

The Baloch Insurgency in Pakistan and the Chinese Connection

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7160/KS.2021.170204>

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Abstract

This article examines the interplay between big ticket investment projects financed by the Chinese capital and ethno-nationalism in the province of Balochistan. It argues that the growing Chinese presence in Balochistan has provided a new impetus to an already simmering Baloch nationalist resistance. Balochistan has profuse natural resource wealth, yet its riches have not benefited its people. The Baloch are one of the most deprived communities in Pakistan. Successive central governments have exploited the province's resources in the name of development to the detriment of its inhabitants. The advent of CPEC (China–Pakistan Economic Corridor) has exacerbated Baloch grievances. They believe that mega-development projects like Gwadar port would impinge adversely on local demography by attracting a huge influx of economic migrants and render the Baloch minority in their own land. The insurgent groups view China as a 'partner in crime' and have responded by selectively targeting Chinese assets and personnel. The article analyses the nature of resistance to Chinese presence and the changing modus of insurgent groups. It argues that Islamabad's attempts to deter the attacks by intensifying the militarisation of the province are counterproductive as they reinforce Baloch opposition to CPEC.

Keywords

CPEC, Balochistan, Gwadar port, Demography, Exclusion

Introduction

Balochistan has remained in the throes of a smouldering insurgency for nearly two decades. Animated by a historic set of grievances, including political neglect, economic marginalisation and resource exploitation, Baloch militants have waged periodic armed struggles against an authoritarian and extractive state. Balochistan has abundant natural resource wealth but its benefits have not accrued to its people. Its resources, in particular, natural gas, have contributed billions of dollars to the state exchequer and powered industries

in Karachi and Central Punjab but the province continues to be most penurious. The socio-economic indicators are abysmal. The province has the lowest literacy rates in the country and lacks basic civic amenities like clean water, electricity and health infrastructure.¹ 71 per cent of households in Balochistan are classified as poor compared to a national average of 37 per cent.²

The multi-billion dollar investments by China in the mineral sector, Gwadar Port and now the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) have accentuated perceptions of exploitation. Even before CPEC, China was involved in different projects in the province like Gwadar port and the copper and gold mining project in Chagai District. With CPEC, Chinese involvement has seen a rapid upswing. The Baloch nationalists are anxious that massive Chinese investments would increase resource theft, engender socio-economic disruptions and upend the demographic balance in the province. They fear that the influx of outsiders in large numbers induced by projects like Gwadar port, estimated to run into several million, could turn the Gwadar city into the next Karachi –a metropolis where migrants outnumber the native population. A single Karachi, in a vast but sparsely populated Balochistan would mean that the Baloch would be reduced to a minority in what they regard as their historic homeland. This has spawned intense consternation and resentment against what they perceive as a ‘Pak-China neo-colonial project’ to expropriate their resources.

The Baloch have responded with fear and violence and escalated an already simmering insurgency. Initially, the insurgents blew up gas pipelines and other energy infrastructure purveying resources to other parts of Pakistan, gradually burgeoning Chinese investments and personnel became the target. Sporadic attacks on Chinese personnel have intensified Islamabad’s effort to dominate the region through the extensive militarisation of the geography. This has resulted in a sharp spike in the cases of enforced disappearances and extra-judicial killings.

The worsening human rights abuses by security forces and diminutive media attention has prompted the Baloch separatists to gain greater visibility for their cause by escalating costs for Pakistan and China. For too long the simmering insurgency remained confined within the precincts of Balochistan. This is beginning to change, as insurgent groups, in

¹ The World Bank. *Balochistan Mining and Regional Integration Policy Dialogue Paper*, 2013. <https://www.pakistanmdtf.org/images/stories/project-documents/BalochistanReport2013.pdf>, p. 28.

² JAVED, Umair; NABI, Ijaz. Heterogeneous fragility: The case of Pakistan. *Commission on State Fragility, Growth and Development*, 2018. <https://www.theigc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Pakistan-report.pdf>, p. 25.

particular, the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) recalibrate their strategies to expand the theatre of conflict.

This article examines Chinese investments in Balochistan and its interaction with the Baloch nationalism. It argues that CPEC and Gwadar port in particular has heightened local perceptions of exploitation and expropriation. The Baloch fear the socio-economic disruptions wrought by mega projects and have thus mounted fierce resistance. The first section places Baloch nationalism in a historical context and argues that the current resistance against Chinese projects is informed by a history of resource exploitation by an extractive central government. The second section examines various motives that underlie Chinese investments in Balochistan. The third section analyses the causes behind the Baloch opposition to Chinese investments and argues that increasing attacks against Chinese interests have led to an intense military crackdown and this has reinforced opposition to CPEC. The fourth section focuses on the Majeed Brigade – a distinctly anti-Chinese insurgent faction that sprang up as a reaction to growing Chinese presence in Balochistan. This new group has adopted a hitherto novel modus operandi and expanded the theatre of the conflict by undertaking action outside the provincial boundaries. The last section summarises the arguments and concludes with some comments about making the Baloch equal stakeholders in the CPEC.

