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FROM CRISIS RESPONSE TO ROUTINE GOVERNANCE: THE UNEVEN INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF CHINA–PAKISTAN LAW ENFORCEMENT COOPERATION

ChenRong Zheng[1#*], Wei Zong[2#], Lei Niu[1*]
[1]*School of Humanities and Law, Southwest Forestry University, Kunming 650224, Yunnan, China.*
[2]*Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, Kunming 650034, Yunnan, China.*
[#]*ChenRong Zheng and Wei Zong contributed equally to this work and they are both first authors.*
[*]*ChenRong Zheng and Lei Niu contributed equally to this work and they are both corresponding authors.*
[*]*Corresponding Author: ChenRong Zheng; Lei Niu*

Abstract: China and Pakistan have built a dense legal framework for law enforcement cooperation, yet much of the cooperation it supports has been assembled in the aftermath of attacks on Chinese nationals. This article asks why formal commitments have produced so little routine practice and why institutionalization varies so widely across issue areas. Drawing on a legal reading of treaties and domestic law, an event–response chronology of attacks on Chinese nationals in Pakistan (2004–2026), and a content analysis of ten joint statements (2013–2026), the article finds that the framework is high in obligation, moderate in precision, and low in delegation: consultative channels exist, but no joint body holds operational authority. Attacks have changed what the two governments commit to, but cumulatively rather than incident by incident; scheduled diplomacy has largely set the timing of new commitments, and Pakistan's own investment in protective forces has supplied an anticipatory track. Cooperation has institutionalized fastest where sovereignty costs are low and slowest where it would require foreign security personnel, cross-border evidence, or transfers of data. The China-Pakistan Security Partnership, announced in May 2026 after nineteen months without a lethal attack, suggests a possible shift from crisis-driven to agenda-driven institutionalization. A comparison with the Mekong River joint patrols indicates that routine governance in Pakistan is more likely to rest on standing coordination and host-state capacity, in keeping with cooperation premised on respect for sovereignty, than on joint policing.
Keywords: China–Pakistan relations; Non-traditional security; International police cooperation; Legalization; Focusing events; China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

1 INTRODUCTION

On March 26, 2024, a suicide bomber rammed an explosives-laden vehicle into a convoy near Besham, in the Shangla district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, killing five Chinese engineers and their Pakistani driver [1-2]. Six weeks later Pakistan's military announced that the attack had been planned in Afghanistan and carried out by an Afghan national [3]. In October a bomb near Karachi's international airport killed two more Chinese workers [4]. The aftermath of each attack followed a familiar script: condemnation from Beijing, pledges of "zero tolerance" from Islamabad, additional protection for Chinese personnel, and a new round of high-level commitments. In May 2026 the two governments went a step further and pledged to "establish the China-Pakistan Security Partnership" [5].

The pattern is puzzling. Over more than two decades China and Pakistan have concluded an extradition treaty, an agreement on mutual legal assistance in criminal matters, a treaty on the transfer of sentenced persons, a counterterrorism agreement, a friendship treaty that makes cooperation against transnational crime a legal obligation, and an agreement on the boundary regime. Both are parties to the principal UN crime conventions and members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Yet the public record of joint operations, joint investigations, and completed extraditions is thin, and the most consequential steps have tended to follow bloodshed rather than anticipate it. Why has so dense a formal architecture yielded so little routine practice? And why does institutionalization differ so sharply across issue areas, from the speed of disaster relief to the near absence of anti-corruption casework?

This article argues that the relationship has followed a pattern of crisis-driven institutionalization, subject to three qualifications. Lethal attacks have reshaped the content and urgency of cooperation, but cumulatively, not in proportion to any single incident. The diplomatic calendar has largely determined when new commitments are announced. And Pakistan has expanded its own protective forces in anticipation of rising Chinese investment, independently of particular attacks. The deeper reason that crisis has not become routine lies in the design of the framework, which is high in obligation but low in delegation. The steps that would convert commitments into standing practice, such as admitting foreign security personnel, moving evidence and data between two legal systems, or creating joint bodies with operational authority, carry high sovereignty costs for Pakistan and meet legal constraints on both sides. Routinization has therefore advanced mainly through Pakistani capacity and bilateral coordination rather than joint policing, a path that fits China's stated principle that law enforcement cooperation should respect the sovereignty of partner states [6]. The Security Partnership, announced during a long lull in lethal attacks, suggests that the relationship may now be moving toward agenda-driven institutionalization.

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The study contributes to three bodies of work. For research on China's overseas security, it maps attacks on Chinese nationals in Pakistan systematically against the institutional responses that followed and codes the security content of bilateral joint statements, so that the familiar claim that cooperation is driven by crises can be tested rather than asserted. For research on international police cooperation, it applies the legalization framework of Abbott and colleagues [7], developed largely with Western and multilateral institutions in mind, to a South–South relationship and connects it to work on focusing events [8] and critical junctures [9]. Comparatively, it sets the Pakistani case against the China-led Mekong River patrols, in which a single crisis produced a durable joint mechanism, in order to identify the conditions under which crisis becomes routine.

The evidence comprises treaty texts, domestic legislation, joint statements and action plans, United Nations and Financial Action Task Force (FATF) documents, data from the Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), and Chinese, Pakistani, and international press reports. Because police and intelligence cooperation is partly confidential, the absence of a public record does not establish the absence of activity. Public evidence is therefore treated as a lower bound, and the discussion flags the points at which the record is thin.

Section 2 situates the argument in the literature and sets out the framework and method. Section 3 analyzes the legal architecture, including the domestic law that conditions what the treaties can deliver, and Section 4 turns to Pakistan's security institutions. Section 5 traces counterterrorism cooperation from 2004 to 2026, and Section 6 compares six further issue areas. Section 7 discusses the findings and the prospects of the Security Partnership, Section 8 considers policy implications, and Section 9 concludes.

2 LITERATURE, CONCEPTS, AND FRAMEWORK

2.1 Non-Traditional Security and the Protection of Overseas Interests

Non-traditional security denotes threats that arise from non-state actors or from natural, technological, and social processes, as opposed to the armed forces of other states: terrorism, organized crime, drug trafficking, cyberattacks, disasters, and epidemics. Two traditions shape the concept. The human security agenda, articulated in the United Nations Development Programme's 1994 Human Development Report, defines security as "freedom from fear and freedom from want" across seven dimensions: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political [10]. The Copenhagen School, by contrast, treats security as a speech act that moves an issue out of normal politics and into the domain of emergency measures [11]. Scholars of Asia have drawn on both. Caballero-Anthony and colleagues emphasize the transnational character of these threats and the need for cooperative responses [12], and Chinese scholars such as Yu Xiaofeng have built a substantial literature of their own [13].

The distinction matters here because China–Pakistan law enforcement cooperation stands closer to the second tradition than to the first. Its central concern is the protection of Chinese nationals, projects, and institutions abroad, together with joint action against groups that both governments regard as terrorist organizations. Chinese doctrine frames the issue in similar terms. The Holistic National Security Outlook, introduced at the first meeting of the Central National Security Commission on April 15, 2014, places traditional and non-traditional threats on a single agenda [14]. Article 8 of the 2015 National Security Law requires national security work to coordinate "internal and external security, territorial security and the security of the people, traditional and non-traditional security, and China's own security and common security" [15]. The report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2022 devoted a full section to modernizing the national security system and stressed the coordination of development and security [16]; the 2025 white paper China's National Security in the New Era extended the framework to cyberspace, data, biosecurity, and artificial intelligence [17]. Internationally, the Global Security Initiative (GSI) concept paper of February 2023 calls for addressing traditional and non-traditional threats together, for strengthening the UN's central role in counterterrorism, and for conducting law enforcement cooperation "on the basis of respecting each country's sovereignty," with support for the capacity building of developing countries [6]. Pakistan has endorsed the initiative in successive joint statements [18-20].

A second literature examines how China protects its interests abroad. Duchâtel, Bräuner, and Zhou describe a "slow shift" away from strict non-interference as the number of Chinese citizens and assets overseas grew [21]. Ghiselli traces how the securitization of overseas interests reshaped Chinese foreign and security policy [22], while Legarda and Nouwens and Arduino document the expansion of Chinese private security companies along the Belt and Road [23-24]. On Pakistan, Small's study remains the standard account of the bilateral relationship [25]; Wolf analyzes the political economy of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) [26]; and Pantucci and Petersen and Markey place the relationship within China's wider engagement with its western periphery [27-28]. This work establishes that security has become central to the relationship. It has less to say about law enforcement cooperation as such, about the legal machinery on which it rests, or about why it has developed so unevenly.

