

Securitisation of Economic Projects

A Case of Chinese Private Security Companies (PSCs) in Pakistan

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The article evaluates the presence of Chinese private security companies (PSCs) in Pakistan and its implications for China's engagement in South Asia. It looks at Chinese debates on the role of PSCs, their legal status and relationship with the Chinese government, and past experiences of deployment of PSCs overseas in other parts of the world to contextualise the presence of Chinese PSCs in Pakistan. The security of economic projects and Chinese nationals in Pakistan has become a critical issue for China in recent years. Based on an analysis of Chinese PSCs' activities, the article argues that the PSCs are becoming a crucial mechanism for Chinese presence, which will change the nature and extent of China's involvement in Pakistan. In addition, the presence of Chinese PSCs in Pakistan holds lessons for understanding the nature and extent of Chinese engagement in countries that are part of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Keywords: *China, CPEC, private security companies, overseas interests, South Asia*

INTRODUCTION

In his report to the Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in October 2022, General Secretary of the CPC and Chinese President Xi Jinping stated: 'We will strengthen our capacity to ensure

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overseas security and protect the lawful rights and interests of Chinese citizens and legal entities overseas.¹ This statement in an important CPC document highlights growing concerns among Chinese policymakers about the security of their country's economic interests and nationals overseas.

According to the latest data, more than 5 million Chinese nationals are working abroad in China-funded projects, mostly concentrated in Asia and Africa. In addition, Chinese nationals are working overseas in companies at senior managerial levels, in official government assignments and in various international organisations.² The massive Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects are spread in some of the most volatile countries in the world: from the Mes Aynak copper mines in Afghanistan, oil fields in South Sudan and Yemen, construction and energy projects in Myanmar, Pakistan and Latin American countries to Chinese-run copper mines near its border in North Korea. In recent years, frequent attacks on Chinese projects and nationals have been reported from several of these countries.³

China's securitisation of its overseas interests has been in the making for a long time.⁴ Attacks on Chinese workers and projects began rising from 2004 onwards, which is when the leadership recognised it as a major issue.⁵ Since then, with China's economic footprint increasing rapidly, the number of such incidents has only increased. Apart from attacks by local militant groups, there have been conflicts between local populations and Chinese workers. Several studies from different parts of the world have shown that when Chinese companies bring in Chinese nationals to work, it not only creates fear of losing jobs but also leads to accusations and fears of attacks on local culture and rash behaviour by the Chinese nationals, thereby aggravating the local population and resulting in clashes.⁶ The security of visiting Chinese businesspersons in volatile regions is another associated problem.

Pakistan is no exception to this trend. A series of violent attacks on Chinese workers and nationals in Pakistan and recurring conflicts between Chinese workers and local people due to job insecurity among the locals and cultural and language barriers have become a major issue in Pakistan in recent years.⁷ More highlighted incidents, such as the Dasu attack on a bus carrying Chinese workers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in July 2021, an attack on the Chinese consulate in Karachi in November 2018 and the blast on a bus carrying Chinese teachers at Karachi University in 2022, usually get greater attention in media.⁸ However, the security of Chinese nationals and assets is a serious issue on a daily basis. Even the Special Protection Unit (SPU) created by the Pakistani government in 2015 to protect the China–Pakistan Economic Project (CPEC) has, at

times, expressed its inability to provide security to every Chinese national. For instance, in early February 2023, the police officials in Punjab province asked Chinese nationals working with private projects to hire private companies for security because the SPU was deployed for those workers who were with the CPEC.⁹

While the People's Liberation Army (PLA) protects China's security and sovereignty, its deployment to protect overseas interests is limited. Hence, private security companies (PSCs) have become an important tool for the security of economic interests and Chinese nationals abroad. The article, in this context, analyses the presence of Chinese PSCs in Pakistan and their ways of functioning; potential drivers and challenges of increased deployment of PSCs; and its implications for the nature and extent of China's engagement in South Asia and beyond.

The remainder of the article is divided into five sections. The first section contextualises the utility of PSCs in a larger strategic context within Chinese debates on security of overseas interests. The second section defines Chinese PSCs and discusses their legal status, the size of the private security services industry, personnel recruitment strategies and their relationship with the government. The third section briefly draws on the past experiences from the deployment of Chinese PSCs overseas in terms of the nature and extent of deployment, their ways of functioning and the challenges they face. The fourth section focuses on the case of the use of PSCs in Pakistan and its implications for China's involvement in the country. The final section concludes the article by raising the question whether Chinese PSCs can be deployed beyond Pakistan in South Asia, and its implications for understanding China's engagement with the region.

CHINESE THINKING ON THE USE OF PSCs: DEFENDING INTERESTS BEYOND GEOGRAPHICAL BOUNDARIES

To understand the utility of PSCs in China's strategy, it is necessary to refer to the Chinese debates on the idea of 'interest frontiers' since the early 2010s. Interest frontiers are defined as frontiers beyond 'the geographical boundaries of China'.¹⁰ In simple words, the shift in Chinese thinking on how security interests are defined has expanded to places where its interests lie. Consequently, scholars and analysts have noted the subtle changes in China's emphasis on the non-interference principle in the last decade, wherein there is increasing flexibility in its interpretation to give room for the protection of

overseas interests.¹¹ As a result, China's power projection and diplomatic and foreign policy strategies have seen subtle doctrinal changes.

