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Pakistan courts China as relations with U.S. grow strained

By Griff Witte,

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In this city where U.S. Navy SEALs touched down long enough last month to [kill Osama bin Laden](#) and ignite a national furor, residents are courting another foreign invasion.

They want China, the emerging superpower just 400 miles to the north along the Karakoram Highway, to invest in this economically depressed part of Pakistan and bring roads, energy, trade and jobs.

“China is our path to prosperity,” said Haidar Zaman, the former mayor of Abbottabad, which lies in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

Many Pakistani leaders believe the same can be true for the entire country: With U.S.-Pakistani relations at [their lowest point since 2001](#), top Pakistani officials have been actively promoting China as an alternative benefactor that could deliver badly needed economic and military assistance without the relentless criticism offered by Washington.

But the drive to move Pakistan away from the United States and into the Chinese orbit has run into a cold reality: China is just not that interested.

China's tentative approach to Pakistan helps explain why, despite widespread antipathy here toward the United States, Pakistan is reluctant to force a deeper rupture in relations with Washington, which provides billions of dollars in aid.

Ironically, the same factors that keep the United States heavily invested in Pakistan — terrorism and instability — have persuaded China to hold Pakistan at arm's length.

“What the Americans are doing here — that's just not a role that China wants to take on,” said Ashraf Ali, who leads the FATA Research Center, a think tank that focuses on militancy in Pakistan's northwest.

A Chinese official who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject described Pakistan as a close ally, both politically and militarily, and said it represents a significant business opportunity for Chinese firms. But he also expressed apprehension about Islamist extremism here and noted that any attempt to turn Pakistan into a central trading corridor for China would be a decades-long project.

Pakistani officials would prefer a more unconditional embrace.

Both President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani visited China soon after the May 2 bin Laden raid, with Gillani pointedly calling China “Pakistan's best friend.”

The military here has trumpeted China's recent decision to supply Pakistan with 50 fighter jets, even as army officials say they [would rather do without U.S. military assistance](#). Top generals have been contemplating what it would mean for Pakistan to take a stronger stand against Washington and receive a greater share of aid from Beijing.

[Economic development](#) experts, meanwhile, have been busy drawing up grand plans for ports, pipelines and railways so that Pakistan can reap the full benefit of China's global rise.

Geostrategic importance

Pakistanis love China just about as much as they dislike the United States: 87 percent of Pakistanis say they have a favorable view of China, compared with 12 percent who say the same about the United States, according to [a Pew Research Center survey](#). The divergent attitudes begin early: Schoolchildren here are taught that the China-Pakistan partnership is “as high as the mountains and as deep as the seas,” but that the United States has been a fickle friend.

Those perceptions have hardened of late amid U.S. pressure on Pakistan to do more in the fight against militant groups and a widespread sense that U.S. assistance comes with strings attached while China's does not. U.S. lawmakers have been particularly critical of Pakistan since the bin Laden raid, while Pakistan has bristled at not being notified in advance.

“The Chinese are not involved in internal Pakistani problems,” said Amir Rana, director of the Pak Institute for Peace Studies. “Washington gives statements about Pakistan every day. China prefers to give its reaction only when needed.”

But that is not to say that China does not have strong interests here. Most important, Pakistan serves as a check on the rising influence of India, China's main rival for Asian supremacy.

Pakistan's location is also strategically important to China. A Chinese-built deep-sea port in the southwestern Pakistani city of Gwadar offers Chinese companies a potentially faster route to natural resources — including energy supplies — in the Middle East and Africa. It also gives China a possible shortcut for transporting goods from its western regions to foreign markets and for extending its growing naval influence into the Arabian Sea.

But [the port](#), which opened for business in 2008, has been a disappointment. Although then-Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf hailed it as the next Dubai, Gwadar has attracted little business. When Pakistani Defense Minister Chaudhry Ahmed Mukhtar floated the idea last month of China building a naval base at Gwadar, Beijing politely declined.

Much of the problem is Gwadar's isolation: The port is in Baluchistan, a remote and relatively lawless province that lacks a viable road network.

Missing infrastructure

In the long term, China hopes to link Gwadar with [the Karakoram Highway](#), another major Chinese investment in Pakistan that has yielded few dividends. The highway, which is the world's highest paved road, is an engineering marvel that slices through 15,000-foot-high mountain passes but attracts sparse traffic: A landslide last year buried a miles-long stretch of the road under water, and any goods being transported between Pakistan and China must now make part of the journey by boat.

Still, China is upgrading the road, which enters the country near its western border in the restive and underdeveloped Xinjiang region. Long-term plans call for the addition of an oil pipeline.

"We should have capitalized on the China opportunity far earlier. We had a highway into China in the 1980s. We could have had the first-mover advantage," said Sakib Sherani, a former top Pakistani finance official.

But Sherani insists that it is not too late: With China focused on developing its western regions, Gwadar and the Karakoram Highway could fit in perfectly with those plans. "There's a much bigger business opportunity for us, if we can get our act together," he said.

Zaman and others in Abbottabad, connected to the Chinese border via the highway's vertiginous turns, certainly hope so. City leaders dream of the day when Chinese trucks come barreling down the road laden with cheap manufactured goods and head back bearing granite, precious stones and other minerals mined from the surrounding hills.

"People will have job opportunities, business opportunities. And we'll collect a lot of taxes," said the white-bearded Zaman, who retired as mayor last year but remains a force in local politics. "Why do we like China? Because they don't want to make Pakistanis slaves like the Americans do. They just want to do business."