Roots of the Baloch Discontent

Balochistan is one of the four federating units of Pakistan. It is the largest province by area but least populated, home to around six per cent of the country's population. Ethno-linguistically, it is Pakistan's most diverse province. The Baloch are the dominant ethnic group followed by Pashtuns and other smaller minorities like Punjabis, Hazaras, Sindhis etc. Tribalism forms the basis of social structure in Balochistan. There are 17 major Baloch tribal groupings and some 400 sub-groupings, with each group or sub-group headed by a Sardar (chieftain) who wields considerable influence over the tribe.³

The Baloch have fiercely guarded their political independence throughout their history. From invading Afghans to the imperial British, they have resisted intruding forces. After falling at the hands of the British in 1839, Balochistan enjoyed a quasi-sovereign status. The Khan (Chief) of Kalat – the largest princely state in Balochistan, was afforded considerable leeway in the administration of internal affairs in return for protection of imperial trade routes

³ JETLY, Rajshree. Baluch ethnicity and nationalism (1971–81): an assessment. *Asian Ethnicity*, 2004, 5.1: 7-26, p. 10.

and access to Afghanistan. For the British, Balochistan was an economic wasteland but was valued for its strategic significance.

The roots of current nationalist resistance against Islamabad can be traced to the later phase of the British colonial period. As British withdrawal neared its end, the then Khan of Kalat, Mir Ahmad Yar Khan, supported by a coterie of young Baloch nationalists organised under the Kalat National State Party (KSNP) speeded up their activities to create an independent Balochistan. Khan opposed accession to Pakistan at the time of partition and officially declared independence on 12 August 1947.

However, Pakistan disregarded Baloch opposition and coerced Kalat into accession. After an initial revolt against the forced incorporation was quelled by the Pakistan military, Baloch leaders faced with a *fait accompli* and acutely conscious of their weak position “acquiesced to subsumption into Pakistan.”⁴ Leaders at the forefront of the Baloch struggle for independence recalibrated their struggle to fight for a federal Pakistan that granted considerable autonomy to its ethno-linguistic minorities.⁵ The ruling class disdained claims of ethnic difference by smaller ethnic groups and superimposed a centralised state structure. This centralised state system “turned into militaristic, authoritarian [regime] that imposed a kind of ‘native’ colonialism on the non-dominant groups.”⁶ Consequently, the nascent Baloch nationalism that emerged before the partition of the Indian subcontinent became a potent force after Pakistan rode roughshod over their ethno-regional aspirations.

The failure to evolve stable democratic institutions and the dawn of military authoritarianism saw Balochistan erupt into a series of uprisings between 1958 and 1962 against the central rule.⁷ The bloodiest confrontation took place during the regime of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Although a democratically elected leader, Bhutto shared many of the authoritarian tendencies with his predecessors and displayed a penchant for a strong unitary centre. He was disdainful of demands for greater provincial autonomy by smaller ethno-linguistic groups and hostile to provincial governments ruled by opposition parties.⁸ The country’s first elections based on the adult franchise in 1970 had brought the National Awami Party (NAP) to power

⁴ TITUS, Paul; SWIDLER, Nina. Knights, not pawns: Ethno-nationalism and regional dynamics in post-colonial Balochistan. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 2000, 32.1: 47-69, p. 48.

⁵ SHEIKH, Salman Rafi. *The Genesis of Baloch Nationalism: Politics and Ethnicity in Pakistan, 1947–1977*. New York: Routledge, 2018, p. 140-141.

⁶ KHAN, Adeel. *Politics of Identity: Ethnic Nationalism and the State in Pakistan*. New Delhi: Sage, 2005, p. 31.

⁷ WANI, Shakoore A. The New Baloch Militancy: Drivers and Dynamics. *India Quarterly*, 2021, 77(3) 479–500, p. 481.

⁸ HARRISON, Selig. *In Afghanistan’s Shadow: Baluch Nationalism and Soviet Temptations*. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1981, p. 156.

in Balochistan, led by fiery nationalist Sardar Ataulah Khan Mengal. Bhutto gave short shrift to the provincial government and barely nine months later (1 May 1972 to 12 February 1973) the province had its first popularly elected government overthrown on the dubious charges of plotting a secessionist conspiracy to dismember the country.⁹

Mengal's unceremonious dismissal plunged the province into a protracted armed struggle between a mélange of Baloch militant groups and government forces. The conflict dragged on for four years from 1973-77 resulting in the death of several thousand Baloch until a coup by General Zia-ul-Haq ousted Bhutto from office.¹⁰ Zia adopted a less confrontational approach, offering amnesty to incarcerated leaders and economic aid to the province. Zia's method of coercion, co-optation and economic largesse helped forestall the retrogression to violence for more than a decade. His accidental death in a plane crash in 1988 ushered in a decade of democracy, 1988-1999. Throughout this period, Balochistan remained largely calm with moderate nationalist parties partaking in the revived democratic process. Pakistan's relapse into military authoritarianism with the seizure of power by General Pervez Musharraf in 1999, coincided with the resurgence of militant nationalist resistance.