2.2 International Police Cooperation

Research on international police cooperation supplies concepts that the China-focused literature lacks. Nadelmann identifies two processes in the internationalization of criminal law enforcement: the regularization of relations between agencies and the harmonization of criminal laws and procedures [29]. Andreas and Nadelmann extend the argument to global prohibition regimes, showing that cooperation requires a minimum of legal convergence and that powerful states tend to export their criminal law priorities [30]. Deflem argues that police cooperation historically advanced when

police institutions gained enough bureaucratic autonomy from their governments to cooperate on professional rather than political grounds [31].

Two expectations follow for the China–Pakistan case. If Deflem is right, cooperation should be most routine where professional agencies deal with each other directly and least routine where foreign ministries or militaries mediate it. If Nadelmann and Andreas are right, cooperation should stall where legal systems diverge, as China's civil law tradition and Pakistan's common law tradition do, and where no instrument has harmonized procedure.

2.3 Focusing Events, Critical Junctures, and Legalization

The claim that cooperation is crisis-driven rests on two related concepts. Birkland defines focusing events as sudden, relatively rare, and harmful events that become known to policymakers and the public at the same time and thereby open windows for agenda change [8]. Capoccia and Kelemen define critical junctures as relatively short periods in which the choices of key actors have a substantially heightened probability of shaping subsequent institutional paths [9]. Attacks on Chinese nationals in Pakistan plainly qualify as focusing events. The question is whether they have also functioned as critical junctures, generating institutions that persist and operate between crises.

Institutionalization is measured here with the legalization framework of Abbott, Keohane, Moravcsik, Slaughter, and Snidal, which distinguishes three dimensions [7]: obligation, the degree to which states are legally bound; precision, the degree to which rules unambiguously specify the conduct they require; and delegation, the extent to which third parties or standing bodies are authorized to implement, interpret, and apply the rules. Routine governance requires more than obligation. It is treated here as present when four conditions hold: standing bodies meet on a fixed schedule; operational tasks are delegated to joint or third-party mechanisms; operational activity, such as patrols or joint investigations, continues between crises; and case flows, such as mutual legal assistance requests and extraditions, are reported. Agenda-driven institutionalization, by contrast with the crisis-driven variety, refers to institutional change initiated through scheduled diplomacy or doctrinal initiatives in the absence of a precipitating incident.

The crisis-driven hypothesis expects major upgrades to cluster in the months after lethal attacks and to address those attacks in their content. Four alternatives compete with it. A diplomatic-calendar explanation expects commitments to track scheduled leadership visits, not incidents; an investment-driven explanation expects protective arrangements to anticipate the growth of Chinese projects; a doctrinal explanation expects changes in Chinese security doctrine to drive cooperation from the top down; and a regional-shock explanation expects events such as the Afghan Taliban's return to power in 2021 to reshape the threat environment and, with it, the bilateral agenda. Variation across issue areas is examined through five factors: the sovereignty costs of cooperation for the host state, the symmetry of demand between the two governments, implementation capacity, the compatibility of the two legal systems, and the availability of multilateral frameworks that can carry part of the load.

2.4 Method, Sources, and Scope

The analysis combines legal interpretation with process tracing [32]. The bilateral instruments and the relevant domestic legislation are examined to establish what the framework permits, requires, and omits. For the process tracing, an event–response chronology (Table 3) was compiled from press reports and official statements. It records attacks in Pakistan between 2004 and 2026 that killed or wounded Chinese nationals or targeted Chinese personnel, facilities, or convoys, along with the bilateral instruments, Pakistani institutional changes, and joint-statement commitments that followed. The chronology is selective rather than exhaustive; it includes the incidents most widely reported and most often cited in official statements. To test whether attacks altered the content of bilateral commitments, ten joint statements issued during leaders' visits between 2013 and 2026 were also coded for six features: a dedicated security heading, the "zero tolerance" formula, commitments on the safety of Chinese personnel, projects, and institutions, commitments to investigate attacks and punish perpetrators, the naming of specific groups, and the naming of security mechanisms (Table 4). Following Collier, the analysis distinguishes evidence that a hypothesis must pass to remain viable (hoop tests) from evidence that strongly confirms it (smoking-gun tests) [33].

In view of Sartori's warning against conceptual stretching [34], law enforcement cooperation is defined narrowly here, as cooperation in policing, criminal investigation, prosecution, judicial assistance, border control, and financial intelligence. Military cooperation and humanitarian assistance are treated as adjacent fields; disaster relief is retained as a contrast case because it shows how cooperation behaves when sovereignty costs are low. Most primary sources are Chinese official documents. They are supplemented with Pakistani official statements, Pakistani and international press reporting, PIPS data, and UN and FATF records; claims that rest on a single government's account are identified as such.

3 THE LEGAL ARCHITECTURE

3.1 Bilateral Treaties

The legal basis for cooperation has accumulated over more than two decades (Table 1).

Table 1 Principal Legal Instruments for China–Pakistan Law Enforcement Cooperation

Instrument	Signed	Entry into force / ratification	Core scope

Instrument	Signed	Entry into force / ratification	Core scope
		Bilateral instruments	
Boundary Agreement	Mar. 2, 1963 (Peking)	On signature	Delimits the frontier; Art. 6 provides for renegotiation after settlement of the Kashmir dispute
Extradition Treaty	Nov. 3, 2003 (Beijing)	Jan. 10, 2008	Surrender of fugitives; mandatory refusal for political offenses (attentat clause only) and for nationals; no duty to prosecute
Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Good-Neighborly Relations	Apr. 5, 2005 (Islamabad)	Jan. 4, 2006	Art. 5: terrorism, separatism, extremism, organized crime, illegal immigration, drug and arms trafficking
Agreement on Cooperation in Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism	Apr. 5, 2005 (Islamabad)	Dec. 12, 2006	Names the MPS and Pakistan's Ministry of Interior as central authorities with direct contact
Agreement on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters	Apr. 17, 2007 (Beijing)	Aug. 6, 2010	Evidence gathering, service of documents, other judicial assistance
Agreement on the Boundary Regime	May 22, 2013	—	Art. 1: order at crossings; joint prevention of cross-border crime
Treaty on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons	Nov. 2018 (Beijing)	Ratified by China Apr. 2020	Transfer of sentenced persons to serve sentences in their home country
		Multilateral conventions	
UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC)	China: Dec. 12, 2000; Pakistan: Dec. 14, 2000	Ratified by China Sept. 23, 2003; by Pakistan Jan. 13, 2010	Organized crime; shared basis for legal assistance and extradition
UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC)	China: Dec. 10, 2003; Pakistan: Dec. 9, 2003	In force for China Feb. 12, 2006; ratified by Pakistan Aug. 31, 2007	Corruption offenses, return of fugitives, asset recovery
International Convention for the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings (1997)	—	Acceded: China Nov. 13, 2001; Pakistan Aug. 13, 2002	Art. 11: covered offenses not to be regarded as political offenses for extradition or legal assistance
International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism (1999)	China: Nov. 13, 2001	Ratified by China Apr. 19, 2006; acceded by Pakistan June 17, 2009, with declarations on Arts. 11 and 14	Terrorist financing; Art. 14 depoliticization, qualified by Pakistan's declarations

Note: — indicates a date not reported in the sources consulted or not applicable. Sources: [35-49].

Two instruments form the core of criminal justice cooperation. The Extradition Treaty, signed in Beijing on November 3, 2003, entered into force in January 2008 [36-37]; the Agreement on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters, signed in Beijing in April 2007, followed in August 2010 [40-41]. Two further instruments were signed in Islamabad on April 5, 2005, during Premier Wen Jiabao's visit and less than a year after attacks on Chinese engineers in Gwadar and South Waziristan (Section 5). Article 5 of the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Good-Neighborly Relations commits the parties, in accordance with their domestic laws and their agreements on extradition and narcotics control, to "carry out cooperation on a bilateral and multilateral basis to combat terrorism, separatism and extremism as well as organized crime, illegal immigration and illicit trafficking in drugs and weapons" [38]. The companion Agreement on Cooperation in Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism, in force since the exchange of instruments of ratification in December 2006, designates China's Ministry of Public Security (MPS) and Pakistan's Ministry of Interior as central authorities with a right of direct contact [39]. Because Pakistan was not yet a full member of the SCO, the agreement carried the SCO's "three evils" framework into a bilateral relationship with a non-member. Finally, a treaty on the transfer of sentenced persons, agreed in principle in 2014 [50], was signed in Beijing in November 2018 and ratified by the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress in April 2020 [43].

