Mao's China and its longtime communist patron in Moscow, in 1971 New Delhi struck the Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union. This treaty aimed to deter any Chinese military intervention against India on behalf of Pakistan in a looming Indo-Pakistani fight over the status of East Pakistan, and it achieved India's immediate security aim of sidelining China during the 1971–1972 war, which saw the defeat of Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh. However, this display of strategic autonomy chilled Indo-American strategic relations for the next two decades. India found itself ostracized from most American and Western defense activities and weapons bazaars. While it remained a liberal democracy and never endorsed or embraced communism as the inevitable future of the world, it found itself extensively isolated from the West, with Indian economic and diplomatic relationships increasingly tethered to Moscow and the states of the Soviet Bloc throughout the 1970s and 1980s. India's approach to Cold War geopolitics evolved through its security dilemma with Pakistan.

India's 1971 treaty with the Soviet Union lapsed in 1991, the same year that the Soviet Union dissolved. As the global geostrategic paradigm evolved toward American hegemony, India adapted its approach to strategic autonomy in a measured fashion. New Delhi's leaders chose to open economic relations with the capitalist world economy, moving away from the restraints of the old Soviet Bloc. It did not, however, rush into an American security embrace. America and the West's economic and political sanctions against India and Pakistan for their nuclear weapons programs continued into the 1990s. India also chafed at the expanding Salafi jihadi terrorist activity targeted against its interests in Jammu and Kashmir from terrorist outfits using Pakistani intelligence collected from the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.

America and the West entered the geostrategic paradigm of global terrorism in September 2001, joining India as a major target of Salafi jihadi outfits and organizations. But while

Pakistan took its position as the West's "major non-North Atlantic Treaty Organization ally" in the regional counterterrorism fight, India pursued a strategic posture focused on greater economic growth and integration with the West, accepting security perks such as the U.S.-India nuclear cooperation agreement as incentive to continue convergence with the West. Over a 20-year period, Indian economic dependence on China grew rapidly as a result of both New Delhi's focus on the economy as strategic necessity and Western signals that business with China was a good bet.

India confronted Pakistani support of anti-Indian terrorism during this period with rhetorical hostility but a reliance on Washington interventions to demand accountability from Islamabad. The United States confronted Pakistan on a couple of occasions, but without much in the way of substantive returns for India. New Delhi benefited from Western-coalition counterterrorism presence in Afghanistan as a proxy that suppressed many, but not all, of the Salafi jihadist training sites that had been incubators for many Taliban-welcomed, anti-Indian terror groups during the 1990s.

Tense but relatively stable, India's bipolar geostrategic relationship with China grew testier by the end of the 2000s, even before the West came to view Beijing as a new Great Power rival rather than a future partner in the world order. China's support for Pakistan's nuclear programs, its repetitive border provocations of India along the Himalayas' Line of Actual Control, and its steady economic and infrastructure encroachments across the Indian Ocean region had India alarmed. But New Delhi muted direct confrontation with or criticism of Beijing to ensure steady bilateral economic exchange. In pursuit of its best strategic footing versus Pakistan in the evolving geostrategic landscape, New Delhi safeguarded economic equities with China while increasing its security dialogue with the West as a hedge against coercive Chinese strategic behaviors.

The Dramatic Reformation: Salafi Jihadist Terrorism Targets in South and Central Asia

The Salafi jihadist terrorist framework across South Asia remains complex and dangerous but has dramatically realigned and reoriented over the past half decade.¹⁵ From the mid-1990s through approximately 2014, the major strategic target for the constellation of messianic Salafi jihadist terrorist groups and outfits was the United States. The prize for these groups was to stage another dramatic, and catastrophic, terror strike against the U.S. homeland or a truly strategic overseas location and to validate and extend the groups' ultimate mission of collapsing Western secular presence across the Muslim world.