At the top of Musharraf's agenda in 1999 was to prop up "Pakistan's sick economy" and to this end, he "focused primarily on mega-projects and infrastructural development."¹¹ Balochistan with its abundant resource wealth was an ideal location. China was to play a pivotal in financing many of the big ticket projects like Gwadar Port and Reko Deq copper-gold project. Musharraf's big push on mega-development projects was fiercely resisted by locals who feared being dispossessed of their land and resources.¹² Reeling under years of severe socio-economic deprivation and political marginalisation, the Baloch are wary of Islamabad's promises of development which brings little benefit to the local population. The military's attempt to suppress local resistance and establish greater control over the resources and territory provided the necessary conditions for the revival of insurgency in Balochistan.¹³

⁹ HAQQANI, Hussain. *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military*. Lahore: Vanguard, 2005, p. 94.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 151

¹¹ BONI, Filippo. Civil-military relations in Pakistan: a Case Study of Sino-Pakistani Relations and the Port of Gwadar. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 2016, 54(4): 498-517, p. 504.

¹² GRARE, Frederic. Pakistan: The Resurgence of Baluch Nationalism. *The Carnegie Papers*, 2006, No. 65, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, p. 5.

¹³ AKHTAR, Aasim Sajjad. Balochistan versus Pakistan. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2007, 42(45/46): 73-79, p. 75.

What is China doing in Balochistan?

The centrepiece of Chinese interests in Pakistan is Gwadar port. For centuries, Gwadar's natural harbours have attracted fishermen and traders shuttling between Southeast Asia, Middle East and Africa. Its potential as the deep seawater port was first noted by the British engineers in the 1920s, but nothing was done until Musharraf announced the plan to build a port in Gwadar with Beijing's assistance in March 2002.¹⁴ Phase one of the port was completed in 2006 with China contributing \$198 million of the total \$248 million budget and leased to the Port of Singapore Authority (PSA) in 2007 for 40 years.¹⁵

Gwadar provides economic and strategic value to both Pakistan and China. Located at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, a key route for global oil supplies, it is projected to serve as a regional hub for transit and transshipment of goods for Afghanistan, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Gwadar is home to a naval base that affords Islamabad with strategic depth. During the 1971 war, the country's major naval base at Karachi was subjected to blockade and a threat of the blockade loomed large during the Kargil war in 1999.¹⁶

For decades, China and Pakistan have had a close strategic relationship, often described with such lyrical epithets as 'higher than the mountains' and 'deeper than the oceans.' However, the extent of cooperation in the political and military domains did not extend to economic relations. This began to change with Musharraf's policies of liberalisation. A free trade agreement between China and Pakistan was signed in 2006 and implemented in 2007.¹⁷ China invested heavily in Gwadar port, Saindak gold and copper mines in Balochistan and finally, CPEC, the single largest source of foreign direct investment in Pakistan. A flagship of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), CPEC involves a 3,000-km network of roads, railways and pipelines connecting Kashgar in the Xinjiang region of China with Gwadar in Balochistan. It pledges an investment exceeding \$60 billion that is expected to address the widening gaps in the energy and infrastructure requirements in Pakistan. In cash-strapped Pakistan, CPEC has been hailed as a game-changer.¹⁸

¹⁴ SCHMIDLE, Nicholas. Waiting for the Worst: Baluchistan, 2006. *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 2007, 83(2).

¹⁵ JETLY, Rajshree. The politics of Gwadar Port: Baluch nationalism and Sino-Pak relations. *The Round Table*, 2021, 110(4): 432-447, p. 435.

¹⁶ HAIDER, Ziad. Baluchis, Beijing, and Pakistan's Gwadar Port. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 2005, 6(1): 95-103, p. 98.

¹⁷ AHMED, Zahid Shahab. Impact of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor on Nation-Building in Pakistan. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2018, p. 5.

¹⁸ RIZVI, Hasan A. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: regional cooperation and socio-economic development. *Strategic Studies*, 2014, 34(4): 1-17.

