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REPORT

Balochistan Security Profile

An assessment of the security processes in Pakistan's Balochistan Province.

January 2024

Joshua Bowes, Levi Cursham, Billy Buddell,
Anonymised London Politica analyst



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IN PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN



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Authors

Joshua Bowes

Joshua is a Research Assistant with Washington, D.C.-based futures think tank South Asia Foresight Network (SAFN), under The Millennium Project. He is a published geopolitical researcher and analyst with a focus on synergetic thinking, militancy, political conflict and extremism in South Asia. Josh also serves as a strategic consultant for non-profit organisation Global Dignity, active in over 80 countries across the world.

Levi Cursham

Levi is a Research Director and co-founder of the *Indo-Pacific Desk* at London Politica, a programme designed to study the region's intertwining economic, security, and political processes. He holds an MA International Relations with a specialisation in East Asia from Durham University, having previously studied at the University of Warwick. He currently specialises on economic statecraft in Korea and Japan, Britain's Indo-Pacific tilt, and deepening Gulf-East Asian relationships.

Billy Buddell

Billy Buddell is a Research Director for London Politica's Indo-Pacific Desk. His research interests centre around strategy and foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly the foreign policies of ASEAN nations amid regional US-China competition. He is currently reading International Politics for his MA at the School of Oriental & African Studies, University of London (SOAS), having previously studied at the University of Exeter. Billy has previously worked with civil society organisations in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, such as the Institute of Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS) and Ashoka

Author 4

Author 4 has chosen to retain anonymity.



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Section one

Executive Summary

This security profile examines security in the Pakistani Province of Balochistan in the face of increasingly prominent violence that threatens central government stability, national unity, and significant Chinese investments that fall under the Belt and Road Initiative and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Pakistan's stability has come under increasing scrutiny in the past few years as it has struggled with military influence in the government, terrorism, conflict with India, and a near economic collapse. Its inability to pay off considerable foreign debt, furthermore, has entrenched its problems and highlighted the erosion of the government's power to manage its affairs.

1. **Situating Balochistan:** Balochistan is a historical region associated with the Baloch people who currently reside in Pakistan, as well as eastern Iran and southern Afghanistan. The province of Balochistan in Pakistan is in focus due to the ongoing separatist Baloch movement that threatens Pakistan's ties with China, which is investing heavily in the region through the BRI.
2. **Core Security processes:** Security processes in Balochistan are tied to the creation of the modern state of Pakistan. Since this time several separatist militant groups have been founded which reject the domination of state and military apparatus by ethnic Punjabis, which are associated with discrimination and violence towards Balochs. China's heavy investment in the region has stoked tensions, with Baloch separatists attacking Chinese engineers on the premise that they are colonialists. Separatism has also spread to cyberspace, with a strong online presence despite freedom of press suppression.
3. **Key actors in Balochistan:** The BLA, the TTP, the Pakistani Security Forces, and Chinese private security are the main four actors in Balochistan. The BLA is motivated by separatist aims and works against Chinese investments. Its ties to the TPP, which seeks to unite opposition against the Pakistani state, are unknown. The Pakistani Security Forces are the main counterinsurgency force in Balochistan, while Chinese private security plays only a minor role, largely focused on site security.
4. **Forecasting: International and Regional consequences:** Separatism in Balochistan is important for Pakistan's national security and stability, which is already under pressure from numerous other factors. Furthermore, Baloch separatism is also tied to regional processes in Western Asia and Southern Asia, as well as placing strain on its ties with China



Section 1

Introduction: Situating Balochistan

This security profile seeks to examine current trends of instability and insecurity in the province of Balochistan, Pakistan and the resulting implications it has on the province, the country, and the wider region. The strategic port city of Gwadar, a key facility in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), is located in the region, giving it high relevance for China's expansive investment plans. A historical port town, Gwadar is now being developed into a major deep-water port, offering an alternative route to China than via ship through Southeast Asia. Separatist militancy in Pakistan's province of Balochistan - but importantly also in neighbouring Afghanistan and Iran - has led to Chinese workers being targeted, and the onset of a low-level but entrenched conflict.

