

Pakistan prime minister visits Beijing amid heightened US-China tensions

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Pakistan's new prime minister, Imran Khan, completed a four-day visit to China earlier this month—his first trip since coming to office three months ago—amid rising tensions and rivalries throughout the region between Washington and Beijing.

With Pakistan facing a worsening balance-of-payments, Khan was desperate to secure Chinese financial support. At the same time, he is under pressure from Washington to dilute Chinese influence in the country. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned in July that any IMF loan would be contingent on lessening Pakistan's economic dependence on China.

Washington's chief concern is the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a crucial part of Beijing's broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to link the Eurasian landmass. The CPEC includes the development of road, rail and pipeline links between the Pakistani port of Gwadar on the Arabian Sea and western China.

For Beijing, such a corridor is essential to help secure China's access to Africa and the oil-rich Middle East and strengthen its ability to resist a US blockade of China's vital shipping routes through South East Asia in the event of conflict.

Prior to his visit to China, Khan, under pressure from Washington, indicated that he would seek to renegotiate the terms of the CPEC. He insisted the government would shift the CPEC's objectives from infrastructure to agriculture, job creation and foreign investment. Such a move would focus the project on economic rather than strategic issues.

As an initial step, Islamabad announced in October that it had revised the cost of key railway projects from \$8.2 billion to \$6.2 billion and wanted to bring it down to \$4.2 billion.

If Khan was hoping for an immediate bailout from China, he was disappointed. At the visit's conclusion, Pakistan and China issued a joint statement but it did not include specific financial aid. China is fully aware of the impact of the mounting US pressure on Pakistan and clearly requires guarantees of its interests before handing out further funds.

On the second day of Khan's visit, Vice Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou said: "As for the specific measures to be taken, the relevant authorities of the two sides will have detailed discussions." As for any revision of the CPEC, Kong effectively dismissed any significant changes. "There is no change [in the CPEC] at all," he said. "If there were, it would only be to increase, not decrease."

China is increasingly coming under fire from the US for engaging in "debt trap diplomacy"—that is, luring countries with the offer of huge infrastructure loans that they are in no position to repay. Such criticisms are utterly hypocritical given that US imperialism and its allies have, for decades, exploited loans with strings attached to prosecute their economic and strategic interests.

In a video entitled "Why China and US are vying dominance in Pakistan," the *Wall Street Journal* cited Sri Lanka as an example of a "debt trap" that Islamabad should avoid. China funded a sea port in Hambantota. When Sri Lanka could not afford to repay the loan Colombo reached a deal to give China the port on a 99-year lease and ensuring Beijing had access to a port facility along the strategic maritime trade route.

The joint China-Pakistan statement hit back, stating: "Both sides dismissed the growing negative propaganda against CPEC and expressed determination to safeguard the CPEC projects from all threats. Pakistan recognised the immense contribution of the

Chinese personnel working on various economic projects in Pakistan. The Chinese side expressed its appreciation for the measures taken for the security of Chinese personnel and projects in Pakistan.”

Like countries throughout the region, Pakistan is engaged in a precarious balancing act between Washington and Beijing.

The premier informed his cabinet that his maiden official visit to China was “more successful than expected” and that the China has “assured every kind of assistance to Pakistan.” But Khan was unable to provide any detail of the particular “assistance” on offer beyond the generalities in the joint statement about agriculture, forestry, fishery, natural resources, etc.

The *Dawn* newspaper concluded that Khan had been given the “cold shoulder” by China during his visit. “The prime minister arrived in Beijing assuming he was there to talk tough, get a better deal and more money, but was taken aback when the Chinese firmly told him off by demanding Pakistan fix its own problems and provide governance to its people instead of asking China to do so,” it wrote.

The actual agreements—15 in all—signed during Khan’s visit were limited, covering bilateral cooperation in fields like economy, agriculture, law enforcement and technology and Chinese assistance in social spheres such as education, health and safe drinking water. The two sides also agreed to alleviate the trade imbalance which is overwhelmingly in China’s favour. Total annual trade between the two countries is about \$15 billion of which Chinese exports to Pakistan account for about \$13 billion. China’s main concession is reportedly to allow trade to take place in Chinese yuan rather than US dollars.

On his return, Khan chaired meeting of Pakistan’s National Security Council where he briefed senior ministers and top generals. China has been pressing Pakistan to commit military forces to securing the transport routes from China through Pakistan. While the meeting reviewed the security situation and committed to the maintenance of “peace, stability, and rule of law” nothing was said about a military deployment to protect the CPEC.

Shortly after Khan’s election win in August, the top Pakistani officer, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, visited China to deepen military ties between the two

countries. Amid concerns in Beijing about the new government’s commitment to the CPEC, Zhang Youxia, a deputy chairman of China’s powerful Central Military Commission, commented: “China-Pakistan military ties are an important backbone of relations between the two countries.”

In a country where the military has seized power more than once, this remark amounted to a veiled warning to Khan that Beijing would back the Pakistani generals above the elected government if the latter turned away from China.



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