The border rests on two further instruments. The Boundary Agreement of March 2, 1963, delimited the frontier, but its Article 6 provides that, once the Kashmir dispute between Pakistan and India is settled, the sovereign authority concerned will reopen negotiations with China on a formal boundary treaty [35]. In legal terms the arrangement is therefore provisional. China's position is that the Kashmir issue is a dispute left over from history that should be resolved properly and peacefully in accordance with the UN Charter, relevant Security Council resolutions, and bilateral agreements [19-20], and Beijing has stated that the development of CPEC does not affect that position [51]. The Agreement on the Boundary Regime of May 22, 2013, commits both sides in its Article 1 to maintain order at crossings and along the frontier. The offenses they undertake to "jointly prevent and combat" include terrorism, kidnapping, arms and drug trafficking, smuggling, trafficking in women and children, and illegal entry, exit, residence, and employment [42].

3.2 What the Extradition Treaty Does and Does Not Do

Much of the framework's practical value turns on details that political statements rarely mention [36]. The treaty covers conduct that is criminal in both states and punishable by at least one year's imprisonment. Article 3 makes refusal

mandatory in several circumstances, two of which matter most for counterterrorism. The requested party must refuse if it considers the offense political; the only carve-out is a classic attentat clause excluding violent attacks, or attempted attacks, on a head of state or government or their family members. There is no general exclusion for terrorist offenses. Refusal is also mandatory where the person sought is a national of the requested party, and the treaty imposes no duty to prosecute in lieu of extradition; Article 4 merely permits refusal where the requested party is itself prosecuting. Requests travel through diplomatic channels to each party's foreign ministry, and the treaty is silent on the death penalty.

These features have practical consequences. As a matter of treaty text, the requested party retains discretion to characterize politically motivated violence, including attacks by ethno-separatist groups, as a political offense. Multilateral law narrows that discretion only in part. Both states are parties to the International Convention for the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings (China acceded in November 2001, Pakistan in August 2002), whose Article 11 bars treating the offenses it covers as political for the purposes of extradition or mutual legal assistance [48]. Because most lethal attacks on Chinese nationals in Pakistan have been bombings, this provision closes much of the gap where it matters most. The International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism contains a comparable clause in Article 14, but Pakistan acceded in 2009 with declarations that it does not regard the convention as a legal basis for extradition and that extradition remains subject to its domestic law [49].

The nationality exception, combined with the absence of an obligation to prosecute, means that a suspect who returns home can be neither surrendered nor, as a matter of treaty obligation, tried. Article 7 of China's Criminal Law permits prosecution of Chinese nationals for crimes committed abroad [52], but whether to proceed is a domestic decision. The 2018 treaty on the transfer of sentenced persons is only a partial complement: it allows nationals convicted in the other state to serve their sentences at home, but it does not resolve the prior question of where a suspect is tried. The diplomatic channel, moreover, makes extradition slower and more political than the agency-to-agency channel created by the 2005 counterterrorism agreement. The treaty's silence on capital punishment cuts the other way. It removes an obstacle that often frustrates extradition between China and abolitionist states, since both China and Pakistan retain the death penalty.

3.3 Domestic Law: The Hidden Layer

Treaties set the outer bounds of cooperation; domestic law determines how much of it can take place. Table 2 summarizes the most relevant provisions.

Table 2 Domestic Legal Provisions That Shape Bilateral Cooperation

Law	Provision	Effect on cooperation
	China	
Extradition Law (2000)	Art. 8: mandatory refusal where the person sought is a Chinese national or the offense is political	Chinese nationals cannot be surrendered; prosecution at home is discretionary (Criminal Law, Art. 7)
Counter-Terrorism Law (2015, amended 2018)	Art. 71: personnel may be sent abroad on counterterrorism missions with the host state's agreement and State Council or Central Military Commission approval; Art. 72: use of evidence obtained through international cooperation	Legal pathway for deployments and evidence flows, conditional on host-state consent
International Criminal Judicial Assistance Law (2018)	Art. 4: no foreign criminal proceedings in China, and no provision of evidence to foreign authorities, without approval	Requests pass through a defined approval procedure
Data Security Law (2021); Personal Information Protection Law (2021)	Art. 36 and Art. 41: approval required before data stored in China is provided to foreign judicial or law enforcement bodies	Data sharing for cyber and fraud cases requires prior approval
Anti-Telecom and Online Fraud Law (2022)	Art. 3: reaches fraud by Chinese citizens abroad and foreign actors targeting China; Art. 37: international police cooperation	Mandates outward-facing cooperation on fraud
	Pakistan	
Constitution (Eighteenth Amendment) Act (2010)	Policing and public order are provincial subjects	Implementation rests with provincial police and counterterrorism departments
Anti-Terrorism Act (1997)	Anti-terrorism courts; s. 19: joint investigation teams constituted by government	JITs combine police and intelligence agencies; no established role for foreign officers
Mutual Legal Assistance (Criminal Matters) Act (2020)	Central authority; assistance on the basis of reciprocity	Domestic procedure for requests, adopted during the FATF review
Qanun-e-Shahadat Order (1984)	Common law rules of evidence and witness examination	Foreign evidence must meet adversarial admissibility standards
Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (2016)	Cybercrime offenses and procedures	Domestic basis for cyber cooperation

Sources: [52-64].

On the Chinese side, the Extradition Law of 2000 requires refusal where the person sought is a Chinese national or the request concerns a political offense [53]. The International Criminal Judicial Assistance Law of 2018 prohibits foreign institutions from conducting criminal proceedings in China, and Chinese entities from providing evidence to foreign authorities, without approval from the competent Chinese authorities [55]. The Data Security Law and the Personal Information Protection Law of 2021 impose comparable approval requirements on the transfer of data stored in China to foreign judicial or law enforcement bodies [56-57]. These provisions safeguard judicial and data sovereignty. Their practical effect is that a Pakistani request must pass through defined approval procedures before evidence or data can be shared, which places a premium on procedural clarity on both sides.

Other statutes look outward. Article 71 of the Counter-Terrorism Law allows the MPS and the state security authorities to send personnel abroad on counterterrorism missions after reaching agreement with the country concerned and obtaining State Council approval, and allows the People's Liberation Army and the People's Armed Police to do so with the approval of the Central Military Commission. Article 72 permits material obtained through international counterterrorism cooperation to be used as evidence [54]. The Anti-Telecom and Online Fraud Law of 2022 applies to fraud committed by Chinese citizens abroad and to foreign actors who target victims in China, and its Article 37 directs the MPS to build international police cooperation mechanisms for information exchange, evidence gathering, arrest, and asset recovery [58]. Chinese law thus already provides a pathway for Chinese security personnel to operate abroad and for evidence to flow back. Both depend on the consent of the host state.

In Pakistan, the Mutual Legal Assistance (Criminal Matters) Act of 2020, adopted during the FATF review, created a central authority and permits assistance on the basis of reciprocity [62]. The Anti-Terrorism Act of 1997 provides for special anti-terrorism courts and, in section 19, for joint investigation teams (JITs) [60]. In practice, provincial governments constitute JITs in terrorism cases, combining provincial counterterrorism police with military and civilian intelligence agencies [61]. The Qanun-e-Shahadat Order of 1984 governs evidence, and its rules on admissibility and the examination of witnesses follow the common law tradition [63]; cybercrime falls under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act of 2016 [64]. Pakistan therefore has the instruments to cooperate. Evidence gathered under Chinese civil law procedures, however, must be made admissible in an adversarial system. Any foreign participation in investigations would have to fit a JIT model that makes no provision for foreign officers.

3.4 Multilateral Conventions and the SCO

Both states are parties to the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) [44-45] and the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) [46-47]. Where the bilateral treaties are silent, these conventions supply a shared legal vocabulary and a fallback basis for requests.