Existing scholarship on CPEC examines various factors underlying Chinese interests in Gwadar port notwithstanding the volatile security in the province. It underlines the strategic and economic significance of Gwadar port for the Chinese, which has been described as “China’s important energy transfer station” and “China’s new energy channel.”¹⁹ Some studies suggest that CPEC can reduce the cost of western and central China’s international trade with Central Asia, the Middle East, Europe and Africa and allow China to save as much as US\$2 billion every year if it were to use CPEC to import 50 per cent of its current volume of oil supplies.²⁰

For others Gwadar's commercial viability is suspect and that China's investments are driven by strategic motives.²¹ Gwadar's proximity to the Persian Gulf offers the Chinese navy a potential “permanent, reliable facility for ships needing support points close to the Middle East, North Africa or East Africa.”²² It also offers China an alternate route for energy supplies from the Middle East to China, allowing Beijing to reduce its dependence on the Strait of Malacca and thus alleviate what has been called the ‘Malacca dilemma.’ Nearly 85 per cent of China’s oil imports pass through this single chokepoint making it vulnerable to an eventual blockade by the United States.²³ Even from the Pakistan's perspective Gwadar's economically viability is in doubt and its main import may lie in its strategic significance. The main industrial clusters in the country are primarily based in Gujranwala, Lahore and Faisalabad and these areas are closest to Karachi port and not Gwadar.²⁴

It is also argued that investments in Gwadar are a part of China's ‘Open up the West’ strategy to reduce socioeconomic inequality between China’s underdeveloped western region and its relatively developed coastal provinces. By developing a large scale transportation infrastructure, Gwadar could provide China’s landlocked western provinces access routes to exploit trade and investment opportunities with the wider world. Through this strategy,

¹⁹ DUCHÂTEL, Mathieu. The Terrorist Risk and China's Policy toward Pakistan: strategic reassurance and the ‘United Front’. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2011, 20(71): 543-561.

HARTPENCE, Mathias. The Economic Dimension of Sino-Pakistani Relations: an overview. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2011, 20(71): 581-599.

YANG, Jian; RASHID A Siddiqi. About an ‘All-Weather’ Relationship: security foundations of Sino-Pakistan relations since 9/11. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2011, 20(71): 563-579.

²⁰ ESTEBAN, M. The China–Pakistan Corridor: A Transit, Economic or Development Corridor? *Strategic Studies*, 2016, 36(2): 63-74, p. 68.

²¹ SMALL, Andrew. *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 102.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 103.

²³ MARKEY, Daniel S.; WEST, James. Behind China’s Gambit in Pakistan. *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2016. <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/behind-chinas-gambit-pakistan>.

²⁴ BONI, Filippo. Civil-military relations in Pakistan: a Case Study of Sino-Pakistani Relations and the Port of Gwadar. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 2016, 54(4): 498-517, p. 512.

Beijing envisages to pacify Xinjiang – China’s restive westernmost province, home to a separatist movement, by promoting the economic revitalisation of the region by linking it to markets in South Asia, Middle East and Europe through road and railway networks. CPEC is also motivated by China’s need to prop up a long-time ally struggling with political and economic instability. A stable and economically thriving Pakistan would be disinclined to provide safe havens for Uighur militants. An economically strong Pakistan would simultaneously be a formidable counterweight to a rising India and thus act as a strategic hedge.²⁵

CPEC has presented Pakistan with a much longed-for opportunity to reboot its economy and infrastructure. It is the largest foreign direct investment in the history of Pakistan and is almost one-fifth of its GDP. However, many are sceptical about the equitable distribution of benefits from the proposed projects. Ethnic divisions are deep-rooted in Pakistan and they overlap with inter-provincial disparities and this has made CPEC an object of intense contestation among the provinces and different interest groups. Smaller provinces like Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) have sparred with Islamabad over the allocation of investments. Opposition parties have accused the central government of discrimination and claimed that the distribution of routes, services, industrial parks, and special economic zones denies some provinces access to investment opportunities and only benefits Punjab –Pakistan’s most populous province containing more than half the country’s total population.²⁶ The discontent against CPEC is most potent in Balochistan where on the one hand moderate pro-federation politicians accuse Islamabad of preferential treatment and on the other hand militant groups outrightly reject the corridor as a neo-colonial project.

Militarisation and Resistance to Chinese Presence

Since Beijing began investing heavily in Balochistan, Baloch separatists have increasingly turned their attention to China, which they perceive to be hand in glove with Islamabad in the exploitation of resources and the militarisation of their spaces. They decry that profitable resources are being siphoned off with the ‘development’ projects in Balochistan following a familiar pattern of exclusion, misappropriation and skewed revenue distribution ratio. The Saindak Project, presently the largest operating copper and gold mine in Pakistan, is a case in

²⁵ RITZINGER, Louis. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Regional Dynamics and China’s Geopolitical Ambitions. *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, 2015.