Prior to his killing in Abbottabad, Pakistan, in 2011, the dominance of Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda kept most Salafi jihadist organizations focused on again orchestrating a catastrophic terrorism event against the "Great Satan" in the United States or across the Muslim world. Bin Laden's death, and the accession to global al Qaeda leadership of Ayman al-Zawahiri, did not alter al Qaeda's laser focus on attacking America as the priority, but it did weaken to a large degree al Qaeda's sheer dominance of the global Salafi jihadist narrative. Given this development, the so-called Islamic State (IS) entered explicit competition with al Qaeda for control of the movement's leadership, targeting priorities, and fulcrum of operations.¹⁶ Whereas al Qaeda and most of its constellation of affiliated groups and terrorist outfits continued to value the Afghanistan-Pakistan region as a spiritual and operational hub for organizational essence, IS and its Iraqi leadership felt no such emotional tie. During its rapid ascent from 2014 into 2015, IS's initial leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, also reframed priority terrorist targets from the anti-American/Western ones on which al Qaeda was fixated toward a far more expansive array of regional and global enemies for Salafi jihadism. These enemies especially but not exclusively included Shiite Muslims and other apostate and foreign infidels within the Muslim world. IS also countered al Qaeda's long-standing preference for centralized planning, and when possible, training, for major global terrorist operations. Al-Baghdadi's IS turned instead to a very decentralized model, leveraging the power of the Internet and social media to inspire a wide array of often spontaneous small- and medium-sized terrorist strikes against a broad array of infidel targets deemed a threat to IS, which aimed to create an expansive superregional Sunni Islamic caliphate subservient to al-Baghdadi's self-proclaimed divine heritage.¹⁷

As the fraternal competition for leadership in and focus of the global Salafi jihadist network intensified, the framework for jihadism in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region evolved. By 2015, al-Zawahiri's al Qaeda dominance across South Asia came under some duress from the wider IS leadership challenge. IS anointed a regional affiliate—referred to hereafter as the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K)—as its jihadi challenger to al Qaeda regional hegemony. IS-K itself was not catalyzed by West Asian leadership but instead formed from aggrieved fragments and splinters of long-standing Afghan and especially Pakistani al Qaeda-affiliated tribal groups, most notably from disgruntled Pakistani subtribal leaders from the Pakistani Taliban (or *Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan*).¹⁸

Aware of the threat but confident in al Qaeda's regional primacy, al-Zawahiri took steps to reorganize and reorient al Qaeda for a durable dominance in this critical Salafi jihadist homeland. He announced the formation of an al Qaeda of the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). He proclaimed a new framework of AQIS-affiliate objectives across South Asia with specific attention

to the issues most important to regional Sunni Muslims, including formally announced enmity toward Hindu-dominated India.¹⁹ Concurrently, al-Zawahiri cemented ties with the Afghan Taliban, arguably al Qaeda's most important regional jihadi affiliate group, by publicizing his personal *bayat* (an oath of fealty to the religious authority) to the successors to Mullah Mohammad Omar beginning in 2015.²⁰ Al-Zawahiri also pronounced IS and its regional affiliates apostate.²¹

Quietly at first, but with persistence and repetition, the al Qaeda-anointed leaders of AQIS began to identify and co-opt regional themes beyond those of anti-Americanism and anti-Westernism long dominant in the movement's core identity. AQIS began a media campaign condemning the Bangladesh and Indian governments' mistreatment of the Rohingya Muslim refugees from Myanmar, competing with similar IS rhetoric, but with activity to match the rhetoric that IS-K did not muster. By 2016, AQIS began questioning in its media releases the mistreatment of the Uyghur Muslim diaspora inside Pakistan, and by extension into China.²² Al-Zawahiri and AQIS leaders announced al Qaeda's distress at the encroachment of large numbers of non-Muslim Chinese nationals into Pakistan that began in 2015 and accelerated quickly; later, they declared solidarity with the Turkistan Islamic Party against Chinese oppression.²³ The United States and the American presence in Afghanistan remained the biggest target for AQIS antipathy. AQIS's close affiliation with the Afghan Taliban as the dominant al Qaeda allegiant in Afghanistan and Pakistan kept al Qaeda's regional focus on ousting the "Great Satan" from Afghanistan. Nonetheless, al Qaeda's tweaking of its global and regional aspirations for Salafi jihad set the conditions for a far wider array of grievances and targets in response to the evolving terrorist outfit milieu across South Asia from 2015 on.²⁴

IS-K's role in South and Central Asia from 2015 and through the collapse of the Afghan Republic and ascent of the Afghan Taliban to political control of the country in August 2021 embodied survival under duress and a schizophrenic existence. The U.S. military, the Afghan military, the Afghan Taliban, and the Pakistani military—both alone and, often, in combination—hounded the mainly Pakistani and Afghan tribal fragments constituting IS-K with persistent targeting. At various times during especially 2017 and 2018, IS-K was assessed to be fewer than 600 in number and largely holed up in the foreboding mountainous ranges of northeastern Afghanistan. Even so, IS-K perpetrated several of the most massive terrorist strikes conducted in Afghanistan between 2015 and 2021. Most of these attacks featured suicide bombers and vehicle-borne massive explosive strikes against Afghan Shi'ite Hazara groups or other apostate and non-Sunni Afghan groups or gatherings. IS-K threatened action in Afghanistan against American and Western interests there and beyond the region, but never made good on its

threats. Instead, U.S. and Afghan special forces operations against IS-K—sometimes undertaken in concert with Pakistani intelligence services and even coordination with Afghan Taliban military units—put IS-K on the back foot, pinning it into a defensive posture and threatening its very existence for a time.²⁵