The SCO adds a regional layer. Founded in Shanghai on June 15, 2001 [65], the organization adopted on the same day the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism, which gave the "three evils" their first agreed definition [66]. The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) began operating in Tashkent in June 2004 [67], and the SCO Convention against Terrorism, signed in 2009, entered into force in January 2012 [68]. Pakistan became a full member on June 9, 2017 [69]. Some Western scholars have questioned the breadth of the SCO's definitions of separatism and extremism [70], whereas SCO documents present them as the basis for cooperation grounded in the "Shanghai Spirit" of mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, and consultation [65]. For bilateral law enforcement, the more immediate limitation is practical. The SCO offers a platform for intelligence exchange and exercises, but not the bilateral delegation that day-to-day police work requires.

3.5 A Legalization Profile

The four layers add up to a distinctive legalization profile. Obligation is high, since the core instruments are ratified treaties reinforced by multilateral conventions. Precision is moderate at best. The friendship treaty and the counterterrorism agreement commit the parties to act against broad categories of threat "in accordance with" domestic law without specifying procedures, timelines, or standards of performance, and the extradition treaty, though precise on the grounds for refusal, leaves the most sensitive cases, politically motivated violence and the surrender of nationals, outside its reach.

Delegation is low. Consultative mechanisms do exist. The foreign ministries have held bilateral counterterrorism consultations since at least the early 2010s, with a seventh round in Beijing in April 2013 that addressed the security of Chinese personnel and projects [71]; joint statements refer to defense and security consultations [72-73]; and trilateral counterterrorism consultations have been added with Iran, institutionalized in 2023, and with Afghanistan [74-75]. None of these bodies, however, has authority to implement the instruments. They are led by foreign ministries or defense establishments, not by law enforcement agencies, extradition runs through diplomatic channels, and the MPS–Interior channel is a line of communication, not an institution with operational tasks. High obligation allows both governments to point to an extensive framework, while low precision and delegation leave the substance of cooperation to be negotiated case by case, and in practice crisis by crisis.

4 PAKISTAN'S SECURITY INSTITUTIONS: FEDERALISM, THE ARMED FORCES, AND MULTIPLE ADVERSARIES

Analyses of China–Pakistan security cooperation often treat Pakistan as a unitary counterpart. For law enforcement purposes it is not, and three features of its security governance condition what bilateral cooperation can achieve.

The first is federalism. Since the Eighteenth Amendment of 2010 devolved a wide range of subjects to the provinces, policing and public order have been provincial responsibilities [59]. Each province maintains its own police force and Counter Terrorism Department, and terrorism investigations are typically conducted by JITs constituted by provincial governments [61]. Federal agencies, among them the Federal Investigation Agency, the National Counter Terrorism Authority, and the Anti-Narcotics Force, cover specific functions, and the civil armed forces, including the Rangers and the Frontier Corps, report to the federal Ministry of Interior, since renamed the Ministry of Interior and Narcotics Control [76]. Yet the 2005 agreement makes that federal ministry Pakistan's central authority [39]. The ministry can commit Pakistan politically and coordinate federal agencies; it does not direct the provincial police and prosecutors who handle most cases. The mismatch between treaty counterpart and implementing agencies is structural. Even the creation of the Special Security Division (SSD) for CPEC in 2016 required terms of reference negotiated with the provinces to address concerns about overlap with provincial police [77].

The second feature is the central role of the armed forces. The army and the intelligence services lead counterterrorism, and the protection of Chinese projects has been organized largely through military formations. The SSD, raised in 2016 with some 15,000 personnel, most of them serving soldiers, operates in zones from Gwadar to Gilgit-Baltistan and is responsible for security within five kilometers of CPEC-related projects [77]; in 2019 the military announced that a second division would be deployed for the corridor [78]. Provincial police have built their own Special Protection Units (SPUs). By 2025 Punjab's SPU was running a round-the-clock helpline and airport help desks for Chinese nationals, with officers enrolled in Chinese-language training [79], and in January 2026 the interior minister announced that a similar unit was being set up in Islamabad [80]. The result is a two-track structure. The formal law enforcement channel runs from the MPS to the Ministry of Interior, while much of the operational protection of Chinese nationals is delivered by the army and provincial units. Cooperation confined to the first track misses most of the activity.

The third feature is the diversity of adversaries, which differ in ideology, geography, and organization. The Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), an ethno-separatist group, and its suicide wing, the Majeed Brigade, have claimed most attacks on Chinese targets since 2018, including those on the Chinese consulate in Karachi in 2018, on the University of Karachi in 2022, and near Karachi airport in 2024 (Table 3). The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and associated networks are concentrated in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Pakistani officials have linked the Dasu and Besham attacks to networks based in Afghanistan [3, 81]. The East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), on the UN Security Council sanctions list since 2002 [82], remains a central Chinese concern. Each threat calls for different instruments. Countering the BLA depends on intelligence about urban networks and financing in Balochistan and Sindh, countering the TTP depends heavily on Afghanistan, and countering ETIM involves cross-border cooperation and the politics of multilateral listing.

These features have to be read against the scale of militant violence in Pakistan. PIPS recorded 699 terrorist attacks in 2025, 34 percent more than in the previous year, killing at least 1,034 people; more than 95 percent of the attacks took place in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, and 437 of the dead were security and law enforcement personnel [83]. Chinese nationals account for a small share of the victims. For Pakistan's security institutions their protection is one priority among many, though an unusually visible one, which helps explain both Islamabad's responsiveness to Chinese concerns and its sensitivity to proposals that would station foreign security personnel on Pakistani soil.

5 COUNTERTERRORISM COOPERATION, 2004–2026

5.1 Three Waves of Attacks

The chronology in Table 3 shows three waves of attacks: 2004–2007, 2018–2019, and 2021–2024.

Table 3 Attacks on Chinese Nationals in Pakistan and Subsequent Responses, 2004–2026

Date	Incident	Claim or attribution	Responses that followed
	First wave, 2004–2007		
May 3, 2004	Car bomb, Gwadar; three Chinese port engineers killed [84]	—	Apr. 2005: friendship treaty and counterterrorism agreement signed [38, 39]
Oct. 9–14, 2004	Two Chinese engineers (Gomal Zam dam) kidnapped, South Waziristan; one killed during rescue, per Chinese reports [85]	Militants	As above
Feb. 15, 2006	Three Chinese engineers and their driver shot dead, Hub, Balochistan [86]	—	—
June 23, 2007	Several Chinese nationals abducted by Lal Masjid seminary students, Islamabad; released the same day [87]	Lal Masjid students	Chinese officials press for protection of Chinese citizens; July: government operation against Lal Masjid [25]
July 8, 2007	Three Chinese nationals killed near Peshawar [88]	Unidentified gunmen	—
	Second wave, 2018–2019		

Date	Incident	Claim or attribution	Responses that followed
Aug. 11, 2018	Suicide attack on bus carrying Saindak project engineers, Dalbandin; two Chinese nationals wounded [89]	BLA	May 2019: second army division announced for CPEC security [78]
Nov. 23, 2018	Attack on Chinese consulate, Karachi; two police officers killed [90]	BLA	2019: United States designates BLA a Specially Designated Global Terrorist [91]
		Third wave, 2021–2024	
July 14, 2021	Bus bombing, Dasu; nine Chinese nationals and four Pakistanis killed [81]	Pakistani officials allege foreign involvement [81]	July 2021: 15 Chinese investigators join the investigation [92]
Aug. 20, 2021	Suicide attack on Chinese convoy, Gwadar; two children killed, Chinese national wounded [93]	BLA	—
Apr. 26, 2022	Suicide attack on Confucius Institute van, University of Karachi; three Chinese teachers and driver killed [94]	BLA [95]	July 2022: main suspect arrested [96]
Aug. 13, 2023	Attack on convoy of Chinese engineers, Gwadar; no Chinese casualties [97]	BLA (Majeed Brigade)	—
Mar. 20, 2024	Attack on Gwadar Port Authority Complex [98]	BLA (Majeed Brigade)	—
Mar. 26, 2024	Suicide car bomb, Besham; five Chinese engineers and driver killed [2]	Pakistan: planned in Afghanistan [3]	11 arrests [99]; June 7 joint statement [100]; June 22: Operation Azm-i-Istehkam approved [101]
Oct. 6, 2024	Bomb near Karachi airport; two Chinese nationals killed [4]	BLA	Oct. 15 joint statement with security section [102]; talks on joint security management [103]
Nov. 5, 2024	Guard shoots and wounds two Chinese workers, Karachi textile mill [104]	Not militant-related, per police	—
		Subsequent institutional steps	
2025–2026	No lethal attack on Chinese nationals in the sources consulted	—	Sept. 2025: 2025–2029 Action Plan [105]; Jan. 2026: Islamabad protection unit announced [80]; May 2026: Security Partnership [20]

Note: The chronology is selective rather than exhaustive. It records widely reported incidents that killed or wounded Chinese nationals or targeted Chinese personnel or facilities, and the bilateral or Pakistani institutional responses that followed. — indicates no claim or no discrete response identified in the sources consulted.