²⁶ MARKEY, Daniel S.; WEST, James. Behind China’s Gambit in Pakistan. *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2016. <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/behind-chinas-gambit-pakistan>.

point. The Chinese enterprise, the Metallurgical Corporation of China (MCC) has been operating the profitable Saindak mines since 2001 but with little oversight and accountability.²⁷ A working paper submitted to the Senate functional committee reveals that copper extracted at Saindak from 2003 to 2013 was sold for around \$1.6 billion. Pakistan and China pocketed the lion's share while Balochistan received a meagre \$9 million.²⁸ The Saindak project has been called a daylight robbery; there is no tally of how much silver, gold and copper was separated since the mines become operational in 2002.²⁹ The lopsided revenue sharing notwithstanding, even secondary benefits like the uplift of the local area, including employment opportunities, have evaded the locals. As two scholars observe that “the Chinese, following their well-honed management approach to such mega-projects, are highly self-sufficient and have not engaged local labor in these efforts.”³⁰

No other project impinged on Baloch nationalism as much as Gwadar port did.³¹ Projected as the next utopia akin to Dubai and Shenzhen, the port presents the tragic story of exclusion, expropriation and dispossession for the local population. In 2013 leasing rights for the port were transferred to China Overseas Port Holding Company-Pakistan (COPHC) under the CPEC agreement after PSA failed to meet its investment pledges and decided to withdraw. The agreement grants COPHC 91 per cent of the profits and Islamabad nine per cent over the next 40 years while denying Balochistan any revenue. Moreover, the port was constructed on a prime fishing ground located along the East Bay, where the majority of the locals depend on the fishing industry for their livelihood. Access to the sea was also restricted due to security concerns causing their steady displacement.³² With CPEC throwing a renewed spotlight on Gwadar port, displacement of fishermen has accelerated and more land is being expropriated by the federal government to make way for development.³³ Land grabbing in

²⁷ Until 2012 when the share of the province was enhanced as required by the eighteenth constitutional amendment, according to the terms of the contract the federal government and the MCC received 48 per cent and 50 per cent revenue respectively, leaving a pittance of 2 per cent for Balochistan. MCC was to pay \$500,000 per month to Pakistan for 10 years and 50 per cent of the total revenue from the mineral sale, Balochistan was to receive a meagre \$0.7 million per year as royalty. Fazl-e-Haider. Syed. “Expansion of Saindak copper project”, *Dawn*, 31 Oct 2005, <https://www.dawn.com/news/163609>.

²⁸ *The Express Tribune*. Saindak Copper and Gold Project: Centre refuses to hand over ownership till 2018. Nov 24, 2014, at <https://bit.ly/2TrDwMe>.

²⁹ NOTEZAI, Muhammad Akbar. The Saindak Files. *Dawn*, Jan 7, 2018. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1381378>.

³⁰ FAIR, Christine; HAMZA, Ali. Rethinking Baloch Secularism: What the Data Say. *Peace and Conflict Studies*, 2017, 24(1), Article 1, p. 11.

³¹ WANI, Shakoor A. The Changing Dynamics of the Baloch Nationalist Movement in Pakistan: From Autonomy toward Secession. *Asian Survey*, 2016, 56(5); 807–832, p. 810.

³² *International Crisis Group*. China–Pakistan Economic Corridor: Opportunities and risks. Asia Report N°297, 2018, p. 20.

³³ KOVRIG, Michael. National Ambitions Meet Local Opposition along the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. *International Crisis Group*, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2tKF18v>

Gwadar has become another contentious issue after civil and military elites from other provinces appropriated lands owned by locals who possessed no ownership documents. Military, navy, coastguards all acquired prime land at Gwadar at throwaway prices.³⁴ Moreover, locals have not benefited from employment opportunities created by CPEC as China brings along its own labour and also the local human resource is too underdeveloped to compete with outsiders.³⁵ Gwadar, branded as the futuristic port city still lacks basic amenities like clean water, schools and hospitals for local inhabitants.

Once fully developed, Gwadar port city is projected to attract millions of migrants according to some official estimates. It will reshape the demographics of Gwadar city led by an influx of economic non-Baloch migrants. According to an estimate, the population of the Gwadar city currently around 90,000 is constantly increasing and the city is likely to have a population of over two million within the next two decades, with the majority being from other provinces of Pakistan.³⁶ There are also reports that gated colonies will be built exclusively for Chinese professionals in Gwadar. Some reports even estimate that the Chinese will outnumber the native population by 2048.³⁷ While these reports may or may not turn into a reality, they nonetheless play upon Baloch anxieties about demographic change and reinforce resistance to Gwadar Port. This resentment has led to the targeted attacks on Chinese personnel and labourers working on various China funded projects in Balochistan. While the Chinese have been targeted in Balochistan since the 2001 attack in Sibi district, they have come increasingly under attack as their presence and investments in the region grew in number. Between 2001 and 2017, a study found 13 such attacks in which 60 people were killed, mostly labourers working on Chinese projects but also some Chinese nationals.³⁸

However, instead of addressing the local discontent over exploitation, inequitable resource sharing and apprehensions about demographic change, Islamabad has responded

³⁴ KAPLAN, Robert. Pakistan's fatal shore. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 2009, 72.