With its formative core of jihadist tribal fragments suffering, IS-K's future promise lay in meshing with Afghans and Central Asians returning from fighting for IS in Iraq and Syria. IS leaders promised such a return from the Levant and Syria, but outside analysts did not see any significant movement of IS fighters into Afghanistan or the “Central Stans” from 2015 to 2020.²⁶ Instead, Iranian, Russian, and Central Asian fears of the potential from any such return in numbers galvanized coordinated efforts to prevent transit of returning foreign fighters in the first place.²⁷ Relentless U.S. and Afghan military strikes against known or suspected IS-K venues across Afghanistan disrupted integration of the relatively few returning foreign fighters reported during that 5-year period. Afghan Taliban and Pakistani intelligence targeting of IS-K tribes and subtribes also detected and deflected any major returns to core IS-K tribal groups laboring to survive in the region. By the end of 2020, the United States and the United Nations (UN) assessed that IS-K was capable of spectacular terrorist strikes in Afghanistan and to a lesser extent in Pakistan, but that its fighters numbered fewer than 2,000, its framework was in disarray, and its leadership was mainly dead or incarcerated in Pakistan or Afghanistan.²⁸

Although the long-term impact remains to be seen, in August 2021, the operational capacity and long-term viability of IS-K changed significantly. Late that month, hundreds of incarcerated IS-K convicted terrorists and leaders escaped Afghan prisons as the Afghan government and security forces fled and the Afghan Taliban took power. The harbinger of renewed IS-K viability was seen on August 26, 2021, when a suicide bomber at the chaotic Kabul International Airport killed 13 American military members and approximately 170 Afghans. Western intelligence services and the UN's Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team determined this attack to be an IS-K effort—and one that elevated IS-K's reputation and profile in the IS global constellation.²⁹ Over the year and a half since then, IS-K has grown in size, reach, and diversity, exploiting serious Afghan Taliban limitations in securing Afghanistan's borders and in tracking criminal or terrorist groups' comings and goings. Although there have been no reports of Taliban commanders from most Afghan minority communities changing allegiance to IS-K, there have been reports of Tajik and Uzbek defections in the north.³⁰ In late 2022, IS-K may be as large as 5,000 to 6,000 fighters and is reinforced by former IS foreign fighters, arriving in small but increasing numbers via infiltration through Iran and Pakistan, as well as by some new,

homegrown radicals signing up from the Central Asian states.³¹ IS-K is evolving as an Afghanistan- and Central Asia-focused Salafi jihadist group.

The New South Asia Terrorism Focus and Strategic Implications

The Salafi jihadist terrorist milieu in Afghanistan and Pakistan no longer has a primary focus on the United States or the West.³² Al Qaeda and its AQIS affiliate assert global ascendance and advance regional jihadi primacy by amplifying their anti-Hindu bona fides while increasingly calling into question the encroachment of non-Muslim China across the region and positioning themselves to become champions of jihad against Chinese malevolent influence should that continue to emerge as a regional narrative.³³

IS-K also now has a focus that has far less to do with America or its allies. IS-K is growing as a security threat from northern Afghanistan and through Central Asia. For example, IS-K claimed credit for an October 2021 suicide bombing that killed 50 in Kunduz, Afghanistan, and stated that the bomber was Uyghur and the strike was to punish the Taliban for their close cooperation with China despite Beijing's oppression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.³⁴ IS-K also remains ready and willing to conduct jihad against the Pakistani state and its Chinese benefactors. China's many workers and project venues in Pakistan will grow in salience as targets for IS-K jihad.³⁵ Likewise, IS-K expansion into Central Asia will directly challenge Chinese security preferences in western China by making the Uyghur Muslims a rallying cry for a restive, regionally focused Salafi jihadi cadre.³⁶

Both major branches of the Salafi jihadist milieu in South and Central Asia—AQIS and IS-K—are increasingly a Pakistani and Central Asian problem with growing risks for China along both of these vectors.³⁷ China's growing vulnerability in this new era of global terrorism is increasingly apparent.