The first wave began on May 3, 2004, when a car bomb in Gwadar killed three Chinese engineers working on the port [84]. In October 2004 two Chinese engineers on the Gomal Zam dam project were kidnapped in South Waziristan; according to Chinese reports, one died during the rescue operation [85]. Within a year the two governments had signed the friendship treaty and the counterterrorism agreement. Because the signing coincided with a scheduled visit by Premier Wen Jiabao, the sequence alone does not establish causation, but the content of the agreements tracks the concerns of the moment: a direct channel between the MPS and the Ministry of Interior and an explicit framework for joint action against terrorism, separatism, and extremism [39]. In February 2006 three Chinese engineers were shot dead in Hub, Balochistan [86]. In June 2007 students from Islamabad's Lal Masjid seminary abducted several Chinese nationals, releasing them the same day [87]. Chinese officials urged Pakistan to protect Chinese citizens, and accounts of the episode identify Chinese concern as one of the considerations behind the government's decision to act against the mosque in July [25]. On July 8, 2007, three Chinese nationals were killed near Peshawar [88].

The second wave followed a decade in which the public record shows fewer lethal attacks but a rapid expansion of the Chinese presence. CPEC took formal shape during Premier Li Keqiang's visit in May 2013 [106] and became the centerpiece of the "1+4" cooperation layout adopted during President Xi Jinping's visit in April 2015 [107]. In April 2020 China's ambassador estimated that more than 23,000 Chinese nationals were in Pakistan, most of them working on CPEC projects [108]; no more recent official estimate is publicly available. In August 2018 a suicide bomber attacked a bus carrying engineers of the Saindak mining project near Dalbandin, wounding two Chinese nationals and three Pakistanis [89]. In November 2018 BLA gunmen attacked the Chinese consulate in Karachi, killing two police officers before all three attackers were killed; the consulate staff were unharmed [90]. In May 2019 Pakistan's military announced the deployment of a second division to protect CPEC [78], and the same year the United States designated the BLA a Specially Designated Global Terrorist [91].

The third wave was the deadliest. On July 14, 2021, a bus carrying workers to the Dasu hydropower project exploded on its way to the site, killing 13 people, nine of them Chinese nationals and four Pakistanis; after initial caution about the cause, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi confirmed on August 12 that it had been a suicide attack [81]. In August 2021 a suicide bomber targeted a Chinese convoy in Gwadar, killing two children and wounding a Chinese national [93]. On April 26, 2022, a suicide bomber struck a van carrying staff of the Confucius Institute at the University of Karachi, killing three Chinese teachers and their Pakistani driver; the BLA claimed responsibility, and in July the Sindh authorities announced the arrest of the main suspect [94-96]. The Majeed Brigade attacked a convoy of Chinese engineers in Gwadar in August 2023, without Chinese casualties [97], and the Gwadar Port Authority Complex

in March 2024 [98]. The Besham bombing came six days later, and the Karachi airport bombing in October [1, 4]. In November 2024 a Pakistani security guard shot and wounded two Chinese employees at a Karachi textile mill; the police said the incident was unrelated to militancy, but it added to Chinese concern [104].

5.2 Content versus Timing

The third wave produced the densest cluster of institutional responses in the period examined. After the Dasu bombing a team of 15 Chinese investigators, including criminal investigators and technical experts, joined the Pakistani investigation, the clearest instance of joint casework in the public record [92]. After Besham, China's Foreign Ministry called for a thorough investigation [109], the UN Security Council condemned the attack in a press statement [110], and Pakistan announced the arrest of 11 suspects [99]. The joint statement of June 7, 2024, issued during Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's visit to China, reaffirmed "zero tolerance" for terrorism and recorded Pakistan's commitment to strengthen security deployments and make "all-out efforts to ensure the safety of Chinese personnel, projects and institutions in Pakistan" [100]. On June 22 the Central Apex Committee on the National Action Plan approved Operation Azm-i-Istehkam, a renewed national counterterrorism campaign. The committee met the day after a senior visiting Chinese official warned in Islamabad that insecurity was eroding investor confidence, and it was briefed on new procedures for protecting Chinese nationals [101]. The joint statement of October 15, 2024, issued nine days after the Karachi airport bombing, devoted a separate section to "Deepening High-Level Security Cooperation" [102]. The 2025–2029 Action Plan went further, committing the two sides to investigate attacks on Chinese nationals, to apprehend and severely punish all perpetrators, and to strengthen judicial and law enforcement exchanges (author's translation) [105]. In January 2026 the foreign ministers' strategic dialogue reaffirmed "zero tolerance" [111], and Minister of Public Security Wang Xiaohong and Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi agreed to act against terrorism and telecom and online fraud and to deepen cooperation on the security of personnel, projects, and institutions and on law enforcement capacity building [76].

Joint training is a further strand, and it exposes the conceptual ambiguity noted in Section 2. From September 21 to October 4, 2021, SCO member states held the counterterrorism exercise Pabbi-Antiterror-2021 at Pakistan's National Counter Terrorism Centre in Pabbi. China's Ministry of National Defense described it as the first time Chinese counterterrorism law enforcement units had deployed abroad for an exercise with their own police equipment, weapons, and live ammunition [112]; Pakistan's military described it as the first military exercise held in Pakistan under the RATS framework [113]. The same event was framed as law enforcement cooperation by one side and as a military exercise by the other.

This record is consistent with the crisis-driven hypothesis, but it also shows why the diplomatic-calendar explanation cannot be set aside. The June and October 2024 joint statements were issued during scheduled visits, the latter on the occasion of the SCO heads of government meeting in Islamabad, and the 2005 agreements were signed during a planned visit by the Chinese premier. The calendar largely set the timing of new commitments, whereas the attacks shaped their content, including the commitments to investigate attacks and punish perpetrators, the "zero tolerance" formula, and the dedicated security section of October 2024. Other responses had no connection to the calendar. The dispatch of Chinese investigators after Dasu, the approval of Azm-i-Istehkam, and the talks on joint security management discussed below were direct reactions to attacks. Attacks, in short, appear to change what the two governments commit to, while scheduled diplomacy determines when commitments are formalized. The joint statements allow this proposition to be tested more systematically.

5.3 Evidence from Joint Statements

Table 4 codes the security content of ten joint statements issued during leaders' visits between 2013 and 2026.

Table 4 Security Content of China–Pakistan Joint Statements, 2013–2026

Statement	Recent attack in Table 3 (prior 12 months)	Security section heading	"Zero tolerance"	Safety of Chinese personnel, projects, institutions	Investigate attacks and punish perpetrators	Groups named	Security mechanism named
May 2013, Premier Li Keqiang in Pakistan [72]	No	Yes	No	No	No	ETIM	Defense and security consultations
Feb. 2014, President Mamnoon Hussain in China [50]	No	No	No	Yes	No	ETIM	None (agreement in principle on transfer of sentenced persons)

Statement	Recent attack in Table 3 (prior 12 months)	Security section heading	"Zero tolerance"	Safety of Chinese personnel, projects, institutions	Investigate attacks and punish perpetrators	Groups named	Security mechanism named
Apr. 2015, President Xi Jinping in Pakistan [114]	No	No	No	No	No	ETIM	Strategic dialogue; counterterrorism consultations; defense and security consultations
Nov. 2018, PM Imran Khan in China [73]	Non-lethal (Dalbandin)	Yes	No	Yes	No	ETIM	Defense and security consultations; counterterrorism and security consultations
Feb. 2022, PM Imran Khan in China [115]	Yes (Dasu)	No	No	Yes	No	None	None
Nov. 2022, PM Shehbaz Sharif in China [18]	Yes (Karachi University)	No	No	Yes	No	None	None
June 2024, PM Shehbaz Sharif in China [100]	Yes (Besham)	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	None	None
Oct. 2024, Premier Li Qiang in Pakistan [102]	Yes (Karachi airport)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	None	None
Feb. 2025, President Zardari in China [19]	Yes (Karachi airport)	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	None (Afghanistan-based groups in general)	None
May 2026, PM Shehbaz Sharif in China [20]	No	No	No	Yes	No	TTP, ETIM	China-Pakistan Security Partnership (new)

Note: Coding by the author from the official texts. "Recent attack" refers to incidents in Table 3 within the preceding twelve months. Readouts of leaders' talks are not included. The 2025–2029 Action Plan, which is not a joint statement, contains both the "zero tolerance" formula and the commitment to investigate attacks and punish perpetrators [105].