Traditionally, the PLA leadership has been wary of extending its power projection abroad to deal with non-traditional security issues. This, however, changed around 2011. The evacuation of Chinese citizens from Libya in 2011 was one of the incidents which triggered the change in PLA thinking about protecting Chinese overseas interests. Then, the 2013 Defence White Paper explicitly called for PLA's involvement in protecting China's overseas interests.¹² In this context, the concept of 'military operations other than war' has become an important dimension to understanding the changing dynamics. This concept enables the PLA to engage with anti-piracy and anti-smuggling operations; international natural disaster relief and PLA medical missions; and international military peacekeeping forces.¹³

China's military presence beyond its border has been steadily increasing. Over the years, China has contributed 30,000 peacekeepers to various missions; the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) patrols in the West Indian Ocean; and the country has also established its first overseas military base in Djibouti. In addition, it has funded many ports in the Indian Ocean region, from Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka to Kyaukphyu in Myanmar.¹⁴ Further, there has been speculation in the media that China wants to establish a naval base in Western Africa on the Atlantic coast.¹⁵ However, the PLA cannot be deployed for the security of its nationals and assets in other countries and hence, the PSCs become key to face this challenge.

In this context, the PSCs help China to project power in a 'low profile and cost-effective way'.¹⁶ Their deployment can also help deny any geopolitical purposes and can work around legal constraints in host countries as the PLA cannot be deployed in foreign countries easily.¹⁷ Thus, the engagement of PSCs helps avoid direct military deployment, while advancing the security of its interests overseas. Traditionally, the United States (US) and Russia have been the two major players who have deployed PSCs abroad. However, since 2010, Chinese PSCs have been expanding overseas rapidly.

A big issue in Chinese debates is international law and domestic laws regulating PSCs.¹⁸ There is no binding and clearly defined legal regime at the international level to regulate PSCs. Though the 'International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries' has been ratified by 47 countries, many states argue that PSCs are not mercenaries. This implies that the convention does not apply to PSCs, despite some similarities with mercenaries, especially when these companies

are involved in an actual armed conflict. On this issue, China's position is similar to that of the US. There is broad agreement among Chinese security analysts and scholars of international law that PSCs are not mercenaries.¹⁹ Additionally, Chinese analysts emphasise the responsibility of the home state of a company for legal responsibility of acts of PSCs overseas.²⁰ This makes the Chinese laws regulating PSCs salient in order to understand how they function overseas and their utility in China's strategy.

At the international level, there are two documents which have been drafted and discussed to regulate PSCs, especially with respect to human rights violations. The Swiss/International Committee of the Red Cross-initiated Montreux Document has been endorsed by 17 countries, including China and the US. It proposes that PSCs should respect international humanitarian law and international human rights law of host states; it also proposes 73 good practices to promote best practices among PSCs.²¹ However, the document provides constructive suggestions rather than legally binding conditions. In 2005, the United Nations Human Rights Council initiated the process to develop a legally binding convention and its draft report was made public in 2011,²² but it is also not a formal treaty yet. The implications of the lack of an international legal regime are that the Chinese PSCs are regulated by Chinese laws in People's Republic of China (PRC) and the laws of host states when operating outside China; however, China can also force the host nation to change the laws in certain conditions to gain permission for its PSCs.

Huge market opportunities in security services are another crucial driver behind the expansion of Chinese PSCs overseas. The PSCs officials, analysts and government officials have endorsed the idea that Chinese PSCs should grab the growing market opportunities.²³ As per 2020 data, the market size of providing security services, which includes companies working in the domestic sphere in China, is more than \$132 billion globally and is expected to grow rapidly in the next 5–10 years.²⁴ However, so far, the share of Chinese PSCs in this market is low; additionally, their market share in international security services is still lower. In fact, Chinese companies have hired foreign PSCs in several cases due to the lack of effective domestic PSCs.²⁵ There are a number of factors responsible for this, including relatively younger Chinese PSCs at the international level, low quality of services and training of its staff, lack of experienced personnel and a host of regulatory issues, such as strict arms control laws in China and restrictive government regulatory environment due to their close relationship with the government and security authorities. The next section analyses these issues in detail.

WHAT ARE CHINESE PSCs?

Many analysts, including Chinese analysts, use the term PSCs rather than private military companies (PMCs).²⁶ The latter refers to security companies which provide services that usually professional state militaries provide, namely, training and equipping foreign military forces and projection of military power. Some of the biggest Russian and US private security providers, namely, the Wagner Group and the Blackwater, are examples of PMCs. The Chinese use of PSCs is different. These companies basically provide security services to Chinese companies abroad in terms of risk assessment, collaboration with local PSCs for actual security tasks and consultancy, among others.²⁷

Such a strategy is explained by the concern among Chinese analysts for the need to avoid militarisation of BRI projects and to prevent anti-Chinese sentiments; in this regard, they often cite examples of how American PSCs stoked anti-Americanism in Iraq and Afghanistan.²⁸ However, the terminology 'private' does not apply to Chinese PSCs in the same way as it does to strictly independent PSCs in other parts of the world (explained later in the article).

