

ARGUMENT

China and Pakistan Have Struck a Devil's Bargain With Militants

Beijing may be safeguarding its interests with the Taliban.

BY YELENA BIBERMAN, JARED SCHWARTZ | APRIL 5, 2019, 10:57 AM

The tense standoff between India and Pakistan has gotten tenser with a surprising move by China. On March 14, China **blocked** a United Nations effort to designate as a terrorist Masood Azhar, a militant group leader who had brought the two South Asian nuclear rivals to the brink of war. Azhar is the founder and leader of Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), which took credit for the Feb. 14 suicide attack in India-administered Kashmir that sparked the recent India-Pakistan crisis.

It might seem strange for China to coddle a militant group that is threatening its **\$60 billion investment** in Pakistan. However, there is a possibility that the Afghan Taliban, not JeM, may have provided the initial push for the attack. By giving diplomatic cover to JeM, China is safeguarding its economic interests in the region and propping its regional ally (Pakistan), which is pressuring the Afghan Taliban to negotiate with Kabul.

Pakistan has been playing a critical role in the U.S.-Taliban peace talks. Their success would mean U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, where China has big plans. Last year, Beijing **decided** to expand the flagship project of its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative—the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) infrastructure-building plan—into Afghan territory, with the **support** of Kabul.

China's strategy in South Asia appears to be cautiously patient. Beijing supports significant efforts to stabilize Afghanistan—most recently, Pakistan's push for the Afghan government to be included in the U.S.-Taliban peace talks—while treating the ensuing backlash and obstacles as inescapable and not a deal-breaker.

China does what it must to keep itself from becoming the target of Islamist ire, especially given the now widespread coverage in the press of its **internment camps** for Uighurs and other Muslim peoples living in Xinjiang. Some have called Azhar “**Beijing's go-to man to ensure security**” of the CPEC. But he is really more of a potential regional threat that China does not want to trigger. It must play a delicate game with Azhar. A U.N. Security Council denouncement would be “**deeply embarrassing**” for him, and a terrorist designation would also severely limit his mobility by freezing his funds and international travel.

Azhar's proven capacity for carnage in Kashmir and **beyond** seriously threatens China's CPEC investments in Pakistan (and Afghanistan). This likely factors heavily into China's calculations. Reputation matters **a great deal** when it comes to South Asian politics. The case of Azhar shows that a powerful country like China can be concerned about its reputation not just in front of other countries or domestic audiences but also when it comes to powerful militant leaders. It must stay in Azhar's good graces

because he has the capacity to seriously threaten its economic and security interests.

The CPEC already faces significant security challenges. The Kashmir region, where Gilgit-Baltistan is an “important part” of the CPEC project, is perpetually on edge. Baluchistan is mired in insurgency. Despite the reported surrenders of hundreds of Baluch separatists, Baluch militants attacked a Chinese consulate in Karachi in November 2018. Afghanistan, rocked by violent conflict for more than 40 years, is teetering on the edge of another civil war.

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The prospect of a stable Afghanistan gives Pakistan a strong incentive to advocate for Kabul’s representation in the peace talks between Washington and the Taliban. And China appears to be encouraging Pakistan to do just that. At the first trilateral meeting with the foreign ministers of Pakistan and Afghanistan in 2017, China in a joint statement called for “a broad-based and inclusive peace and reconciliation process,” suggesting that the inclusion of all Afghan parties was crucial to China’s interests in the region.

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Successful negotiations could also **precipitate** the withdrawal of U.S. troops within three to five years. With the United States out of the picture, and the CPEC binding the two countries' economies closer together, Pakistan could move to pull Afghanistan away from India's **economic orbit**.

China might be courting militants to protect its own interests—but it's a long leap from that to encouraging attacks on others. Pakistan, meanwhile, has long used proxy groups to stab at India. Yet the timing of the Feb. 14 attack seems off. Islamabad had little to gain and lots to lose in a crisis.

