

## COMMENT 265 – Pakistan Caught in Fire with Iran, China Acts to Mediate

By **Amrita Jash** and **Yashvi Barot**

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**Amrita Jash** is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Geopolitics and International Relations, Manipal Academy of Higher Education (Institution of Eminence), Manipal, India.



**Yashvi Barot** is pursuing a Masters Degree at the Department of Geopolitics and International Relations, Manipal Academy of Higher Education (Institution of Eminence), Manipal, India.

On 16 January, 2024, the Border Taskforce of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps Ground Force of Iran launched attacks on the militant bases of the Jaish al-Adl<sup>1</sup> group in Panjgur in Pakistan’s Balochistan province. [Iran’s Foreign Ministry](#) called it: a preventive action against a terrorist group preparing to infiltrate the territory of the Islamic Republic of Iran to carry out another terrorist operation similar to the criminal and terrorist attack in Rask. Condemning the Iranian strikes, [Islamabad stated](#) that “this violation of Pakistan’s sovereignty is completely unacceptable and can have serious consequences”, while Pakistan’s National Security Committee affirmed its commitment to protect the country’s [security and sovereignty at all costs](#).<sup>2</sup> [Acting tit-for-tat, on 18 January, Pakistan](#) responded with retaliatory airstrikes on the terrorist hideouts of the Balochistan Liberation Army and Balochistan Liberation Front in the Sistan-Baluchistan province under [Operation Marg Bar Sarmachar](#). Caught by surprise and facing a dilemma, Pakistan’s logic to retaliate was not just limited to safeguarding its sovereignty. As [Asfandiyar Mir](#)

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<sup>1</sup> Jaish al-Adl, also known as the “Army of Justice”, is a Sunni militant faction that emerged in 2012 and has a significant presence in Pakistan. It is a U.S. designated terrorist group that has been fighting the Iranian regime with the goal of securing political and economic rights for the ethnic Baluch and Sunni in Iran.

<sup>2</sup> On 19 January, the National Security Committee meeting held. The meeting was chaired by caretaker Prime Minister Anwaarul Haq Kakar and the meeting was attended by Foreign Minister Jalil Abbas Jilani, Army Chief General Asim Munir, Navy Chief Admiral Naveed Ashraf, Pakistan Air Force chief Zaheer Ahmad Babar, and the heads of intelligence agencies.

[argues](#): for the Pakistani leadership, the absence of a response by Pakistan would have emboldened countries like India, and especially Afghanistan (where the Teherik-e-Taliban is a security threat for the country). However, on 22 January, both Islamabad and Tehran issued a joint statement saying that it has been mutually agreed that the Ambassadors of both countries may return to their respective posts by January 26. Following up on the de-escalation, Iran’s Foreign Minister will be visiting Pakistan on 29 January at the invitation of his Pakistani counterpart Jalil Abbas Jilani. On this development, [China’s Foreign Ministry remarked stating](#):

China welcomes the good progress that Iran and Pakistan have made in repairing their ties and supports them in further enhancing mutual trust and deepening cooperation through friendly consultation. We stand ready to work with Iran and Pakistan to strengthen mutually beneficial cooperation and safeguard regional peace, stability and development.

Can this development be attributed to Chinese intervention between its two close allies?

The sudden flare-up between two Asian neighbours, but more importantly ‘two brotherly Muslim countries,’ comes at a time when the Middle East has become an increasingly tense region, since Hamas-led an attack on Israel in October 2023. Since then the region has been embroiled in the Israel-Gaza conflict, the escalation in the Red Sea with the Houthi rebel’s attack on international shipping vessels, and more recently the attacks by the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq against bases with U.S. troops in both Iraq and Syria. Given the critical need to avert a further military escalation, countries like China, Russia, Turkey, and the European Union have called the two countries to show “[maximum restraint](#)”. The US has made it clear that it does not want to see an escalation; however, [US President Joe Biden](#) also stated that “Iran is not particularly well-liked in the region”. [India took a position](#) that it is “a matter between Iran and Pakistan”, so being that India holds “zero tolerance towards terrorism”; however, India “understand[s] actions that countries take in their self defence”. Of all countries, the situation has put China in the most difficult position as Beijing is a close ally to both Tehran and Islamabad. On 18 January, on the query of Pakistan’s retaliatory strike on Iran, [China’s Foreign Ministry stated](#) that:

China always believes that relations between countries should be handled in accordance with the purposes and principles of the UN Charter and international law and that countries' sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity should be respected and safeguarded. Iran and Pakistan are close neighbours and countries who have influence and keep friendly relations with China. China sincerely hopes that the two sides will remain calm and restraint and avoid escalation of the tension. If there is need from the two sides, we would like to play a constructive role in cooling down the situation.

