

The National Interest

China in Pakistan's Tribal Areas?

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Danger Room's [Spencer Ackerman](#), relaying a story reported in [Asia Times Online](#), [wrote yesterday](#):

The plugged-in Asia Times Online reports that China wants to set up military hubs in Khyber-Pukhtunkhwa, formerly known as the Northwest Frontier Province. China's reasoning will sound familiar to American ears: That's where anti-Chinese terrorists operate. Khyber-Pukhtunkhwa abuts the restive, non-Han Chinese province of Xinjiang, home to ethnic Uighur separatists. With the People's Liberation Army getting a foothold in tribal Pakistan, the Chinese reason, it can crush separatism, and make sure that terrorist factions can't hide out across the border.

He continues further down:

The Asia Times Online story smells like a calculated Islamabad leak, especially since it comes on the heels of last week's demand by Secretary of State that Pakistan cut off its terrorist proxies in the Haqqani Network.

Mr. Ackerman might be on to something. Characteristic of the U.S.-Pakistani partnership, if one can call it that, is its diplomatic one-upmanship. Something similar happened a couple years back when almost immediately after the Bush administration signed a nuclear energy deal with India, China—which [actively assisted](#) the development of Pakistan's nuclear program—[announced](#) it was [exporting](#) nuclear reactors to Pakistan and [justified](#) its decision on the [basis](#) of the U.S.-India deal. As [Chris Preble](#) and I [wrote](#) many moons ago, "It is also true that Pakistan and China have typically drawn closer whenever the US and India do the same."

On the one hand, China's alleged push into Pakistan via a military base in FATA seems inconsistent with its sacred policy of "[non-interference](#)." On the other hand, China undoubtedly views Pakistan as a means for extending its geopolitical reach into South Asia—*voilà*, China's heavy investment in Pakistan's deep-sea port in [Gwadar](#)

I also am skeptical about the veracity of the *Asia Times* story in that it is anything more than a calculated leak by Islamabad. But as an aside, Mr. Ackerman makes a telling remark about Washington's reaction to the scoop: "You can expect some thumbsucking think-tank type to lament the decline of American power any minute now." Well, we shall see. Many [inside the Beltway](#) also [claim to want China to act](#) as "[a responsible stakeholder](#)." Let's see how these same "thumbsuckers" react if and when Beijing starts to stick its stake where Washington doesn't like.