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/05/pakistans-fatal-shore/307385/>

³⁵ KAKAR, R. China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Balochistan. In Maheen Hassan & Umer Akhlaq M. (Eds), *Balochistan: Challenges & opportunities*, 2018, Islamabad: UNDP, p. 14-15.

³⁶ AHMED, Zahid Shahab. Impact of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor on Nation-Building in Pakistan. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2018, p. 10.

³⁷ CHAUDHURY, Dipanjan Roy. As part of CPEC, 'Chinese only' colony coming up in Pakistan. *Economic Times*, 2018, 21.

YOUSAFZAI, Fawad. Chinese to outnumber Baloch natives by 2048. *The Nation*, 04 Aug, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2hrYbbZ>

³⁸ JAWAD, Syed. Terrorising the Belt and Road: A critical analysis of security threats to Chinese nationals and businesses in Pakistan. *China Pakistan Management Initiative*, LUMS Working Paper Series, 2017. <http://shorturl.at/gmnHO>

with increased security surveillance and control.³⁹ Some other conciliatory options were also tried to create a more conducive environment for Chinese investments. For instance, the parliamentary committee established by the Musharraf government in 2004 and the Aghaz-e-Huqooq-e-Balochistan package (Urdu for Beginning of Rights in Balochistan) in 2009 attempted to accommodate Baloch grievances through institutional structures. However, these efforts were half-hearted and the reforms were never fully implemented. Contrary to the popular demands for the greater provincial control over Gwadar port and a halt to the construction of military cantonments, Musharraf government approved the construction of three new army cantonments in some of the most sensitive districts in the region, namely Sui, Gwadar and Kohlu. This further indicates government's willingness to militarily dominate the region to provide greater security to Chinese nationals working in the area.⁴⁰

The military 'solutions' continue to be the preferred way over arduous democratic compromises to deal with the security issues in Balochistan. A 15,000-strong force was created to protect Chinese interests in Pakistan.⁴¹ The federal government also planned to build a 24-km fence to physically seal off parts of Gwadar to protect CPEC related investments from insurgent attacks. The decision was later reversed following a public outcry.⁴² It is telling that Chinese authorities appear to be more sensitive to local resentment than Islamabad. They built a school and promised some \$500 million assistance for the construction of a hospital, a college and projects to supply the city with drinking water.⁴³ Chinese analysts have also suggested that Beijing must build up local support by establishing contacts with local communities to better accommodate local interests in order to ensure the success of CPEC.⁴⁴ Some reports suggested that Beijing was holding talks with Baloch rebels to protect its investments in the province.⁴⁵ However, such efforts did not yield desired results as evidenced by subsequent attacks against Chinese interests and workers.

³⁹ KOVRIG, Michael. National Ambitions Meet Local Opposition along the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. *International Crisis Group*, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2tKF18v>

⁴⁰ BONI, Filippo. Civil-military relations in Pakistan: a Case Study of Sino-Pakistani Relations and the Port of Gwadar. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 2016, 54(4): 498-517, p. 504.

⁴¹ AKINS, Harrison. China in Balochistan: CPEC and the Shifting Security Landscape of Pakistan. *Howard H. Baker Jr. Center for Public Policy*, Policy Brief 4:17, 2017, University of Tennessee., p. 10.

⁴² ZAFAR, M. CM halts work on Gwadar fencing project. *The Express Tribune*, 2020. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2277928/cm-halts-work-ongwadar-fencing-project>

⁴³ ADENEY, Katherine; BONI, Filippo. *How Pakistan and China negotiate*. Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021, p. 20–21.

⁴⁴ NOTEZAI, M. Akbar. Why Balochs Are Targeting China. *The Diplomat*, 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/11/why-balochs-are-targeting-china/>

⁴⁵ BOKHARI, Farhan & Stacey, Kiran. China woos Pakistan militants to secure Belt and Road projects. *Financial Times*, 2018. <https://www.ft.com/content/063ce350-1099-11e8-8cb6-b9ccc4c4dbbb>

In the midst of pervasive militarisation and growing disenchantment with exclusionary ‘development’, the appeal of separatism is finding greater resonance among the increasingly disillusioned population. The anxiety over an impending threat to the demographic balance has engendered a radical ethnic consciousness among the Baloch who perceive the pattern in the influx of outsiders as “ethnic swamping.”⁴⁶ As a result, the struggle to restore ownership over the province’s resources has become a cornerstone of the Baloch armed resistance.