Legal Status

The PSCs in China emerged later in comparison to the US and Russia, where such companies emerged in the 1960s. Some of the earliest companies in China were established in the mid-1980s: the first security company was established in 1984 in Shenzhen.²⁹ However, until the State Council, China's cabinet, passed the Regulation on the Administration of Security and Guarding Services (henceforth, the Regulation) in 2010 to legalise PSCs to work within China and overseas, the country lacked the legal infrastructure to regulate them. Prior to 2010, the number of security companies was limited and they were established by, and worked with, public security bureaus or local governments for 'auxiliary services'. Afterwards, their services expanded, ranging from security of housing societies and shopping malls to the issues of law and order, crime prevention and detection and other services under social management system.

The Regulation categorises PSCs into two types: security companies and armed escorting services. It also lays down certain guidelines for a company to be eligible for registration: minimum capital; staff and their training and quality; organisational structure; and other infrastructural requirements.³⁰ In addition, the rules and regulations issued by the Ministry of Commerce

in 2010 mandate that Chinese companies working overseas, especially in volatile regions, must establish a security system to deal with security risks and emergency security situations.³¹

Chinese PSCs are also regulated by China's gun control laws, that is, the 1996 Law of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on Control of Guns and the 2002 Regulation on the Administration of the Use of Guns by Full-time Guards and Escorts. As per these two laws and the Regulation, Chinese PSCs can only own a licence to use arms in the domestic realm if they are registered as state-owned enterprises (SoEs) under the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC)—in other words, the PSCs wanting to enter into armed security must register as SoEs—or they have a public holding of 51 per cent or more. As a result, most PSCs working within China provide unarmed security services. However, in the absence of any international law, Chinese PSCs working abroad are not prohibited from using arms overseas, which opens up possibilities for use of arms while operating outside the country.³² This enables Chinese PSCs to procure weapons from the countries where they operate.

It is evident that in the absence of any legally binding treaty or law at the international level, the Chinese PSCs working abroad work like other Chinese commercial enterprises. However, given strict regulations on the use of arms in Chinese laws, which reflect the CPC's fear of rival groups emerging as a challenge to its rule, Chinese PSCs working abroad employ two strategies to overcome legal restrictions on the use of arms. They either become SoEs within China or register in countries with loose arms control laws as joint ventures with local PSCs.

In recent years, the Chinese government has also promoted strengthening legal obligations for protection of overseas economic interests and Chinese nationals. Article 33 of the National Security Law, passed in 2015, states that 'the state shall take necessary measures in accordance with the law' to protect overseas interests and Chinese nationals.³³ Similarly, Article 68 of the 2020 National Defense Law emphasises that China will use 'armed forces in accordance with relevant state laws' to protect overseas Chinese interests.³⁴ The legalisation of security of overseas interests, therefore, works as a legitimising tool used by the Chinese government to fund, promote and help domestic PSCs with closer links to the authorities to expand overseas. In addition, these laws can be used to communicate to the domestic audience that the government is serious about protecting Chinese interests abroad.

Size of Security Services Industry in China

As of 2020, there are more than 13,000 registered PSCs in China, employing more than 6.4 million personnel, and the size of industry is around US\$ 35 billion.³⁵ To a large extent, the number of PSCs has grown rapidly after the 2010 Regulation. For example, the number of PSCs reached around 4,000 in 2013.³⁶ Apart from the Regulation to allow PSCs to operate legally, a number of factors have contributed to the rapid rise of these companies within China, including rising social instability within China, greater number of Chinese individuals with wealth, security issues in educational institutions, private housing apartments, etc. Some of the domestic PSCs with greater capital attempt to expand overseas. Thus, China's increasing economic interests abroad, and consequent business opportunities, the need for security services due to instability in many countries and the Chinese government's active support have contributed to more PSCs expanding their services abroad.

The number of PSCs working abroad is much lower in comparison to those within China; however, they too are increasing in number gradually. As of now, around three dozen PSCs have a presence overseas. Still, due to a lack of information, the exact number of Chinese PSCs is a matter of speculation.

Recruitment of Personnel

As just stated, the majority of PSCs are working within China. Given that domestic security services mostly include unarmed security, the PSCs working in domestic realm recruit personnel from a variety of backgrounds, ranging from retired security and PLA personnel to personnel with graduation and minimum educational qualifications.³⁷ In many cases, they do not require special qualifications due to the fact that they are generally not engaged in armed security services. However, retired public security officials and personnel form a significant part of the staff of PSCs. Some companies make it mandatory for prospective candidates to have military (national guard, active duty or reserves) and law enforcement experience or a bachelor's degree in legal/law/criminal justice/business or related field. Meanwhile, PSCs working abroad generally recruit experienced personnel, including senior retired officers, from the PLA or those with work experience in public/other security agencies. These overseas PSCs are engaged in security services besides actual armed security.

Although many staff members of these companies are from the PLA and public security organs, one issue that the Chinese companies face when they are expanding overseas is the lack of personnel with combat experience or experience of working abroad. China has not fought a war since 1979

Vietnam War; as a result, these companies lack staff members who have experience in war, which hinders Chinese PSCs' efforts to specialise in certain areas of security services, namely, risk assessment and analysis of security situations within larger regional and international security dynamics in host countries. To overcome these problems, the Chinese PSCs are collaborating with foreign PSCs for training, intelligence collection and sharing of practices through recruitment of foreign staff at senior management levels. Looking at the recruitment strategies, it becomes clear that the PLA veterans and retired officials from other security agencies, namely, the People's Armed Police (PAP) and public security bureaus, form the majority of personnel in PSCs working abroad.