1.1 Methodology

This profile outlines the security themes and processes, the key actors, and how the conflict has relevance for security in South Asia. It is important to note the scarcity of information on the security processes in the province of Balochistan. Media suppression by the Pakistani government has limited the ability for information to be generated on this topic, meaning that drawing exact conclusions about the relationship between militant organisations, as well as their aims, is still difficult. Despite this, modern use of social media and HUMIT allow for an appreciation of the conflict, and its constituent actors, which this report builds upon. The HUMIT and social media post analysis in this report is not a replacement for established facts, but through this fieldwork, it is possible to evaluate – in context – what information does exist, and therefore build a fuller qualitative understanding of the actors involved.

1.2 Historical Balochistan

Historical Balochistan is a region that spans modern-day Pakistan, Iran, and southern Afghanistan, named after the Baloch people who inhabit it. This report focuses on the province of Balochistan in Pakistan, though this cannot be completely separated from the wider Baloch people group in the Iranian state of Sistan and Baluchistan, and in Afghanistan's three southern states of Nimruz, Helmand, and Kandahar. Pakistan's Baloch population numbers some 7 million, with as many as 4 million more Balochs in neighbouring

countries. The Baloch people have previously lived within the Persian, British, and Mughal empires, and is still split between nations.

Figure one: [Balochistan](#)

1.3 Demographics of the province of Balochistan

The Province of Balochistan is Pakistan's largest and most sparsely populated. It is bordered by Iran, Afghanistan, and the Arabian Sea. It is also bordered by Pakistan's other states: Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and the Federally Administered Tribal Regions. Comprehensive and up-to-date statistics on the province's demographics are difficult to obtain. The results of the 2023 census have been the source of significant controversy. Pakistan's Bureau of Statistics (PBS) reported that the province's population stood at 14.89 million, with around 30.96% of residents living in urban areas. Despite this, PBS had, before the release of the census data, reported on its official social media pages that the province's population had reached 20.6 million. Critics have highlighted that the 2023 census has large implications for the re-drawing of electoral districts. With a population of 20.6 million, the province would be due at least 7 more seats in the National Assembly.

Data from 2018 reflects the language split to be 35.5% Balochi, 35.34% Pashto, 17.12% Brahui, and 5% Sindh. Furthermore, Islam is the predominant religion of the province, with over 99% adherence.



Section 2

Core Security Processes

2.1 Militancy and Violence in Balochistan

For this section, the author collected information via interviews and emails with a scholar, an analyst, and a journalist experienced with Balochistan. The interviewees confirmed their consent to be referenced in this report.

Interviewees:

- Burzine Waghmar, *scholar and researcher, SOAS South Asia Institute*
- Malik Siraj Akbar, *political analyst, and editor of online publication The Baluch Hal*
- Kiyya Baloch, *freelance journalist and analyst covering militancy in Balochistan.*

Since the establishment of Pakistan in 1947, Balochistan has witnessed political instability, state violence, and militancy. Baloch separatist movements have subsequently been entangled in a continuous conflict with Pakistani security forces in a fight for independence. Many tribal and ethnic groups in Balochistan, particularly Balochs and Pashtuns, have sought to become independent from the greater Pakistani state since the country's inception. Consequently, violence has long been present in the area, both from separatist militants as well as state security forces aiming to secure national sovereignty and eliminate separatism.

This has risen to international prominence as Chinese investment in the Balochistan province has become a focal point of separatist violence since the early 2000s. In October 2017¹, the BRAS alliance was formed, consisting of the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF), the Baloch Republican Guard (BRG), the Baloch Republican Army (BRA) and the Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army. All these nationalist groups share the goal of seceding entirely from Pakistan, claiming that Islamabad thwarts both Baloch secularism and the political liberation of the Baloch people from foreign rule.