One party that definitely gained from the attack in India was the Afghan Taliban. The Taliban are ardently opposed to negotiating with Kabul. They **deem** the Afghan government not only illegitimate but also not genuinely interested in ending U.S. occupation and, therefore, incapable of negotiating the withdrawal. The Taliban have, so far, resisted all efforts to compel them to engage with the central government, including by demanding the change of venue for the talks from Riyadh to Doha. As one senior Taliban member **explained**: “The problem is that leaders of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates wanted us to definitely meet the Afghan government delegation, which we cannot afford to do now, and we have canceled the meeting in Saudi Arabia.”

However, over the past several months, Pakistan has applied **“unprecedented pressure”** on the Taliban to open talks with the Afghan government. “I haven't seen Pakistan so serious before,” a senior Taliban leader **told** Reuters. “They [Pakistani officials] made it clear to us that we

[the Taliban] have to talk to the U.S. and Afghan government.” In January, Pakistani authorities arrested a top Taliban commander and then, according to **a senior Taliban leader**, “started raids on many other houses of the Taliban movement, their friends and commanders in different places in Pakistan.”

Then came the Pulwama attack in India-controlled Kashmir. Maleeha Lodhi, Pakistan’s permanent representative to the United Nations, **warned** that the ensuing crisis with India “will obviously mean that Pakistan will have to put its full focus on its eastern border ... rather than the western front and that could affect the peace process [in Afghanistan].” No other regional actor would this benefit more than the Afghan Taliban, which, incidentally, have long-standing **ties** with JeM.

According to the United Nations, JeM was formed with the **Taliban’s support** by Azhar after he was released from prison in India in 1999 in exchange for 155 hostages held on an Indian Airlines flight that had been hijacked to Kandahar, Afghanistan—a deal facilitated by the Taliban.

The Taliban and JeM also have extensive financial and leadership ties. JeM is financed by Al-Rehmat and Al-Akhtar trusts, which are both controlled by Azhar. JeM registered Al-Akhtar Trust as a humanitarian aid agency in Pakistan following Azhar’s arrest after the 2001 Indian Parliament attack for cover. It has been **linked** to the kidnapping and murder of the Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl. Al-Rehmat Trust also began serving **as a front for JeM’s operations** in 2002 by, among other things, providing financial and logistical support to foreign fighters operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan. According to the U.S. Treasury Department, Al-Rehmat Trust has provided **financial support and other services** to the Taliban, including financial support to wounded Taliban fighters from Afghanistan.

Al-Akhtar Trust, an **offshoot** of JeM, is **financially linked** to the Taliban through its executive officer, Mohammad Mazhar, who has **led** the trust's financial efforts to support the Taliban and was once **part** of a Taliban combat unit. Hakeem Muhammad Akhtar, the former CEO of Al-Akhtar Trust, was **closely aligned** with former Taliban leader Mullah Omar. Another top Taliban fundraiser, Abdur Rehman, **maintains ties** with both JeM and Al-Akhtar Trust. JeM is also associated with Al-Rashid Trust, which was involved in the funding of both the Taliban and al Qaeda.

The use of an attack in one area to distract from another is also an established tactic for JeM. Bruce Riedel, a senior fellow and director of the Intelligence Project at Brookings Institution, **suggested** that the prime beneficiary of JeM's 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament was Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda: "In December 2001, the al-Qaeda was on the run, even on the ropes. ... By diverting Pakistan's army to the east, to the border with India for the next year, the Parliament attack helped save al-Qaeda."

China and Pakistan are facing a delicate balancing act. They both want to push the Taliban to engage with Kabul. But the Taliban, which have extensive ties to groups such as JeM, can generate instability in the region through operations similar to the Feb. 14 attack in response to pressure. China and Pakistan, in order to protect the CPEC, must simultaneously remain on the militant groups' good side and cajole the Taliban. The potential costs of failure, such as regional chaos and lost investment, are high. But the potential benefits of success—snatching Afghanistan from India while building a massive economic corridor with security benefits **likely to follow**—are highly alluring.

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