The Majeed Brigade: The Formation of an anti-China Front

The Majeed brigade was formed to target security forces and Chinese personnel and investments in the region. Since its formation, Baloch militants have not hesitated to take their fight outside the territorial precincts of Balochistan by carrying out attacks against carefully chosen targets outside the province. This strategy has somewhat lifted the Baloch resistance from the abyss of obscurity in which the province remains perennially shrouded and forced its inclusion in the national and international discourse. In December 2011, members from the Majeed Brigade carried out what was the first suicide attack since the onset of insurgency in the mid-2000s. A car laden with explosives targeted the alleged head of a Pro-Pakistan militia—Shafeeq Mengal at his residence in Quetta. The blast killed more than 10 people but Shafiq and his family escaped unhurt.⁴⁷

The Majeed Brigade remained dormant until 2017, when Aslam Baloch rose through the ranks to become the commander-in-chief of the BLA.⁴⁸ Aslam repurposed the group as a near China-exclusive outfit and under his leadership, the group carried out some of the most high profile attacks on Chinese personnel and businesses who Aslam believed were “looting resources in Balochistan in the name of mega projects”.⁴⁹ In August 2018, the Brigade targeted a bus carrying Chinese engineers in Dalbandin. The suicide attack injured three Chinese engineers and five other people. Although the suicide attack was a limited success, it was nevertheless a symbolic display of Aslam’s commitment to the group's objective to drive the Chinese away, he had assigned his elder son as the suicide bomber.

A more daring attempt to hurt China was made a few months later when members of the Brigade launched an attack against the Chinese consulate in Karachi in which seven

⁴⁶ LIEVEN, Anatol. *Pakistan: A Hard Country*, New York: Public Affairs, 2011.

⁴⁷ MASOOD, Salman. Car Bombing, Claimed by Separatists, Kills 10 in Pakistan. *The New York Times*, Dec 30, 2011. <https://shorturl.at/aJJTZ>

⁴⁸ *The Balochistan Post*. Aslam Baloch-The Baloch General. 11 Feb 2020 at <https://shorturl.at/otFNQ>

⁴⁹ AAMIR, Adnan. The Balochistan Insurgency and the Threat to Chinese Interests in Pakistan. *China Brief: A Journal of Analysis and Information*, 2019, 19(4).

people were killed including the three attackers. A pre-recorded video warned Chinese investors to stop exploiting the resources of Balochistan, or else the attacks would continue.⁵⁰ A few weeks later, Aslam Baloch was killed in a suicide bombing attack in Kandahar, Afghanistan. The commander's death was a severe blow to the fledgling group, whose organisation and structure remain nebulous. His death, however, did not deter the group from launching further attacks and some months later, Balochistan's only five star hotel, the Pearl Continental in Gwadar, where the Chinese businessmen are known to stay, was attacked by the group. Four hotel employees and one security personnel were killed. The recent attack on Pakistan Stock Exchange in June 2020 too had a Chinese angle. In 2016, China became the anchor investor in the stock market and secured management control by acquiring 40 per cent of its shares in a transaction valued at \$85 million. The shares are held by Shanghai Stock Exchange, Shenzhen Stock Exchange and China Financial Futures Exchange. Another five per cent of shares held by a local company are also linked to Chinese investment.⁵¹

All the above attacks by Majeed Brigade have had a high visibility impact but were unable to exact significant damages on the opponent. The attackers have failed to engage the adversary for longer hauls and some of the attacks have been neutralised in a flash. This brings to fore the group's poor organisational capacity, lack of preparedness, training and resources. Above all, it points towards the absence of serious external assistance or a guiding hand that could make the group more effective and lethal and thus seems to belie the claims by the Pakistan government that these attacks are handiwork of foreign intelligence agencies.

Yet the recurring attacks have exposed the vulnerability of Chinese personal and inhibited their mobility within the province. They are unable to move freely and must travel with security squads. The attacks have increased the security costs of CPEC. In addition to the 15,000 strong security division created to protect Chinese personnel, Chinese firms working in Pakistan have also hired private security guards thus sharply increasing the security costs of CPEC.⁵² The attacks on Chinese by Baloch separatists as well as by extremist groups like Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) – which have begun to increasingly target Chinese personal due to Beijing's persecution of the Uyghur Muslims in the Xinjiang region, have raised question marks on the future of Gwadar port.

⁵⁰ Ibidem

⁵¹ BAQIR S. Syed. Analysis: BLA out to bleed Pakistan economy, Chinese interests. *Dawn*, June 30, 2020. <https://shorturl.at/duxQ3>

⁵² AAMIR, Adnan. The Balochistan Insurgency and the Threat to Chinese Interests in Pakistan. *China Brief: A Journal of Analysis and Information*, 2019, 19(4).