First, in Pakistan, Beijing's presence and posture has grown in unprecedented ways since President Xi Jinping's 2015 announcement of its massive Belt and Road Initiative flagship project, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).³⁸ In 2018, Pakistani government spokesmen had promised an unprecedented CPEC investment in Pakistani infrastructure of over \$65 billion, but by 2019, project underperformance and frictions were causing many to question whether most of CPEC's promise would ever be attained.³⁹

Despite the uncertainty about the ultimate CPEC value, China's exponential expansion of people and policy connections across Pakistan for CPEC has altered important considerations for the Salafi-jihadist terrorist constellation in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.⁴⁰ The robust Chinese economic presence has given regionally based Salafi-jihadi terrorist groups including

AQIS and IS-K a new non-Muslim invader to contest. It has given locally based, anti-Pakistan ethnic terrorist groups a new, nearby target set. It also has given Pakistani military and intelligence leadership new and more daunting missions to track and disrupt regional terrorist groups with animus toward Chinese presence in Pakistan and Beijing's policies with respect to Chinese Muslim minority groups.

Chinese nationals in Pakistan have been targeted by extremists there for many years.⁴¹ But the exposure of Chinese nationals to Pakistani extremists and terrorist groups has never been higher. As a pre-CPEC condition from Beijing, Pakistan created a section in the Special Security Division—including 9,000 army soldiers and 6,000 paramilitary forces personnel—to provide security for Chinese nationals and projects. In addition, various types of CPEC security forces were generated at provincial levels.⁴² This extraordinarily resourced security detail has been far from perfect. IS-K has successfully targeted Chinese nationals in Pakistan multiple times over the past 5 years. In May 2017, the group kidnapped two Chinese nationals from Quetta, announcing the following month that both had been killed. That incident halted the free movement of Chinese nationals in the city. In January 2021, IS-K kidnapped and killed 11 miners in southwestern Balochistan Province.⁴³ In April 2021, China's ambassador to Pakistan was narrowly missed in a terrorist attack at a hotel in Quetta where his delegation was staying. In addition, Chinese workers were attacked in deadly roadway bombings and shootings during June 2021.⁴⁴

Tensions between China and Pakistan are rising over the loss of Chinese lives and increasing exposure to regional terrorists. Pakistan knows that if it cannot ensure the safety of Chinese workers, then it may face a very cold and financially dangerous response from Beijing.⁴⁵ Despite this knowledge and Pakistani efforts to strike at terrorists within Pakistan and to use the Haqqani Network to broker a peace deal with major anti-Pakistan Salafi jihadist leaders in the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, the Sino-Pakistani CPEC relationship is increasingly fraught.⁴⁶ The attacks against Chinese people across Pakistan, and against Pakistani security personnel charged to secure Chinese workers, by Salafi jihadists and ethno-nationalist Pakistan groups from Sindh and Balochistan provinces have continued into 2022. This prompted some 2,000 Chinese workers to depart from Pakistan during spring 2022 and exacerbated a slowdown in CPEC projects, threatening Pakistan's economic plans and fragile economy.⁴⁷

Certainly, Pakistani military and intelligence services communicate and coordinate extensively with their Chinese counterparts about protecting workers and pressuring anti-Chinese terrorist elements in Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, the thrust of Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts is not fully aligned with Chinese priorities. Managing and exploiting a baseline level

of Salafi jihadism and militancy is a core part of Pakistan's national security strategy against India and not subject to Chinese alteration or suasion.⁴⁸

Simultaneously, and for the first time in more than two decades, northern Afghanistan and Central Asia are becoming major flash points for Salafi jihadist terrorism. During early 2022, IS bombed Shia mosques near the border with Central Asia—one in Mazar-i-Sharif, 50 miles from Uzbekistan, and one in Kunduz, 45 miles from Tajikistan—killing a total of 80 people. In April, IS-K claimed to have launched a botched rocket attack into Uzbekistan.⁴⁹ Since regaining power, the Afghan Taliban have repeatedly assured the governments in Central Asia that they would not allow Afghan territory to be used for attacks against Afghanistan's neighbors. But the Taliban lack ethnic credibility in the north of the country and are finding it again—as in the 1990s—difficult territory to control.

