

The United States in Gwadar: Testing China's Dominance in Pakistan

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Summary

The recent visit of the United States (US) Ambassador to Pakistan, Donald Blome, to Gwadar Balochistan, where China is building a port and developing an industrial zone, may not translate into substantive outcomes in the near term. However, it marks Washington's new commitment to challenge Beijing's dominance in Pakistan and Islamabad's attempt to reset its ties with the US.

In a major move on 12 September 2023, Donald Blome, the United States (US) Ambassador to Pakistan, made a [much-publicised visit](#) to the Gwadar region in Balochistan, which is a significant region of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and a critical node in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

During his tour, Blome met with the business chambers of Balochistan and regional government officials, visited the Gwadar port, interacted with Pakistan's naval establishment and addressed the media. In a [statement issued after the visit](#), the US embassy in Islamabad said the objective was to “underscore the United States’ commitment to the people of Balochistan, a partnership that remains steadfast and robust.” It added that Blome “explored opportunities to enrich development, trade, and commercial ties, building on the successful outcomes that underpin the robust US-Pakistan bilateral relationship.”

Pointing to the “strong history of successful collaboration” between the US and Balochistan, Blome “reiterated US support for Balochistan’s development, touching on economic growth, disaster relief and preparedness; security; the benefits of US trade and investment; and measures Pakistan can take to strengthen and improve its investment climate.”

Blome’s visit focused not just on development cooperation but also touched on the strategic role the Gwadar port had acquired in the region. The US Ambassador visited the Gwadar port “to learn about port operations and development plans, Gwadar’s potential as a regional trans-shipment hub, and ways to connect with Pakistan’s largest export market: the US. In a meeting with Pakistan Naval West Command, Ambassador Blome discussed regional issues and emphasised a continued partnership in the years ahead.”

Although the US Ambassador did not mention China by name or the CPEC, he was flagging the US’ economic and geopolitical interests in Balochistan and Gwadar. The visit marks several new trend lines in the US’ engagement with Pakistan. Although high-level engagements between the US and Pakistan have significantly reduced since the US’ withdrawal from Afghanistan two years ago, the US has no desire to abandon its interests in Pakistan.

The withdrawal from Afghanistan has inevitably turned the US' attention to confronting China and promoting a new security order in the Indo-Pacific. Although India gets the bulk of US strategic attention in the Indo-Pacific framework, Washington is not giving up on other countries in the region.

The Donald Trump and Joe Biden administrations have actively sought to draw the rest of the Subcontinent into an engagement with the Indo-Pacific. This has not been easy because China has emerged as a significant economic, political and strategic actor in South Asia in the 21st century. However, the US is unwilling to let China free ride in South Asia.

Even as it focused on deepening strategic ties with India, the Biden administration had sought to retain substantive engagement with Pakistan. Despite India's grumbling, the US resumed military aid – [a sustainment package for the F-16s in 2022](#). The [US Centcom commander](#) has been a regular visitor to Pakistan. Washington has also assisted Pakistan in coping with the devastating floods in 2022 and has reportedly helped the International Monetary Fund resume its economic support for Pakistan.

The question of Pakistan's deepening military ties with China is under scrutiny in the US today, and Washington is not convinced that the army leadership in Rawalpindi has [decided to choose Beijing over Washington](#). The US Ambassador's visit to Gwadar also comes at a time when the US has intensified its criticism of China's BRI and is increasingly supportive of India's efforts to promote regional connectivity. The [recently unveiled plan](#) to build an India-Middle East-Europe Corridor is part of the effort.

The US is also determined to challenge [China's quest for military bases](#), logistical facilities and access to civilian facilities that help Beijing project its military power across the Indo-Pacific. In this context, Pakistan's territory, especially the Gwadar port, has long been a potential site for Chinese strategic access. Although there is no report of the US publicly raising these concerns in Pakistan, Blome's visit to Gwadar signals the US' interest in [competing with China](#) for public influence in Balochistan and demonstrating the US' interest in access to the Gwadar port for commercial and other purposes.

Blome's visit to Gwadar also underlines the desire of the Pakistan army to [seek greater balance](#) in ties with China and the US as Washington draws closer to New Delhi in its intensifying geopolitical competition with Beijing. Much like India, which maintains its [ties with Russia](#) even as it courts the US, Pakistan is determined to retain its all-weather partnership with China.

Pakistan's balancing act between the US and China will be more demanding than Delhi's between Washington and Moscow. China's strategic salience in Pakistan is much larger than Russia's in India. Washington also sees Beijing, not Moscow, as the principal challenge to its long-term leadership in Asia and the world. That cuts more leeway for India in the great power dynamic while Pakistan's room for manoeuvre is limited. Washington also remains an important economic partner for Islamabad, while Moscow's economic weight in Delhi is on a secular decline. For long, Pakistan has been a beneficiary of productive relations between the US and China.

The deepening Sino-US confrontation has begun to test Pakistan's long-term strategic calculus and its immediate diplomatic skills. For the US, too, challenging Chinese dominance in Pakistan while expanding strategic ties with India will pose interesting challenges.

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