PSCs and their Relationship with the Government

Many PSCs have seen rapid expansion in terms of revenue, recruitment, setting up of subsidiaries in offshore locations, especially Hong Kong, and joint ventures with local PSCs in other countries. More than 30 PSCs have expanded outside China since 2010.³⁸ This expansion can generally be explained as part of the process of expanding security services business domestically and globally, but in recent years, the government's support to PSCs has also played a big role. As scholars like Min Ye explain, behind the façade of a monolith Chinese state, and consequently the idea that BRI is a well-thought-out strategy to go global, lies a fragmentary Chinese state with conflicting interests and bureaucratic politics between the centre and provinces, among the central ministries and agencies, and between the SoEs and private companies. The Chinese state usually overcomes these problems through what it calls 'state-mobilized globalization', by giving out nationalist call to smooth out the conflicting interests and mobilise them for its strategies.³⁹

When these actors heed such nationalist calls, they get favourable treatment from government agencies. This factor has played a crucial role in the expansion of PSCs. For example, 2016 onwards, central agencies, namely, the Ministry Public Security (MPS), Ministry of State Security (MSS), commerce and finance ministries, the State Administration for Market Regulation (SAMR) and the Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission, began promoting some of the PSCs in their expansion plans.⁴⁰ In fact, the incentives by government agencies have prompted several PSCs working in the domestic sphere to expand their services abroad. Figure 1 depicts the relationships between government agencies and PSCs.

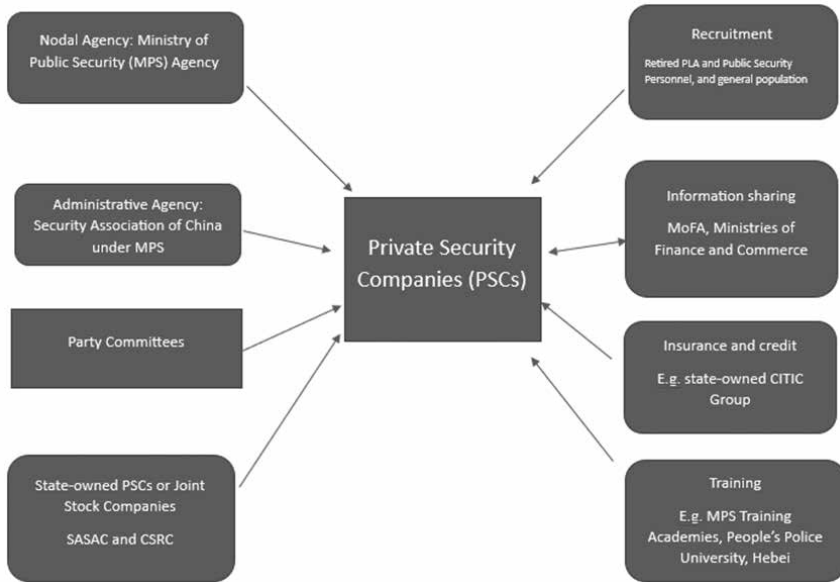


Figure 1 The Relationship between PSCs and the Party–State in China

Source: Compiled by the author.

Note: CSRC: China Security Regulatory Commission; MoFA: Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The expansion of PSCs abroad is promoted by government agencies at different levels. These agencies regularly organise symposiums and forums to discuss and share ideas about the market opportunities, challenges and security situation in different countries. This, in turn, provides an opportunity for domestic PSCs to expand globally through sharing know-how. In addition, certain government agencies, like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce, share security risks and threats with the PSCs. Also, government regulations create opportunities for PSCs overseas. For example, the China Security Association’s ‘Guidelines for Overseas Operations and Services of Security Enterprises’ (保安企业境外经营服务指引试行) in 2019 mandated that Chinese enterprises set aside 10 per cent funds for payment for security services.⁴¹

A general feature of PSCs in China is that, prior to the Regulation in 2010, almost all of them were established by government agencies, primarily the public security bureaus and municipal governments. As China adopted economic reforms, urbanisation and commercial enterprises flourished, which required low-level unarmed security services,

like security guards at the gates of companies, residential societies and malls. The regular public security forces could not handle it because of the costs of such services; hence, PSCs became crucial for providing such security services. These PSCs were cost effective as they hired low skilled and contractual staff and did not need to pay insurance and other social security benefits.⁴² However, only few hundred such companies existed from the mid-1980s to 2010.

As mentioned earlier, after 2010, the number of PSCs within China went up, from around 4,000 in 2013 to more than 13,000 in 2020.⁴³ In addition, the Regulation also allowed the Chinese PSCs to go global. As a result of the new regulatory structure, several of these companies were decoupled from direct state control. Primarily, the majority of former security companies were restructured and re-registered as either SoEs or joint stock companies. The SoEs required registering with the SASAC, which is the regulatory authority for Chinese SoEs, and the SAMR. In addition, the MPS became the nodal agency, with the China Security Association handling day-to-day affairs of the PSCs.