Affiliates and fragments of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) now resident in northern Afghanistan constitute a primary security challenge. IMU and its anti-Uzbek affiliated terror groups all pledged allegiance to IS. First, Jamaat Ansarullah, now a security affiliate of the Afghan Taliban, was once the Tajik wing of IMU, a group formed by Uzbeks who fought on the side of the Islamic opposition during the 1992–1997 Tajik Civil War. Run off from Tajikistan, then Uzbekistan and through Afghanistan and into Pakistan, Jamaat Ansarullah remained within the IMU constellation there despite numerous efforts to eradicate them by the Pakistani army. Under extreme duress from a Pakistani military offensive that began in 2015, Jamaat Ansarullah scattered across north Afghanistan. The Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) is an IMU splinter group formed in 2005. It also committed to IS and has been active in northern Afghanistan. Finally, IMU spin-off Katibat Imam al-Bukhari saw many of its number move to Syria in 2014–2015 to fight with al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusrah. Loyal to al Qaeda, many from its numbers returned to northern Afghanistan in 2016 and recommitted to overthrowing the governments in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.⁵⁰

IS-K briefly had a foothold in northern Afghanistan in 2016 when a disaffected ethnic Uzbek local Taliban commander in the northern Jowzjan Province named Qari Hikmatullah swore allegiance to the Islamic State and carved out an IS-K area there. IS-K lost this Jowzjan stronghold by April 2018 after successful U.S. and Afghan military operations. Beginning in December 2021, with limited to no effective Taliban security presence in north Afghanistan, IS-K reportedly began an increasingly effective recruitment campaign with ethnic Uzbek and Tajik Afghans. The campaign stresses that the Taliban are a Pashtun movement that does not respect Afghan minority rights and deserves to be attacked, like the governments in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

For now, the Central Asian states hope the Afghan Taliban can get a tighter grip on northern Afghanistan and the growing jihadist menace there. Yet they recognize increasing vulnerabilities to jihadist terrorism, which has not been so prevalent since before 2001.⁵¹ Over their shoulders, China is on notice from this direction as well. Ethnic Muslim Uyghurs are very much present in the Salafi jihadist groups affiliated with both AQIS and IS-K. Many are organized into cells managed by the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM; known more recently as the Turkistan Islamic Party), while others are in various regional Salafi jihadist terrorism groups targeting the states to China's west, including the IMU, IJU, and Jamaat Ansarullah.⁵²

Russia remains the dominant security overlord across Central Asia, with unmatched ties and influence. China and other regional actors have relied on Russia to maneuver security options for best advantage to suffocate potential Salafi jihadist threats.⁵³ Although reliance on Russia's counterterrorism lead in the past has paid dividends for Beijing and across the region, the Russian war in Ukraine has brought into question Moscow's residual military capability and political acumen to sustain counterterrorism results in a rapidly evolving and more complex Salafi jihadist environment.⁵⁴ China's prospects for leading durable counterterrorism programs against the major accomplices of its Turkistan nemeses do not look good, either. China has introduced some paramilitary border forces into South Tajikistan and reportedly parts of northeastern Afghanistan while pressuring the increasingly challenged Afghan Taliban government to make anti-Uyghur militant operations a priority. Beijing also has urged the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which it co-founded, to prioritize counterterrorism activities. But neither of these approaches today shows great promise. The SCO is a security organization without formally constituted or affiliated operational units and thus more of a Chinese-led political forum, limited to rhetorical statements about broad security and economic aspirations.⁵⁵ The Chinese approach to the Afghan Taliban lacks clout because of China's historical unwillingness to physically intervene in the domestic dilemmas of a sovereign state. Even if that inhibition were dropped, China would need a quantum leap forward in the kinds of intelligence gathering and precision targeting necessary to enable targeting of Uyghur terrorism outfits and individuals in Afghanistan, which only the United States and its Western counterterrorism partners ever have effectively pursued in the region.

The threats posed to Pakistan and to China by the evolving Salafi jihadist milieu across a post-American South Asia provide two critical insights. First, the Western departure has accentuated and accelerated Salafi jihadist primary terrorism targeting toward Pakistan and Central Asia, with grave implications for Chinese nationals in Pakistan and China's western border security. Second, America and its allies alone possess the military and intelligence capabilities to

precisely target many of the Salafi jihadist leaders and critical outfits most dangerous to Pakistan now and into the foreseeable future.⁵⁶

These two insights inform Western policymakers about who needs counterterrorism support, what they need, and how Washington and its key security partners might pursue wise security collaboration that capitalizes on South Asia regional needs and Western strategic interests. In turn, the overlay of Great Power competition on the core South Asian security framework of the Indo-Pakistani security dilemma indicates where America and its allies should work to effectively reengage in a manner that best advances their major geostrategic interests and special security capabilities.

The Historic Geostrategic Shift: The GPC Strategic Paradigm in South Asia

For American policymakers, the dominant global strategic realities of 2022 differ substantively from those of 2001, 2009, 2012, and most important, even 2017.