The coding yields three findings. A commitment to the safety of Chinese personnel and projects appears from 2014 onward and becomes standard from 2018; it is a baseline, not a response to particular incidents. The commitment to investigate attacks and punish perpetrators, by contrast, appears only in the three statements issued between June 2024 and February 2025, after the Besham and Karachi airport bombings, and in the 2025–2029 Action Plan. It is absent from both 2022 statements, although each followed a lethal attack, and it disappears again from the statement of May 2026, issued 19 months after the last lethal attack in the chronology. The "zero tolerance" formula follows the same course. Finally, the groups named shift from ETIM alone before 2019 to the TTP and ETIM in 2026, reflecting the growing weight of Afghanistan in the relationship.

These results refine the crisis-driven hypothesis. The hoop test, which requires statements issued after attacks to contain attack-specific commitments, is passed for the 2024 wave but failed for 2022. The effect of attacks on content therefore appears to be cumulative rather than proportional: the language changed after a sequence that included a second deadly strike on personnel of the same Dasu project, not after the first. Two responses pass the more demanding smoking-gun test because the calendar cannot account for them, namely the dispatch of Chinese investigators within days of the Dasu bombing [92] and the approval of Azm-i-Istehkam at a meeting briefed on the protection of Chinese nationals [101]. The May 2026 statement points in a different direction. It introduced the Security Partnership during a period of relative calm, together with commitments to military cooperation and to implementation of the GSI [20]. Its timing, in the year of the 75th anniversary of diplomatic relations established on May 21, 1951 [116], is better explained by the diplomatic

calendar and China's doctrinal framework than by crisis. Institutionalization may therefore be turning from a crisis-driven toward an agenda-driven pattern.

5.4 Anticipatory Measures: CPEC and the Special Security Division

Not all protective measures were reactive. The SSD was raised in 2016, between the first and second waves, as CPEC investment and the Chinese workforce grew [77]; by around May 2026, according to figures compiled by China.org.cn's Belt and Road portal, the corridor had attracted about $25.9 billion in direct investment [117]. The SSD's creation fits the investment-driven explanation better than the crisis-driven one, since it anticipated a growing risk instead of responding to a specific incident. Even so, crisis shaped its expansion: the decision to add a second division followed the attacks of 2018 [78]. This anticipatory track is also distinctively Pakistani. It took the form of national military capacity under Pakistani command, not bilateral law enforcement institutions, which helps explain why it did not increase delegation within the bilateral framework.

Before 2026, the doctrinal explanation accounts poorly for timing. The Holistic National Security Outlook of 2014 and the Counter-Terrorism Law of 2015 provided the conceptual and legal basis for a more proactive approach to overseas security [14, 54], yet the most important bilateral steps came years later and followed specific attacks. Doctrine made a more proactive approach possible; incidents made it urgent.

5.5 The Question of Chinese Security Personnel

The clearest test of whether crisis can produce delegation came after the Karachi airport bombing. According to Reuters, citing unnamed Pakistani officials, China sought Pakistan's agreement in late 2024 to allow Chinese security personnel to help protect Chinese citizens and proposed formal negotiations on a joint security management system. Pakistani officials reportedly accepted Chinese participation in security meetings and coordination and asked for help with intelligence and surveillance, but did not agree to a role for Chinese personnel on the ground [103]. Neither government confirmed the talks; China's Foreign Ministry said it was unaware of discussions on a joint security scheme and that China would continue to strengthen cooperation with Pakistan.

The episode locates the current limit of acceptable delegation. Chinese law already permits the deployment of security personnel abroad with the host state's agreement [54]; what is missing is Pakistani consent. Three considerations plausibly account for its absence: the sovereignty cost of armed foreign personnel, the central role of Pakistan's armed forces in internal security, and the domestic political sensitivities that surround any foreign security presence. Pakistan's preferred alternative, visible in the SPUs and the new Islamabad unit, is to expand its own protective capacity while accepting closer coordination with China [79-80]. Delegation of coordination is acceptable; delegation of operations is not. This outcome accords with the GSI principle that law enforcement cooperation should proceed on the basis of respect for each country's sovereignty, with support for the security capacity of developing countries [6]. Building national protective capacity with Chinese support is better understood as a form of cooperation than as a failure of it.

5.6 Afghanistan and the Politics of Designation

Since the Afghan Taliban returned to power in August 2021, Afghanistan has become a central variable in the relationship. Pakistan accuses the Afghan Interim Government of harboring the TTP, which Kabul denies; the dispute escalated into deadly border clashes in October 2025, followed by a ceasefire mediated by Qatar and Türkiye and talks in Istanbul that ended in deadlock [118]. Pakistan also attributed the planning of the Besham attack to Afghanistan [3]. China has responded by mediating between its two neighbors [119] and by drawing Kabul into trilateral diplomacy. At the sixth China–Afghanistan–Pakistan foreign ministers' dialogue, held in Kabul in August 2025, the three governments agreed to strengthen security dialogue and expand law enforcement and security cooperation [75]. The May 2026 joint statement names the TTP and ETIM among the groups that must not be allowed to use any territory to threaten regional security and commits the two sides to close coordination on Afghanistan [20], and in June 2026 the two countries' special envoys for Afghanistan agreed to synchronize their counterterrorism efforts against both groups [119]. The bilateral relationship is becoming partly trilateral, and its effectiveness against the TTP depends on a third government. The India–Pakistan military confrontation of May 2025, during which China urged both sides to remain calm and exercise restraint [120], added a further layer by reinforcing the weight of traditional security concerns in Pakistan's priorities.

Multilateral designations have also become contested. When the United States removed ETIM from its Terrorist Exclusion List in November 2020, citing a lack of credible evidence that the group still existed [121], China's Foreign Ministry expressed strong dissatisfaction and resolute opposition. It described ETIM as an internationally recognized terrorist organization and the decision as an instance of double standards [122]. ETIM remains on the UN list [82]. Conversely, the United States designated the BLA and the Majeed Brigade a Foreign Terrorist Organization in August 2025 [91]. Yet a joint Pakistani and Chinese proposal to add them to the UN sanctions list was blocked by the United States, the United Kingdom, and France in June 2026, drawing an expression of disappointment from Pakistan's Foreign Ministry [123]. The explanation is partly legal. The regime established under Security Council resolution 1267 and its successors, including resolution 2253 (2015), covers individuals and entities associated with ISIL (Da'esh) or Al-Qaida [124]. ETIM was listed under it in 2002 [82]; an ethno-separatist group such as the BLA falls outside its criteria unless such associations are shown. The bilateral relationship therefore cannot rely on the UN list to reach the

group responsible for most recent attacks on Chinese nationals, which strengthens the case for bilateral and national mechanisms.

On balance, the evidence supports a qualified version of the crisis-driven hypothesis. Attacks have repeatedly altered the content and intensity of cooperation and produced the one joint investigation documented in public sources. Yet the principal institutional innovations of the past decade, from the SSD to the SPUs, have been Pakistani rather than bilateral, and the one proposal that would have created genuine operational delegation did not succeed. Nor does the public record yet show a bilateral system that prevents attacks as reliably as it responds to them. Reuters reported that before the Karachi airport bombing a vehicle carrying about 100 kilograms of explosives waited near the outer security cordon for roughly 40 minutes [103], a detail that underlines how much depends on intelligence and early warning and not on physical protection alone.

6 VARIATION ACROSS ISSUE AREAS

Counterterrorism is the most visible area of cooperation but not the only one. A comparison of six further areas shows that institutionalization varies with the factors identified in Section 2 (Table 5).

6.1 Narcotics

Drug control is the oldest strand of cooperation against transnational crime. According to China's MPS, the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding on counternarcotics cooperation in 1996 and have since exchanged intelligence and conducted enforcement work under it [125]. The 2005 friendship treaty refers to agreements on narcotics control and names "illicit trafficking in drugs and weapons" as a target of cooperation [38], although the government-level narcotics agreement to which it refers could not be identified in public sources. On September 16, 2018, counternarcotics liaison offices opened on either side of the border, at Tashkurgan and Sust [126]. They are among the few standing bilateral mechanisms in the relationship.