There are already changes underway and Gwadar seems to be losing its importance as a mega-investment hub. Saudi Arabia has decided to shift a proposed oil refinery to Karachi from Gwadar. In 2019, Riyadh had committed to invest \$10bn in an oil refinery and petrochemical complex at Gwadar. The decision to withdraw stemmed from the infrastructural shortcomings of Gwadar, which Pakistan and China have failed to address in the past six years.⁵³ With security in Balochistan showing no signs of improvement, China may well be turning its back on Gwadar port city. As the recent MoU signed between Pakistan and China for the Karachi Coastal Comprehensive Development Zone indicates, the focus and investments might be shifting towards Karachi and away from Gwadar.⁵⁴ While China may remain invested in Gwadar port for strategic reasons, the development of a futuristic port city will remain a pipe dream, as unending turmoil makes sustained investments in infrastructure unfeasible.

Conclusion

Balochistan is currently into the second decade of a simmering low intensity insurgency that commenced in the mid-2000s. Although Baloch nationalism is informed by historically consistent demands for greater self-rule, the contemporary conflict is characterised by such dominant themes as, expropriation, marginalization, and dispossession. The Baloch are increasingly conscious of the riches their land possesses and yet find themselves among the most deprived in the country. For decades, Balochistan was the largest producer of natural gas in the country and Pakistan relied heavily on it for its domestic consumption. However, most of the energy produced there bypasses Balochistan to supply the state's most industrialized and populous provinces, Punjab and Sindh. Even the royalties allocated by the federal government to the province were until recently the lowest among the gas-producing provinces of Pakistan. Similarly with the development of Gwadar Port, purported to transform the coastal region of Gwadar into the next Dubai, the local population again find themselves bereft of any potential benefits. As one think tank report aptly summarises, that "instead of developing a sleepy fishing village into a bustling commercial hub as pledged by Islamabad

⁵³ AAMIR, Adnan. Pakistan's Gwadar loses lustre as Saudis shift \$10bn deal to Karachi. *Financial Times*, 23 June 2021. <https://www.ft.com/content/88cfe78b-517f-41d9-97d1-9f7f540f517c>

⁵⁴ AAMIR, Adnan. Pakistan and China unveil ambitious plan to develop Karachi coast. *Nikkei Asia*, 5 October 2021. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Belt-and-Road/Pakistan-and-China-unveil-ambitious-plan-to-develop-Karachi-coast>

and Beijing, the project is producing a heavily militarised zone, displacing locals and depriving them of economic lifelines.”⁵⁵

It is experiences like this that have made the Baloch wary of Islamabad's promises of development. They see CPEC and its lynchpin-the Gwadar port as another ‘colonial’ period enabled by China. As a result, Baloch insurgents are not only targeting energy infrastructure, mainly gas pipelines and other modes of distribution, but also Chinese engineers, workers, and technicians, who are perceived as accomplices and profiteers from Pakistan’s ‘colonial’ projects.⁵⁶

CPEC is seen as a particularly disruptive project -that can result in the expropriation of their resources and upend the demographic balance in the province. This has engendered deep anxieties among the local population who have responded with fear and violence. A new insurgent faction -Majeed Brigade has emerged with the stated goal of pushing the Chinese away from Balochistan. A spate of attacks against Chinese interests and personal has created jitters in Islamabad, which fears losing on the much-coveted investment from Beijing. The anxiety to protect the Chinese investment at all costs has intensified the militarisation of the province and expropriation of resources in Balochistan in the name of development and anti-terrorism. And as the military further entrenches its penetration to safeguard economic assets and ward off the threat from a hostile local population, nationalists are pushing back against the intensifying control over their land and resources.

As a quintessential endpoint of CPEC, Balochistan should have indubitably been its major beneficiary. CPEC possesses an immense transformational potential for Pakistan as well as Balochistan. However, the Baloch have serious apprehensions about the implications of centrally imposed large-scale development projects. Only by fostering a sense of ownership, creating stakes for the Baloch in the projects and incentivizing their participation in harnessing and protecting their resources, can the brewing discontent be assuaged. In its current form CPEC, with minimal local control over their resources, absence in the decision making processes and an overbearing military presence, may well end up furthering the divide between Islamabad and Quetta.

⁵⁵ *International Crisis Group*. China–Pakistan Economic Corridor: Opportunities and risks. Asia Report N°297, 2018, p. i-ii.

⁵⁶ WANI, Shakoor A. The Changing Dynamics of the Baloch Nationalist Movement in Pakistan: From Autonomy toward Secession. *Asian Survey*, 2016, 56(5); 807–832.

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