America, China, and Russia are now almost 5 years into a formally acknowledged fast-evolving era of Great Power competition.⁵⁷ While not yet a main theater of direct GPC, South Asia has been shaping up as a growing arena for proxy strategic competition in the U.S.-China dyad for almost a decade, and the implications of this new geostrategic overlay are now becoming clearer. China and India are joined in a complex and increasingly testy strategic relationship. China's strategic partnership with Pakistan exacerbates Sino-Indian tensions and warms a historically wary India to intensifying American overtures for greater strategic partnership in opposition to growing Chinese influence across the Indian Ocean region. Pakistan prizes its alliance with China as its most vital strategic and economic arrangement against India but seeks to retain traditional hedging strategy with the United States and the West to avoid entrapment by any one geostrategic partner, including Beijing.

In late 2022, the United States has a primary geostrategic imperative of competing with China long term in South Asia. Containing and constraining the remaining international terrorism threat remains a secondary security interest, no longer the predominant one.

The United States must continue to pursue strategic partnership with India in its geostrategic competition with China. This is a first-order imperative, because India possesses the most latent power of any country bordering China or in the Indo-Pacific region. Successive administrations in Washington have understood this situation, seeking greater Indian military interoperability and strategic convergence over the past two decades.⁵⁸ Ever cautious on matters involving strategic autonomy, India continues a slow dance with the West in strategic partnership against China.

India's greatest strategic thinker since its independence, the late Krishnaswamy Subrahmanyam, wrote directly about the inevitable convergence of American and Indian strategic futures; they both face the growing existential threat to democracy and liberalism posed by the march of authoritarianism and denial of pluralism purveyed by Beijing.⁵⁹ K. Subrahmanyam's successors, including his son, long-serving diplomat and current Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, have moved India slowly along a pathway toward this strategic convergence. But this pathway is oblique, given India's aversion to formal alliances and its determination not to prematurely provoke antagonism from New Delhi's number one trading partner.⁶⁰

Even with these constraints, India has concluded four foundational military coordination and interoperability agreements with the United States over the past half decade and has become one of only a handful of states conducting regular, annual 2+2 political and defense minister coordination meetings with Washington.⁶¹ India also joined the United States, Japan, and Australia in the strategic framework for diplomatic and political coordination in support of Indo-Pacific openness and rules-based order known as the Quad.⁶² Each of these milestones indicates the primary strategic basis for growing Western geostrategic partnership with India. The United States and its strategic partners need only to sustain the slow but steady pace in building this vital relationship for the long-term competition with China.

Pakistan presents different geostrategic challenges and opportunities when its evolving regional security posture is considered. Vulnerable as a primary target of Salafi jihadist terrorism and without the political ability to coerce Afghan Taliban destruction or the precision-strike military tools to reliably disrupt the threat, Islamabad today confronts an increasingly frustrated patron in Beijing. Although China is unlikely ever to abandon its longtime ally, Pakistan rightfully fears that an economic retreat by Beijing due to unabated terrorism risks would leave Islamabad unable to pay its international debts and untenably beholden to China. Therefore, Pakistan's military chief has stated publicly and repeatedly during the 2022 political crisis over the fate of former Prime Minister Imran Khan that the country wishes to maintain its long-standing helpful relations with the United States.⁶³

Pakistan is looking for both an economic and a security hedge against slipping relations with China. It also needs quiet Western assistance in military precision targeting of those terrorist entity leaders in IS-K or AQIS who threaten both Pakistan and its Chinese guests today—and potentially the West again tomorrow. The American precision drone strike that killed Ayman Zawahiri in Kabul on July 31, 2022, shows the potential of such a quiet, tactical counterterrorism partnership. Zawahiri's growing anti-Chinese rhetoric made him a security problem for Pakistan. Pakistani military intelligence could track him through his relationship with

patronage elements in the Haqqani Network but could not be the actor to eliminate Zawahiri inside Afghanistan, given its lack of technical means and the risk of a relationship rupture with the Haqqanis. Thus, the solution of choice: Pakistani intelligence quietly confirms the precise Zawahiri location and behavior patterns, American precision technology takes out the target, Pakistan's military denies playing any role, and both sides benefit.⁶⁴

As in the case of Zawahiri's elimination, Pakistan's increasingly stressful relationship with China provides strategic opportunities for the United States and the West. They can reconstitute a transactional politico-military relationship in Islamabad that advances primary Western geostrategic interests in GPC with China while achieving residual counterterrorism aims and keeping growth of the strategic partnership with India versus China in the fore.