The threat environment has changed sharply. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates that Afghan opium cultivation covered about 232,000 hectares in 2022 and yielded roughly 6,200 tons. After the Afghan interim authorities banned poppy cultivation that year, the area fell to about 10,800 hectares in 2023 and output to about 333 tons, a decline of some 95 percent [127]. Cultivation recovered slightly in 2024, to about 12,800 hectares and 433 tons [128], before falling again in 2025 to about 10,200 hectares and 296 tons [129]. Whether trafficking toward China through Pakistan followed the same trajectory cannot be established, because seizure statistics disaggregated by destination are not published. Low sovereignty costs, a shared interest, and a modest standing mechanism make narcotics the most routinized area of law enforcement cooperation, if also one of the least visible.

6.2 Cybercrime and Online Fraud

Cybercrime and telecom fraud are the most recent additions to the agenda. The 2025–2029 Action Plan calls for exchanges between cyber and data security agencies and for cooperation in the digital security industry [105]; on the published record, this is the first time cyber and data security have appeared in a programmatic bilateral document. The January 2026 ministerial meeting added an explicit commitment to act against telecom and online fraud [76]. In March 2025 Pakistan's federal cabinet approved the signing of a memorandum of understanding between Pakistan's National Cyber Emergency Response Team and China's National Computer Network Emergency Response Technical Team/Coordination Center covering research, training, joint drills, policy coordination, and intelligence exchange [130]; its signing has not been publicly confirmed.

The legal environment accounts for much of the slow progress. China's Anti-Telecom and Online Fraud Law reaches Chinese citizens who commit fraud abroad and calls for international police cooperation on evidence, arrests, and asset recovery [58], but China's data laws require approval before data stored in China is provided to foreign law enforcement bodies [56-57], so casework presupposes agreed procedures. Pakistan's Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act provides the corresponding domestic basis [64]. Nothing comparable to the joint raids and mass repatriations China has conducted with Southeast Asian partners against fraud compounds has been reported in Pakistan. Demand is shared, but the procedural groundwork has yet to be laid, and cooperation remains declaratory.

6.3 Financial Crime and Terrorist Financing

Financial crime is shaped more by multilateral standards than by bilateral agreements. On June 29, 2018, the FATF placed Pakistan under increased monitoring, the so-called grey list, citing strategic deficiencies in its anti-money laundering and counterterrorist financing (AML/CFT) regime and attaching a 27-point action plan [131]. On October 21, 2022, after roughly four years of reform, the FATF announced that Pakistan was no longer subject to increased monitoring, having substantially completed the 34 items in its 2018 and 2021 action plans [132]. China is a FATF member, and a Chinese official, Xiangmin Liu, held the FATF presidency from July 2019 to June 2020, during Pakistan's period of increased monitoring [133]. The reforms strengthened Pakistan's Financial Monitoring Unit (FMU), the financial intelligence unit established in 2007 and now governed by the Anti-Money Laundering Act of 2010 [134], and produced the 2020 mutual legal assistance law discussed in Section 3 [62].

The bilateral payoff has been indirect. The FATF process, not China–Pakistan cooperation, drove the reforms, and the public record contains no bilateral mechanism linking the FMU with its Chinese counterpart, the China Anti-Money Laundering Monitoring and Analysis Center, for counterterrorist financing purposes. The gap is significant. Groups such as the BLA and the TTP rely on financing networks, and tracing those networks is one of the few routes from response to prevention. Financial cooperation is routinized multilaterally but thin bilaterally.

6.4 Anti-Corruption and Fugitive Recovery

UNCAC, which both countries ratified in the 2000s (Table 1), is the main legal basis for anti-corruption cooperation and asset recovery [46-47]. In China, the international pursuit of fugitives and the recovery of corruption proceeds are coordinated under the Sky Net campaign led by the National Supervisory Commission, while the MPS runs the Fox Hunt operation against economic fugitives; Sky Net 2026 was launched in April 2026 [135]. The one well-documented bilateral case ran in the opposite direction from what might be expected. In May 2021 Interpol's National Central Bureau in China gave Pakistani authorities the whereabouts and outbound flight details of a Pakistani national wanted under a Red Notice for check forgery and fraud, and Pakistani police arrested him on arrival [136]. No comparable case of China recovering a corruption suspect from Pakistan appears in public sources, and no dedicated bilateral anti-corruption instrument has been identified.

This absence should not be read as institutional failure. Cooperation follows demand, and there is no public evidence that Pakistan is a significant destination for Chinese corruption fugitives or their assets. Where the flow of cases is small, a thin record may reflect limited need rather than weak institutions. The Action Plan's commitment to practical cooperation on fugitive repatriation and asset recovery [105] is best understood as a framework held in reserve.

6.5 Border Management

The Khunjerab Pass, at about 4,733 meters in Xinjiang's Tashkurgan Tajik Autonomous County, is the only land crossing between the two countries; in December 2024 it moved from seasonal operation, April to November, to year-round opening [137]. The 2025–2029 Action Plan calls for modernizing the Khunjerab–Sust crossing, convening the first meeting of the China-Pakistan Joint Committee on the Land Boundary, and continuing talks on revising the Protocol on the Mechanism of Border Law Enforcement Cooperation to strengthen the legal basis for security at border ports [105]. The May 2026 joint statement commits the two sides to "make good use of the Khunjerab Pass to strengthen land connectivity" [5].

Border management thus combines standing mechanisms, in the liaison offices and the planned joint committee, with an unusually sensitive legal setting. Because Article 6 of the 1963 agreement treats the boundary as provisional pending a settlement of the Kashmir dispute [35], any upgrade of border law enforcement arrangements touches on territorial questions that neither government wishes to reopen. Year-round traffic will increase the demand for routine cooperation, while the political setting will continue to favor low-profile technical arrangements over high-profile legal ones.

6.6 Disaster Relief and Public Health: A Contrast Case

Disaster relief is not law enforcement cooperation, but it provides a useful contrast. After the earthquake of October 8, 2005, China announced four rounds of emergency aid totaling $26.73 million [138], and a 49-member Chinese rescue team was among the first international teams to reach the devastated town of Balakot [139-140]. The 2022 floods affected some 33 million people and killed about 1,739 [141]. China's emergency aid reached about RMB 400 million within days [142-143], and according to China's ambassador, total Chinese assistance in cash and kind eventually reached RMB 660 million, with a further RMB 500 million pledged for reconstruction [144]. On February 1, 2021, Pakistan received the first batch of COVID-19 vaccine aid that the Chinese government provided to any foreign country [145].

Cooperation in this field has been fast because sovereignty costs are low, demand is shared and visible, no intelligence or evidence has to cross borders, and both governments gain in public standing. Speed, however, is not routinization. Most assistance has taken the form of ad hoc packages, with few standing arrangements, although scientific cooperation, such as the 2024 agreement between the China-Pakistan Earth Sciences Research Center of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and Pakistan's National Disaster Management University on mountain hazard forecasting, points toward more durable links [146]. The contrast supports the central argument. Where cooperation does not require the delegation of sensitive authority, crisis translates quickly into action; where it does, crisis produces commitments rather than institutions.