The Pakistani state is accused of excluding the province from economic development, while also exploiting its mineral wealth and access to the Sea. Separatists also perceive the

¹ Kiyya Baloch, via interview with Joshua Bowes, November 2023



Punjab-majority state as oppressive toward Balochs, Pashtuns and other ethnic minorities. Pakistan's military, bureaucracy, and mercantile classes are dominated by the ethnically Punjabi elite, which have historically had the lion's share of scarce resources. The allocation and distribution of these resources, coupled with investment defrayals, has ignited feelings of marginalisation, disdain, and resentment amongst non-Punjabis, which has kindled dissidence bordering on anti-establishment revolt². To that end, Pakistan has excluded ethnic minority-majority Balochistan from economic support and investment, attempting to rule the province via an artificial leadership created by the military junta of the state.³ By way of maintaining control, the Pakistani state has reverted to violence by abducting Baloch intellectuals and educated youth, students and professors.⁴ Pakistan officials suppress freedom of the press in order to convey that the region is under control.⁵ For the state, the default means of addressing the Baloch social rights issue has been to militarise the area.⁶

Baloch insurgents are largely rooted in ethno-nationalist beliefs, citing a perceived Punjabi-dominated Pakistan and a dearth of economic development from the central government, thereby posing a threat to the Baloch identity. In addition to regional neglect, Baloch activists allege kidnapping, murder and genocide by the Pakistani Security forces. Around 5000 Balochs are alleged to have gone missing due to forced disappearances by state security forces. This policy has become known as 'kill-and-dump,' steadily increasing since 2019 and only seeming to worsen tensions within the Baloch region.

Retaliatory violence in response to forced disappearances from the BLA has become more frequent, one being the October 2023 massacre of six Pakistani workers in the Turbat district. On September 3rd, 2023, a video released by the BLA presented a message from the group's leader, Basheer Zaib Baloch, to China, international powers, and the 'Baloch Nation.' Jamal Baloch⁷, an activist on X (formerly Twitter), asserted that "Pakistan has occupied Balochistan and is selling off the Baloch's resources."

Ex-President Imran Khan addressed forced disappearances in 2021 while in power and promised to enact legislation against it. This never became a reality, with Khan being labelled a 'toothless tiger' and a false hope for Baloch activists. Despite this, Khan, who though electorally popular was ousted and side-lined by the army in 2022, has criticised the military's corruption and embedded position within Pakistan's government. Some analysts

² Burzine Waghmar, via an email to Joshua Bowes, November 2023

³ Kiyya Baloch, via interview with Joshua Bowes, November 2023

⁴ Kiyya Baloch, via interview with Joshua Bowes, November 2023

⁵ Malik Siraj Akbar, via interview with Joshua Bowes, November 2023

⁶ Kiyya Baloch, via interview with Joshua Bowes, November 2023

⁷ The surname 'Baloch' is commonly taken by Baloch people as a symbol of their tribal homage.



argue that this has indirectly stoked support for Baloch protests due to the aligning anti-military-establishment position.

2.2 China's Growing Presence in Balochistan

One of the most significant driving factors of the violence in Balochistan in the past decade is Beijing's presence in the region for the purposes of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). CPEC is a flagship project within China's colossal Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As part of CPEC, China aims to invest over \$60 billion into Pakistan in order to connect the Chinese mainland to the Arabian Sea via tunnels, bridges and railroads. The project is aimed at strengthening Beijing's economic relationship with Islamabad, bolstering regional trade networks, and providing an alternative route for Chinese exports.