Although several previously state-owned security companies became joint stock private enterprises or SoEs after the 2010 Regulation, their relationship with the public security bureaus or other government agencies has remained close both in terms of their management and functions. They function closely with government agencies for security services, ranging from unarmed security guards at malls, gated residential communities, to crime detection, social stability and law and order tasks. As only companies having public holdings of 51 per cent or above are allowed to provide armed security services, it effectively means that their ownership remains with the state. In addition, the existence of the Party committee as part of the organisational structure of companies is another institutional linkage between the Party–state and PSCs, as it is the case with all the Chinese enterprises whether private or state owned. These Party committees are an important tool to control and guide the PSCs in the hands of public security bureaus.

To illustrate how the former PSCs transitioned into a new institutional framework after 2010, it is useful to take an example of the first such company to go global in 2010, the Shandong Huawei Security Group. It was established by the Qufu Public Security Bureau in Shandong province in 1993. The company became a joint stock enterprise immediately after the Regulation was approved and was registered as a joint stock company under the SAMR.⁴⁴ Previously, the company was engaged in unarmed security services with

limited administrative jurisdiction at the county level. After its restructuring, it established 30 branches all over China. It also established a subsidiary in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 2014. In August 2016, this company and a Russian PSC, the National Technology Group, established a joint company, called the Good Guard Company Limited, in Moscow. Presently, it has established partnerships with the US, Russian and Singaporean companies for exchange of expertise and cooperation—an important pillar of strategy by Chinese PSCs in their expansion plans to make up for the lack of experience and expertise in working abroad. This is a typical case of how the Chinese companies expand.

LESSONS FROM PAST EXPERIENCES OF DEPLOYMENT OF CHINESE PSCS OVERSEAS

After laying out the legal, personnel and regulatory aspects of PSCs under Chinese laws, it is pertinent to discuss lessons from the deployment of these PSCs in different parts of the world since 2010. More than three dozen Chinese PSCs working overseas employ more than 3,500 security personnel.⁴⁵ Most companies are concentrated in African countries, the Middle East (Iraq, Turkey, Yemen and the United Arab Emirates [UAE], among others), South Asia (Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar), Central Asia and Southeast Asia.

An analysis of past trends shows that the deployment of PSCs is emerging as an integral part of China's BRI strategy; and this trend is most pronounced in Chinese PSCs' presence in Pakistan (discussed in the next section). Although officially unsubstantiated, the contention that around 5,000 Chinese security personnel will be deployed in Iran as part of the 2019 China–Iran investment deal reflects potential future trends in BRI projects, where the deployment of PSCs is designed into BRI project deals itself.⁴⁶

Very few Chinese PSCs are emerging as big players in comparison to other players from the US, Russia, Israel, the United Kingdom (UK) and Singapore. As a result of Chinese PSCs being younger, different companies are strong in different aspects. For example, Genghis Security Academy specialises in training bodyguards to meet demands for high training standards for PSCs in China. It also works with overseas local partners in host countries and provides training sessions to Chinese citizens working abroad; for example, it has done so through collaborating with Israeli PSCs.

The Huaxin Zhong'an is a major PSC which has worked with the PLAN. It specialises in providing armed maritime escorts to shipping companies, including anti-piracy, intelligence collection and risk assessment in the maritime domain. It is working with a local PSC close to the Pakistan Navy and has a strong presence in the Western Indian Ocean. For instance, it has established work bases in Sri Lanka, Djibouti, Egypt, Tanzania and Yemen after expanding its business overseas in 2011.⁴⁷

Since the Chinese PSCs cannot legally carry arms due to tighter regulations at home, they have employed certain strategies to overcome this problem. For instance, they build joint ventures with local PSCs wherein Chinese PSCs perform non-armed security tasks, while local PSCs perform the actual security tasks. This is a useful tool as it helps to avoid direct interference and conflicts with local people; keeps them away from the limelight; and enables them to work around local laws prohibiting foreign PSCs and hence, avoid criticism of interference in domestic affairs. Several Chinese companies are also reportedly hiring local militias in some African countries through the Chinese PSCs.⁴⁸ Although they do not engage in actual armed security tasks in host countries, their role in intelligence collection, other than risks to Chinese assets and nationals, is consequential for understanding how they will play as front actors for Chinese influence.

To overcome the challenges of lack of experienced and well-trained staff, the engagement of the Frontier Services Group (FSG)—a company established by Eric Prince, former boss of the US PMC, Blackwater—is a good example. The FSG is part of the China Overseas Security Group, which was established with four other Chinese PSCs in 2015 and registered in Hong Kong. The FSG is supported by the CITIC Group Company Limited, a large Chinese asset management company.⁴⁹ Media reports suggest that the FSG has established two 'forward bases', in the south-west province of Yunnan abutting Myanmar and in Xinjiang, to expand its business in South and Southeast Asia and Central Asia along the BRI.⁵⁰ It has also acquired stakes in Beijing-based International Security Defense College, which is a privately owned training institute for Chinese security officers engaged in anti-insurgency and counter-terrorism.⁵¹ The primary reason why Chinese PSCs and government promote cooperation and support with the FSG is to gain experience for working abroad and training of personnel.