China's statement highlights three aspects. First, on international disputes (where China is not directly involved) Beijing seeks compliance to UN norms and upholds sovereignty; however, in its own unilateral actions in the South China Sea or at the land border with India, China does not. Second, any form of tension between Iran and Pakistan (both China's friends) does not align with China's interests. And third, China seeks to further act on [its role as an international mediator](#)- a precedent it has set to its long held 'non-interventionist' foreign policy by brokering the Saudi-Iran peace deal in 2023. Not to mention, China has failed to make any breakthrough in Gaza or in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Therefore, given China's strategic and economic interests in both Iran and Pakistan, instability between its allies impedes its ambitions in the region. Scholars like [Abdul Basit argue](#) that "a stable Iran-Pakistan-Afghanistan region opens several opportunities for China to expand into Central Asia and beyond". China's stakes remain high; Beijing cannot afford a further deterioration.

China's interests to play a "constructive role", as in the words of the Chinese Foreign Ministry to "[bridge differences through dialogue and consultation](#)" is driven by its strategic calculations. First, in diplomatic terms, both Pakistan and Iran are China's 'Strategic Partners'; Pakistan is also an 'all-weather friend'. Second, at the core lies the essential need to maintain stability in Baluchistan - a Pakistani province that shares borders with Iran. This is directly linked to safeguarding China's strategic asset - the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the flagship project under the Belt and Road Initiative. Third, maintaining a conducive security environment is key to China, especially along the borders of Xinjiang where China faces threat of terrorism from the East Turkistan Islamic Movement. Stability in Iran-Pakistan ties is crucial to China's counter-terrorism actions as

validated by the establishment of the trilateral counterterrorism and regional security consultation between Beijing, Tehran and Islamabad in June 2023. All three share a concern over security in Baluchistan – as well as Afghanistan. Besides, both Iran and Pakistan are also members of China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization; tension among members can impact the functioning of the SCO. Fourth, China’s willingness to mediate between Tehran and Islamabad can also be viewed in alignment with Xi Jinping’s [Global Security Initiative](#) that seeks to provide China’s solutions to global security challenges. And lastly, China’s quest to present itself as the alternative to the US in dealing with and managing crisis - not just promoting security and stability in region, but also projecting China’s responsibility as a major country.

So far, China’s mediation has been calibrated in its hand-on-hand dealing with Islamabad and Tehran. For instance, on 20 January, China’s Vice-Foreign Minister Sun Weidong met with Pakistani Foreign Secretary Mohammad Syrus Sajjad Qazi in Islamabad<sup>3</sup> and [discussed the current international and regional situation, stressing the need to](#) “strengthen coordination and cooperation” between China and Pakistan and “jointly contribute to regional peace, stability, development and prosperity”. Simultaneously, on 21 January, [China’s Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu had a phone call](#) with Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Ali Bagheri Kani. And on 22 January, both Islamabad and Tehran issued a joint statement based on mutual agreement to de-escalate tensions. Drawing a pattern in the events, one can speculate that China did have a role to play in the so-called peace between Pakistan and Iran. With so much at stake, mediating between its two crucial allies is probably the only way forward for Beijing. If that’s the case, it can be further argued that, now it is a bigger burden for China to sustain the peace between Pakistan and Iran.

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<sup>3</sup> To note, on 21 January, Sun Weidong co-chaired the Fourth Meeting of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Joint Working Group on International Cooperation and Coordination in Islamabad.

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19 Avenue des Arts 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, 1210 Brussels, Belgium  
E 0833.606.320 RPM Bruxelles  
Email: [info@sadf.eu](mailto:info@sadf.eu) Web: [www.sadf.eu](http://www.sadf.eu)