On 13th August 2023, a group of Chinese engineers were targeted in an attack carried out by Baloch separatists as a warning against China's growing influence; the BLA claimed responsibility for this attack. Instances of Baloch aggression towards Chinese workers date back to the early 2000s but have only worsened with the development of China's infrastructure mega-projects. China's ambitions to both fortify its reach across Asia as well as to embolden economic ties with Pakistan appear to come at a cost. Baloch rebels are gravely dissatisfied with Beijing's hand in the province. China has already offered a strong warning towards Islamabad, as it perceives Baloch separatism and extremist activities as a threat to Chinese economic security as well as the integrity of the China-Pakistan relationship. Baloch rebels view Chinese investment in the province, best represented by CPEC, as colonial exploitation and an infringement upon Baloch self-determination.

Many projects under the CPEC banner have largely benefited ethnic Punjab people to the detriment of other provinces. Balochs and Pashtuns have verbalised their dissatisfaction with the Punjabi-dominated central government region and all-powerful military, which they claim has funnelled funds to Punjab-majority areas only, to the depletion of geographies that are home to minority groups.⁸ Gwadar and its port on the Arabian Sea, a focal point of CPEC investment, has become central to Baloch separatist grievances. Baloch fishermen have been forced out of their native waters, with the industry now drawing upon Punjabi or Sindhi workers with almost no local Balochs.⁹ The Pakistani government has also rendered Balochistan unwelcome to foreign journalists, human rights activists, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), utilising violence to censor and restrict journalistic freedoms and

⁸ Burzine Waghmar, via an email to Joshua Bowes, November 2023

⁹ Burzine Waghmar, via an email to Joshua Bowes, November 2023



information sharing. Violence in Balochistan is intensifying, and with limited information available on the topic, the full extent and dimensions of this conflict could remain elusive.¹⁰ According to activist Jamal Baloch on X (formerly Twitter), 14 Balochs were abducted by Pakistani security forces across Balochistan in just the first week of November 2023, with attached pictures of the abducted individuals.

Instability in Balochistan is attributed to a tripartite of militant outfits: (1) The BLA and other separatists in the BRAS Alliance, (2) pro-Taliban groups (TTP affiliates) which are jihadist (3) sectarian, anti-Shia militants. The additional presence of the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKAP), the regional faction of ISIS – which is vehemently anti-China - also looms in the background of Pakistan's terrorism problem. Irredentists in the region have long had a foothold in Afghanistan; as such, the Afghan Taliban (AT) is very aware of the Baloch movement but little evidence shows that there is an operational relationship between the two groups.¹¹ Despite a porous Afghanistan-Pakistan border, the AT is not as active in the area as the Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP), Pakistan's supporting wing and ally of the AT that has also encroached into the Baloch region, which is potentially benefitting from the addition of Baloch fighters. However, the degree to which there has been a merging between the two groups is murky given the history of Pakistani intelligence in purveying disinformation in Balochistan about militant groups.¹² The TTP's ambitions in Balochistan have primarily been geared towards amplifying the anti-state Baloch resistance movement, producing propaganda on their multi-language outlet Umar Media, and even producing content in the Baloch language.

While the BLA and the broader Baloch resistance is ostensibly a secular movement with a history rooted in ethnic tribal code, BLA separatists are very much akin to both the AT and the TTP in their virulent anti-government stance. The latter terrorist groups are jihadists seeking to uproot democracy and oversee Afghan and Pakistani society under fundamentalist Islamist law, these organisations are inherently anti-state in their ideologies and are particularly sworn against the Islamabad-run state. Despite fundamental ideological differences, therefore, it is feasible that due to their shared aims in resisting the Pakistani state, jihadist and Baloch separatist movements are able to work together¹³. Purportedly, the TTP supports the Baloch movement through aid in the production of videos denouncing the state's policy of enforced disappearances, but operational aid and support are

¹⁰ Kiyya Baloch, via interview with Joshua Bowes, November 2023

¹¹ Burzine Waghmar, via an email to Joshua Bowes, November 2023

¹² Burzine Waghmar, via an email to Joshua Bowes, November 2023 & Kiyya Baloch, via interview with Joshua Bowes, November 2023