Table 5 Institutionalization of China–Pakistan Cooperation across Issue Areas

Issue area	Obligation and precision	Standing mechanism (delegation)	Public operational record	Main drivers and constraints	Routinization

Issue area	Obligation and precision	Standing mechanism (delegation)	Public operational record	Main drivers and constraints	Routinization
Counterterrorism and protection of Chinese nationals	High obligation; low to moderate precision	Consultative only: foreign ministry counterterrorism consultations; defense and security consultations; joint security management under discussion	One documented joint investigation (2021); exercises; Pakistani arrests	Attacks as focusing events; sovereignty cost of foreign personnel; role of armed forces; Afghanistan	Low; crisis-driven
Narcotics	High obligation (1996 MoU; treaty Art. 5); moderate precision	Moderate: Tashkurgan–Sust liaison offices (2018)	Limited public data	Low sovereignty cost; shared interest	Moderate
Cybercrime and online fraud	Low (Action Plan; MoU approved, not confirmed signed)	None	None reported	Shared demand; data-transfer and evidence procedures	Low; declaratory
Financial crime and terrorist financing	High at multilateral level (FATF standards)	Multilateral review; no public bilateral mechanism	Pakistan's reforms, 2018–2022	Multilateral pressure; bilateral demand not institutionalized	High multilaterally; low bilaterally
Anti-corruption and fugitive recovery	Moderate (UNCAC; extradition and transfer-of-sentenced-persons treaties)	None bilateral	One case (2021), China assisting Pakistan	Low demand	Low; framework in reserve
Border management	High (1963 and 2013 agreements)	Moderate: liaison offices; joint committee and protocol revision planned	Year-round crossing since Dec. 2024	Rising traffic; legal sensitivity of the boundary	Moderate, rising
Disaster relief (contrast case)	Low formal obligation	Low: ad hoc packages; some scientific cooperation	Extensive (2005, 2021, 2022)	Low sovereignty cost; shared, visible benefits	Fast but ad hoc

Note: Assessments are the author's, based on the evidence presented in Sections 3–6. Obligation is coded high where binding instruments are in force, precision by the specificity of procedures, and delegation by the existence of bodies with consultative or operational authority.

7 DISCUSSION: WHY CRISIS HAS NOT BECOME ROUTINE

Three conclusions follow from the evidence. Cooperation is crisis-driven in content but calendar-driven in timing, and the effect of attacks on content is cumulative. Routinization has proceeded through Pakistani capacity more than through bilateral institutions: the SSD, the provincial SPUs, and the new Islamabad unit are the most durable protective arrangements to emerge from two decades of attacks, and all are under Pakistani command. Variation across issue areas, finally, follows the expected logic, with cooperation institutionalizing where sovereignty costs are low and demand is shared and stalling where it would require foreign personnel, cross-border evidence, or data transfers.

These findings speak to the literature on international police cooperation. Deflem's emphasis on bureaucratic autonomy [31] helps explain why the narcotics liaison offices, a professional arrangement between agencies, are among the few standing mechanisms, whereas counterterrorism cooperation, mediated by foreign ministries and militaries, remains episodic. The emphasis of Nadelmann and Andreas on legal convergence [29-30] helps explain why cooperation that depends on evidence and data lags behind: no harmonizing instrument has yet bridged China's civil law procedures and data controls and Pakistan's common law rules of evidence.

The Mekong River patrols clarify when crisis does become routine. After 13 Chinese sailors were killed on the Mekong in October 2011, China, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand launched joint law enforcement patrols within about two months, with more than 200 Chinese armed police operating from the river port of Guanlei, which also hosted a multinational security headquarters [147]. By November 2025 the four countries had launched their 159th joint patrol [148]. A single crisis produced a standing mechanism with recurrent operations and a high degree of delegation. Three conditions set that case apart. The threat on the Mekong was primarily criminal rather than insurgent, which lowered the political stakes of joint action; the riparian states had limited capacity to police the river on their own, which made delegation attractive, not threatening; and the patrols' mandate was geographically bounded, which limited their sovereignty cost. In Pakistan the threat is political and multi-sourced, the state has a large security apparatus in which the armed forces play a central role, and insurgents contest state authority in parts of the territory concerned. Under these conditions crisis is more likely to produce national capacity building and bilateral coordination than joint operations, and routine

governance is likely to take the form of standing coordination bodies, shared intelligence products, and predictable procedures for investigations and requests instead of Mekong-style patrols.

The Security Partnership should be judged against this standard. The official texts place it in a paragraph that also commits the two sides to continued bilateral and multilateral counterterrorism cooperation, stronger military-to-military cooperation, the security of Chinese personnel, projects, and institutions in Pakistan, and implementation of the GSI [5, 20]. They describe no new institutional mechanism. Announced during a period of relative calm, the partnership may mark a shift toward agenda-driven institutionalization, but it could equally repeat the pattern of earlier commitments, raising obligation without adding precision or delegation. It could also become the framework within which the joint security management system discussed in 2024 is formalized. Three indicators will show which path it takes: whether a standing joint body with a fixed meeting schedule is created, whether procedures for joint investigations and evidence exchange are agreed, and whether the two governments begin to publish basic data on cooperation.

The findings also underline the importance of coordinating development and security, a principle central to China's national security doctrine [16]. Protection unaccompanied by visible benefits for local communities may leave intact the grievances that militant groups exploit. Tying security cooperation more closely to CPEC's livelihood, employment, and training components would make protective measures more sustainable and reduce the likelihood that the cycle of attack and response traced here will repeat itself.

8 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Several measures could move cooperation toward routine governance on the basis of mutual respect for sovereignty and without the operational delegation that Pakistan has so far declined. They are grouped below by function, roughly in order of priority.

The most immediate need is institutional. The joint security management arrangement discussed in 2024 could be formalized as a standing body with a fixed schedule and a secretariat, bringing Pakistan's provincial authorities and the SSD into the same forum as the MPS and the Ministry of Interior. This would align the formal channel with the agencies that actually deliver protection without assigning Chinese personnel operational roles. The two governments could also publish annual aggregate data on mutual legal assistance and extradition requests, joint investigations, and narcotics seizures linked to the China–Pakistan route. Such data would not compromise operations, and they would allow both publics to judge whether commitments are being kept.

A second set of measures concerns legal procedure. The mutual legal assistance agreement, China's 2018 judicial assistance law, and Pakistan's 2020 act together supply the elements of a protocol on joint investigations covering video-link testimony, the authentication of Chinese evidence for use in Pakistan's anti-terrorism courts, and the participation of Chinese liaison officers as observers in JITs. Whether foreign officers may sit on a JIT under section 19 of the Anti-Terrorism Act is a question Pakistani law has not answered, and it is better settled explicitly than case by case. A protocol to the 2003 Extradition Treaty could exclude terrorist offenses from the political offense exception and add an obligation to prosecute where extradition is refused on grounds of nationality, bringing the treaty into line with the counterterrorism commitments of successive joint statements. Until then, Article 11 of the Terrorist Bombings Convention provides a basis for the bombing offenses that have dominated attacks on Chinese nationals.

Terrorist financing offers one of the few points at which prevention is possible. An arrangement between the FMU and the China Anti-Money Laundering Monitoring and Analysis Center, building on the reforms Pakistan undertook during its FATF review, would address it directly. Because the UN sanctions regime does not reach the BLA, national designations and the exchange of financial intelligence are the more practical instruments.

Two further measures concern the relationship's geographic margins. Completing the revision of the Protocol on the Mechanism of Border Law Enforcement Cooperation and convening the Joint Committee on the Land Boundary would give the year-round Khunjerab crossing a legal and institutional framework commensurate with its traffic; given the sensitivity of the boundary's legal status, these arrangements are best framed as technical and operational. The China–Afghanistan–Pakistan framework, for its part, could be used to agree practical procedures for exchanging information on cross-border militant groups, since bilateral cooperation against the TTP and ETIM ultimately depends on cooperation from Kabul.

9 CONCLUSION

This article has asked why China and Pakistan, despite an extensive legal framework, have built so little routine law enforcement cooperation, and why institutionalization varies across issue areas. Part of the answer lies in the design of the framework, which is high in obligation, moderate in precision, and low in delegation. Lethal attacks on Chinese nationals have functioned as focusing events that reshape the content of cooperation, cumulatively and not incident by incident, but they have not served as critical junctures that generate standing bilateral institutions. The other part lies in the Pakistani setting: a federal structure that separates the treaty counterpart from the agencies that implement cooperation, the central role of the armed forces, a diverse set of adversaries, the Afghanistan variable, and procedural differences between two legal systems. The durable arrangements that have emerged, from the SSD to the provincial SPUs, follow the host state's capacity, in keeping with the principle of cooperation based on respect for sovereignty that both governments endorse.

The findings have limits. They rest on public and largely official sources in a field where much cooperation is confidential, and the chronology does not claim to be exhaustive. Interviews with officials in both countries would allow the causal claims to be tested more directly, and comparison with China's security cooperation in Central Asia and Africa, where similar tensions among protection, sovereignty, and delegation arise, would show how far the argument travels.

The Security Partnership, announced during a period of relative calm, offers an opportunity to break the pattern. Its significance will depend less on the level of political commitment, which is already high, than on whether it supplies what the framework has lacked: precise procedures, standing bodies that work between crises, and enough transparency for both societies to see that cooperation is working. Whether the two countries can move from crisis response to routine governance will be decided in those details.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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