The American Policy Opportunity and Recommendations: GPC and Counterterrorism Interactions with Pakistan

Since the fall of Kabul to the Taliban, the U.S. Government has been reconsidering its relationship with Pakistan.⁶⁵ This is especially true since the new civilian government in Pakistan did not endorse former Prime Minister Imran Khan's unequivocal refusal to discuss future U.S. military activities in Pakistan and the Pakistani military broke publicly with Khan's obsessive anti-Americanism.⁶⁶ Thus, a new, tactical bilateral relationship might consist of three elements.

First, the United States and its Western partners should quietly reestablish a small number of counterterrorism intelligence and Special Forces assets inside Pakistan.⁶⁷ The amount should be limited to the level necessary to synchronize and coordinate manned and unmanned counterterrorism strikes against IS-K, AQIS, and other mutually threatening Salafi jihadist terrorism leadership targets in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. This would be a logical and necessary transactional activity for both parties. The transaction would include overflight and temporary staging rights for Western aerial assets undertaking counterterrorism.⁶⁸ The small, quiet presence of U.S. and Western assets would flesh out the reformulated global counterterrorism intelligence and strike network now being established by Washington and its partners in recognition of the new global terrorist mosaic. It also would address the Pakistan military's unmistakable need to generate timely, remote, precision-strike missions against terrorist targets it cannot otherwise eliminate, to protect national economic projects or sensitive activities.

Second, the United States should negotiate iteratively with Pakistan for limited Pakistani purchase of spare parts for its current Western military equipment, used in counterterrorism activities to its west, and the sale of modest amounts of intermediate-generation military and intelligence counterterrorism equipment, used for the same purpose. An effort along these lines

was made in September 2022, when Washington approved the sale of \$450 million in sustainment and related equipment for Pakistan's F-16 fleet despite a freeze on military-to-military security assistance since 2018—and in noteworthy proximity to the targeted killing of Zawahiri in Kabul.⁶⁹ This transaction was a good down payment on a smaller reprise of past Western military equipment sale arrangements with Pakistan, which now would serve two purposes—one counterterrorism-related and one GPC-related. For counterterrorism, it would ensure some continuing interoperability with Western assets already possessed by Pakistan rather than letting them atrophy for lack of spare parts or refurbishment. For Great Power competition with China, even this limited, iterative program would give Islamabad the ability to avoid complete transition to Chinese military and counterterrorism equipment—much of which is today inferior to that of Western design. As it has historically, the Pakistani military would welcome this hedging opportunity. Although India would express understandable concerns, the Western track record of successful calibration of military equipment sales to Pakistan so as not to disadvantage Indian defense should minimize any backlash from New Delhi.⁷⁰

Finally, the United States should work to reestablish mid-level political-military dialogue with Pakistan on the topic of regional counterterrorism and transactional partnership arrangements in light of their mutual interest. Duly constituted, this dialogue would be helpful in the short term and more useful in the long term, to directly discern the status of the Sino-Pakistani strategic relationship. It will be important for the United States and Western strategic partners to understand the vicissitudes and stressors in the relationship between China and Pakistan over time. As these tensions ebb and flow, Washington and its Western partners might be able to gain a lot of insight—maybe even some of strategic intelligence value—about Chinese intentions and capabilities across the wider Indo-Pacific by using the Pakistani military's access and liabilities to Western advantage in the wider geostrategic competition.

Conclusions

The highly visible and emotionally charged August 2021 end to the latest post-World War II U.S. security foray into South Asia overshadowed significant geostrategic evolution over the past half decade that made a change in Washington's security approach toward Afghanistan—and South Asia in general—overdue. Although the Indo-Pakistani security dilemma remains South Asia's dominant regional paradigm, the change in dominant global geostrategic paradigm from one of the war on terror to Great Power competition has produced significant change for Western strategic interests in the region.

Pakistan and China are now at relatively higher risk from residual Salafi jihadist terrorism; the regional dimensions of terrorism have evolved since 2015. In departing from Afghanistan, the United States removed a security presence that, for all its shortfalls, created both a foil to and an ally for Islamabad and Beijing to leverage in containing much of the terrorism that now threatens both. At least for the foreseeable future, Salafi jihadist outfits will pose a far greater threat to regional states, and particularly Pakistan and China, than they will for the United States and Western homelands or major overseas interests. This substantively changed situation is evident in 2022 and will remain dominant into the future. And U.S. coalition military and intelligence presence no longer generates targeting against elements of the Afghan Taliban working with anti-Pakistan jihadist outfits, depriving Rawalpindi of the nontrivial kind of “pincer effect” it has been able to take advantage of over the past two decades.