To meet the demand for trained security personnel, a few companies in China are focusing on their expertise in training. Several companies

have opened training academies and schools and run short and long-term programmes for training personnel. In addition, local public security bureaus and their training academies also run programmes for training personnel for PSCs working abroad. Under the State Council's Security Services Management Regulations, notified through Order No. 564 of the State Council of the PRC on 13 October 2009, it is the responsibility of the MPS police training academies to train and regulate PSCs. For example, under Article 34 of these regulations, the Chinese People's Police University located in Langfang in central China's province of Hebei and the People's Police Training Academy are responsible for training personnel for PSCs. Other training academies of security and police services also run training programmes for PSCs, although they are not directly responsible for the same.⁵² It is important to note here that although the training of staff is still of low quality, the role of state authorities is crucial. This has implications for how Chinese companies function and the role of the Party–state in promoting PSCs to go global.

MAPPING THE PRESENCE OF CHINESE PSCs IN PAKISTAN

The section analyses the nature and extent of presence of Chinese PSCs in Pakistan. So far, there is no official confirmation about the presence of these companies in Pakistan; in fact, the Pakistan government has publicly refused to allow Chinese PSCs. This is evident from a statement from Iqbal Ahsan, then planning minister and in-charge of CPEC in Pakistan, in 2016: 'There can be tension between Chinese security companies and the local population. It is preferable that Pakistani security personnel and agencies deal with local security problems, as it will not create conflicts between China and the local population.'⁵³

As per media reports, there have been pushbacks from China that its PSCs be stationed to protect Chinese projects and nationals in Pakistan formally.⁵⁴ Such proposals, which are not official, go back to the very beginning of the CPEC. The Beijing Dujie Security Technology Co. Ltd website mentions that its personnel were part of 'research trips' in Pakistan even before the CPEC was rolled out.⁵⁵ It indicates that the deployment of PSCs may not necessarily be entangled with the security of BRI projects; and this aspect of PSCs is specifically significant in China's neighbourhood.

The contentions over the deployment of foreign PSCs in Pakistan go back even further to 2012, when a PSC contractor of Central Intelligence

Agency (CIA) was involved in a controversy after its security personnel killed two armed men in Lahore.⁵⁶ After that, foreign PSCs, like G4S, Blackwater and others, left Pakistan. The decision to deploy Pakistan military and local PSCs for the security of CPEC project, and not allow Chinese PSCs, thus emerges from political sensitivity over the issue. Further, anti-Americanism, promoted by Pakistan political parties and religious groups, plays a crucial role in why the Pakistan government does not acknowledge that Chinese PSCs are already present.

Pakistan's laws prohibit foreign PMCs and PSCs to work independently in the country. In addition, the local PSCs in Pakistan are highly regulated in terms of licence to carry arms and their operations. Yet, Pakistani laws do not prohibit foreign PSCs to enter into joint ventures with local PSCs. This is a significant avenue for Chinese PSCs to work around local laws to expand their activities.⁵⁷ Most Chinese PSCs work through this legal loophole in Pakistan.

The Chinese leadership has been worried about the security situation and its negative impact in Pakistan for a long time. However, recent incidents have triggered Chinese anxieties about the security of its projects in Pakistan. The Dasu incident in Upper Kohistan district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in July 2021, which killed nine Chinese nationals and injured several others when a bus carrying Chinese workers was attacked and it fell into a nearby river, is such an example.⁵⁸ Chinese media reports, social media outbursts and official statements often refer to the incident to point towards the fragile security situation in Pakistan.⁵⁹ Another incident is the recent attack on Chinese nationals in Karachi University in April 2022.⁶⁰

In 2022, the Chinese MSS reportedly asked Pakistan for permission to allow its PSCs, which Pakistan again declined.⁶¹ This further emphasises the fact that China is worried about the fragile security situation in Pakistan, which resembles similar concerns in other countries along the BRI. For example, the 2022 annual report of the Center for International Security and Strategy (CISS) at the Tsinghua University highlighted the fragile security situation in countries along the BRI as a major international security challenge for China.⁶²

Table I Profile of Chinese Security Companies Present in Pakistan

S. No.	Name of Company	Major Area of Operation	Remarks	Year of Establishment
1.	Beijing Dewei Security Co. Ltd	Pakistan; BRI focus.	Entirely staffed with PLA veterans and retired PSB personnel.	2011
2.	China Security and Protection Group Co. Ltd	Southeast Asia and South Asia focus; presence in Sri Lanka and Myanmar.	Works with major Chinese companies in Pakistan; it has two branches: China Security Technology Group Pakistan established in 2016 and China Security Technology Group Pakistan in 2017 (only foreign PSC to establish local branch without collaboration).	1994
3.	Huaxin Zhong'an Security Co. Ltd	Maritime domain; works with a Pakistan PSC linked to Pakistan Navy.	Maritime escort; risk assessment; anti-piracy in Western Indian Ocean.	2004
4.	Shanghai Zhong Chengwei Security Service Group Co. Ltd	Pakistan, South Africa, Columbia, Brazil, Dubai.	Armed escort, risk assessment and consultancy for large Chinese construction companies.	2005
5.	Shenzhen Zhongzhou Special Security Consultant Co. Ltd.	Focus on BRI in Asia; no reported presence in Pakistan so far.	—	2006
6.	China Overseas Security Group (consortium of 5 Chinese PSCs)	Pakistan; major focus on BRI.	—	2015
7.	Frontier Services Group (FSG)	Myanmar and Pakistan in South Asia; major BRI focus.	Established by Eric Prince, former Backwater boss; it has established two forward bases in Yunnan and Xinjiang; expertise in training, risk assessment and intelligence collection.	2014