The growing dynamic of global Great Power competition between the United States, China, and Russia has reframed the security construct within South Asia even though it does not recast the major regional security paradigm: the intractable Indo-Pakistani security dilemma. This dilemma will remain, but the U.S.-China Great Power dyadic rivalry across the Indo-Pacific now dominates the South Asia regional geostrategic framework. In short, GPC is displacing the global war on terror and recasting relationships and possibilities between the United States, China, India, and Pakistan.

For the United States and its security partners, managing India’s responsible rise as a strategic partner and a net security provider against Chinese advances in the western Indo-Pacific will be the main prize. The process to achieve this aim has already been started by the United States and India. It is progressing slowly but steadily with increasing strategic agreements, exercises, and exchanges between New Delhi, the United States, Japan, Australia, France, and other liberal democratic states. Patient and persistent security interactions with India will advance mutual Indo-American strategic interests in countering China’s threats in the region.

At the same time, Pakistan’s historic penchant for strategic hedging makes it unlikely that Rawalpindi will paint itself into the corner of full strategic alignment with China. Instead, Pakistan might be expected to seek out transactional deals with the United States and the West in a manner that exploits its close relationship with China and sustains its strategic options—and generates diplomatic opportunity for Washington and its partners.

Historically averse to strategic dependence on any one outside entity, Pakistan has a strategic tradition of triangulation between the United States and China for security assistance, and triangulation between the United States, the Gulf Arab states, and, recently, China for economic assistance. Today, this Pakistani practice is recurring as Islamabad exhibits growing concern

about its accelerating exposure and vulnerability to Chinese political demands or economic coercion due to massive CPEC debts and its poor economic performance. The realities confronting Islamabad provide the United States and Western partners with transactional security openings. The main opening is one that would allow the United States to quietly formalize with Pakistan a program of limited counterterrorism support, featuring in-country access and intelligence sharing, in exchange for continuing support to Pakistan's classic use of Western financial institutions to wriggle out of debt crises. Simultaneously, Washington would reestablish security talks initially as a venue for counterterrorism coordination, with the potential to glean future Pakistani insights about Chinese vulnerabilities and activities in the security arena across South Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific region.

In the new and evolving geostrategic environment of GPC across South Asia, the United States must continue to cultivate India as a long-term strategic partner against China and seek steady, deliberate security convergence accordingly. At the same time, the United States and its partners need to pursue a revised tactical security arrangement with Pakistan that is optimized for mitigation of the short-term Salafi jihadist terrorism threat while allowing Pakistan a longer-term hedging option, which could generate important strategic insights and observations about Chinese security strengths and weaknesses. America and its Western partners best manage their security future in South Asia—and an inevitable return there—by framing its strategic interactions with India and Pakistan along these lines.

Notes

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³⁸ The concept/construct for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was first proposed by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang during his visit to Pakistan in May 2013; the formal agreement for CPEC was signed by both parties during President Xi Jinping’s April 2015 visit to Pakistan. CPEC was originally meant to be inaugurated in the fall of 2014, but national unrest from Pakistani opposition politician Imran Khan’s protests of Nawaz Sharif’s government pushed the launch back to spring 2015. See Madiha Afzal, “At All Costs”: *How Pakistan and China Control the Narrative on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, June 2020), available at <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FP_20200615_china_pakistan_afzal_v2.pdf>; Raza Khan, “15,000 Troops of Special Security Division to Protect CPEC Project, Chinese Nationals,” *Dawn*, August 12, 2016, available at <<https://www.dawn.com/news/1277182>>.

³⁹ Initially forecast as a \$46 billion undertaking, CPEC has seen its estimated cost rise, reaching \$65 billion in 2020. It is a project scheduled to run for 15 years, through 2030. See Masood Khalid, “New Framework for China-Pakistan Cooperation,” *China Daily*, March 4, 2019, available at <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/global/2019-03/04/content_37443355.htm>; and Isaac Kardon, “China’s ‘New Era’ of Influence in Pakistan: Counterterrorism and the Limits of the All-Weather Partnership,” in *Essays on the Rise of China and Its Implications*, ed. Abraham M. Denmark and Lucas Myers (Washington, DC: The Wilson Center, 2021), 153–188, available at <<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/2020-21-wilson-china-fellowship-essays-rise-china-and-its-implications>>.

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