8.	Shandong Huawei Security Group	Pakistan	First Chinese security company to establish overseas branch in 2010.	1993
9.	Beijing Dingtai Anyuan Security Co. Ltd	Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq.	—	2011
10.	Beijing Guang'an Security and Tech Co. Ltd	Afghanistan and Pakistan.	—	2008
11.	Genghis Security Academy	No reported presence in Pakistan.	Training bodyguards for Chinese PSCs.	2011
12.	Beijing Dujie Security Technology Co. Ltd (part of the China Overseas Security Group)	Local branch in Pakistan, the Pan-Asia Group.	Risk assessment, security awareness and training for Chinese nationals, including live fire drills and consultancy.	2011
13.	Zhongjie Security Group	BRI focus.	Reports on its website about an MoU with local PSC in Pakistan.	2016
14.	15.Weizhijie Security Ltd	Pakistan	Recruits PLA veterans; focus on Karachi and Baluchistan.	2002
15.	Huai'an Security Limited	Pakistan and Vietnam	—	1988

Source: Compiled from various sources cited in the article by the author.

Note: PSB: Public Security Bureau; MoU: memorandum of understanding

Several Chinese PSCs working overseas have a presence in Pakistan (see Table 1). The Beijing Dujie Security Technology Co. Ltd is one such company which, along with four other companies, decided to establish the China Overseas Security Group in 2015. The company has established branch offices and carries out comprehensive security service operations in 10 countries, including Pakistan. Other countries include Turkey, Cambodia, Malaysia, Mozambique, Thailand, South Africa, Somalia, Argentina and Iraq. The exact nature of security tasks in Pakistan is not clear from the scarce information available in public domain. However, as per its annual work reports, its representatives paid visits to local PSCs in Pakistan, apart from other government agencies, before its overseas subsidiary was established in 2015.⁶³

The China Overseas Security Group, a conglomerate of five PSCs, has a local branch in Pakistan, the Pan-Asia Group. As per its website and annual reports, it has participated in organised live fire training in Pakistan for its staff and local personnel from PSCs in 2018. In addition, it regularly conducts training and orientation programmes for Chinese nationals in Pakistan.⁶⁴ The FSG and Huaxin Zhong'an have also operated in Pakistan in partnership with local PSCs. According to media reports, Huaxin Zhong'an, which has operated overseas since 2016, used local retired military and police guards to escort the visiting Chinese TV crew which visited Baluchistan's capital, Quetta, after the killing of Chinese workers in 2017 in an attack by Baloch nationalists.⁶⁵

Another major player is the Zhongjie Security Co. Ltd. As per accounts of achievements posted on its website, it has signed a memorandum of understanding with an unnamed local PSC in Pakistan and has engaged in security consultancy, research and even live fire training of its staff and management.⁶⁶ Additionally, security officers have been sent to Pakistan by the Huai'an Security Ltd, the Beijing Dewei Security Co. Ltd and the Weizhijie Security Co. Ltd. These security officers have mostly gone to Karachi.⁶⁷

One way to understand the increased presence of PSCs with retired PLA and Public Security Bureau (PSB) personnel is that it indicates Chinese assessments of a severe challenge to its investments in Pakistan. China feels that personnel with longer experience in security affairs can help understand Pakistan's domestic and regional security situation. This is borne by the fact that the number of Chinese PSCs has steadily increased in Pakistan. Media reports also corroborate the presence of Chinese PSCs' increased focus on Pakistan after the Dasu bus attack. A *Xinhua* report states, 'Security companies are hired for corporate offices and most of the residences stationed in major Pakistani cities such as Islamabad, Karachi, and Lahore 24 Hours on duty.'⁶⁸

Table 1 shows, Chinese PSCs in Pakistan perform a variety of tasks in partnership with local PSCs, which provide actual armed security. These tasks include security training and awareness for Chinese nationals in Pakistan; risk analysis and control; armed escort for VIPs in collaboration with local PSCs; and consultancy. Some Chinese PSC personnel also intervene in disputes between Chinese workers and local people, as well as labour disputes. In addition, Chinese PSC personnel are deployed in consulates and embassy as security analysts and consultants.

The Chinese presence in Pakistan in terms of thousands of workers is relatively new compared to the US and the UK in previous periods. Although Chinese PSC presence is limited in scope as of now, going by the recent

increase in activities—that is, awareness training camps for Chinese workers and nationals in partnership with the embassy and consulates; and concerns about the security and safety of its nationals and assets being articulated by Chinese officials—their presence will increase in the near future. It is, however, unlikely that these PSCs will get into direct armed security tasks on the ground. Nevertheless, their role is becoming crucial as security advisers and consultants to Chinese enterprises and embassy and consulates; risk analysts; and liaising with Pakistani security agencies, police and private security providers. In addition, unlike diplomatic staff, the PSC personnel are in touch with the ground reality regarding their presence in locations where Chinese enterprises and workers are involved in projects.

The Chinese PSCs can be a convenient tool for influence operations—the use of non-military and non-diplomatic means to extend China's influence in other countries. With China willing to spend on influence operations using a variety of means and tools, particularly in its immediate neighbourhood in Asia,⁶⁹ such a possibility involving PSCs cannot be ruled out in the future; although their role in this regard remains unclear so far.

However, Chinese PSCs also face several challenges. The issue of cultural understanding and the lack of trained staff proficient in Urdu or other local languages is a major issue. One way of overcoming the challenges is to cooperate and work with Pakistani PSCs, as several Chinese PSCs are doing now. Pakistan has many PSCs: for instance, Askari Guards is a security company with links with Chinese PSCs. It has been involved closely with the Pakistani military and has a strong presence in restive regions of Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.⁷⁰ For the Chinese PSCs, working with local PSCs in Pakistan provides a convenient mechanism to function in the country.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the article contextualises the nature and extent of Chinese PSCs present in Pakistan within the institutional and legal framework which regulates domestic PSCs in China. In the absence of a legally binding international regime, Chinese PSCs are regulated by domestic laws in China and the laws of host countries. It is noted that Chinese PSCs are not 'private' in the proper sense, but have close institutional and regulatory linkages with the CPC, state agencies, like the MPS, and the PLA. Notably, the recruitment of PLA and other security agencies' veterans overseas suggests a strong link with the PLA.

The past experiences of deploying Chinese PSCs show that they are engaged in tasks other than actual armed services. These mainly include intelligence collection, risk analysis and control, consultancy and liaising with local PSCs. In addition, Chinese PSCs face several challenges, including the lack of experienced personnel, weakness in intelligence collection and analysis and dearth of trained personnel. Several Chinese PSCs are, therefore, collaborating with foreign PSCs to sort out these problems in the short run, while a number of PSCs and government agencies, like the public security bureaus and police training academies, have stepped in to train personnel.

Since China passed the Regulation in 2010 to legalise PSCs, the number of PSCs has increased exponentially, with several companies expanding abroad. The trends since then show that more Chinese companies will expand overseas. However, the PSCs may also see a familiar trend among commercial enterprises, with some PSCs getting promoted to become bigger players to grab market opportunities, often with state support in terms of information sharing and access to capital. The role of state agencies in this regard is therefore crucial.

Given that Chinese PSCs have closer institutional, financial and regulatory linkages with the state, they serve China's security and strategic interests overseas by helping secure its nationals and assets. As the article shows, Chinese PSCs work with local PSCs to circumvent local laws and maintain a low profile, thereby avoiding the limelight. Indeed, Chinese PSCs in Pakistan have done this successfully and, despite official denial, their presence has increased manifold, with unofficial linkages with the Pakistan Army and navy, other state agencies and local PSCs. In addition, the PSCs work for both government and private enterprises in Pakistan.

The article also shows that the presence of Chinese PSCs in Pakistan and some other South Asian countries is expanding (see Table 1). Political instability and consequent threats to Chinese assets and nationals in Pakistan are the major driving factors behind this. The Pakistan Army and local police have been quite ineffective in containing the situation, as evidenced by the rising number of attacks on Chinese nationals and China's continuous insistence on deploying its PSCs formally.

The example of two Chinese companies in Pakistan, the Beijing Dewei Security Co. Ltd and the Weizhijie Security Co. Ltd, indicates that PSCs perform the tasks of security assessment, analysis, consultancy, awareness, as also indirect security tasks by working with the local PSCs and security agencies. Furthermore, at the behest of Chinese policymakers, the PSCs may become a crucial mechanism for cultivating local groups, so as to influence

local politics over a period of time. This will have serious implications for other countries trying to deal with China's presence and influence in their foreign, security and economic policies.

However, the evidence of China's involvement in cultivating local groups through the PSCs remains vague at best, if not outright absent, from publicly available records. Presently, China is hesitant to cultivate local extremist groups due to its sensitivity over potential spillover in Xinjiang. Still, such a possibility cannot be denied as the country attempts to manage the security of its assets overseas with respect to non-extremist groups. China is known to have deep pragmatic connections with rebels and militants in countries like Myanmar,⁷¹ which provides a perspective on whether and how it engages with non-state actors in countries with political instability. Such involvement will also add to the intense strategic competition with the US and other powers, including India, amid rising Chinese influence and presence in South Asia. Sri Lanka and Nepal have also become battlegrounds for competing interests among China, India and the US.

Apart from Pakistan, Chinese PSCs are already present in other South Asian countries, namely, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Afghanistan. After withdrawal of the US-led forces in August 2021, Afghanistan has become another hub for Chinese PSCs; it already had a Chinese PSC guarding the China National Petroleum Corporation project.⁷² The presence of Chinese PSCs other South Asian countries is, however, limited. As of now, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh have not reported the presence of Chinese PSCs.⁷³ Nevertheless, as in the case of Chinese PSCs in Pakistan, their presence in other South Asian countries cannot be ruled out. Indeed, the Chinese PSCs can expand rapidly if a suitable environment emerges, such as increasing threats to Chinese assets and nationals and China-friendly regimes. An example is Myanmar which, like Pakistan, is becoming another target country for the expansion of Chinese PSCs.

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