¹³ Kiyya Baloch, via interview with Joshua Bowes, November 2023



unsubstantiated.¹⁴ The influence of the TTP on the BLA's tactics can also be drawn from the BLA's suicide division, the Majeed Brigade, may have adopted some of the TTP's terror strategy in the unprecedented deployment of a female suicide bomber in 2022, which killed three Chinese personnel at the Confucius Institute in Karachi. It may not be unreasonable to assume that members of Baloch society have been radicalised by TTP or AT jihadists and as a result, the secular majority BLA and BLF feel threatened by Islamist extremism. Malik Siraj Akbar expressed that - perhaps aware of the TTP's ubiquity - Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI) may be responsible for weaponizing political Islam to suppress and delegitimize the call for a Baloch homeland, attempting to categorise and group together the AT, TTP and BLA triple threat as a concerted terrorist effort to undermine Pakistan's sovereignty.¹⁵ While this remains speculative, it highlights the relationship between the political and identarian dynamics in the region and how intraregional violence could grow.

In response to both the slew of violent actors and high levels of political activism in Balochistan, Islamabad has allegedly exerted a coordinated effort of kidnappings and enforced disappearances. The state's counterinsurgency endeavours have appeared to have galvanised the insurgent mobilisation even more, rallying even stronger support for the BLA's movement for liberation and permeating its anti-state attitude throughout the Pakistan-Afghanistan geography. Paramilitary troops are largely responsible for the security of Balochistan and operate on guidance from forces referred to as the Frontier Corps. These armed personnel are equipped with the authority and power from the state that the police force would ordinarily have.¹⁶ Since 2020, the Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD) of the Pakistani military has allegedly been behind the enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings of the Baloch people. On the 29th of October 2023, a suspected terrorist disappeared before being tried in an anti-terrorism court on November 21. His dead body then appeared at a hospital in Turbat in the late hours of November 22.¹⁷ CTD claimed he was killed in a firefight after providing counterterrorism forces with the location of militants in the area, but the circumstances of his death are contentious.¹⁸ This incident points towards state security forces conducting covert operations and extra-judicial killings against Baloch militants, as well as subsequent attempts to cover such acts up.

2.3 State-Sponsored Suppression, Activism and Militancy in Cyberspace

¹⁴ Burzine Waghmar, via an email to Joshua Bowes, November 2023

¹⁵ Malik Siraj Akbar, via an interview with Joshua Bowes, November 2023

¹⁶ Kiyya Baloch, via interview with Joshua Bowes, November 2023

¹⁷ Kiyya Baloch, via interview with Joshua Bowes, November 2023

¹⁸ Kiyya Baloch, via an interview with Joshua Bowes, November 2023



Despite Balochistan being a region out of reach for journalists and the freedom of the press, activists have turned to X (formerly Twitter) as a platform to spread awareness of continued kidnappings and extra-legal killings. On TikTok, accounts like 'Voice_of_Balochs' and 'Justice for Balochistan' post videos of protestors adorned with banners of missing and kidnapped persons. The Baloch separatist movement has a robust presence online¹⁹ insofar as it has a social rights campaign against the kidnapping of Balochs. What is apparent is that a new generation of secessionists are literate, semi-urbanised, media savvy, politically articulate and less naïve when it comes to bribery, unlike previous generations of rebels, that were co-opted or forced into exile in neighbouring Afghanistan.²⁰ On X, the hashtags '#StopBalochGenocide' and '#SaveBalochStudents' are used on hundreds of posts alongside images of kidnapped persons. An organisation called the Baloch Students Action Committee (BSAC) posts about the forced disappearances of students and the oppression of educational institutions in the province. Teachers and professors are targeted and killed on allegations of blasphemy. In Balochistan, the media is totally controlled, and freedom of the press is restricted; Pakistan exerts its best effort to counter online narratives. One publication, the Voice of Balochistan (VOB) is particularly engaged in ridiculing and countering Baloch rights activists in various online spaces. International correspondents cannot visit the province and require permission from the interior government.²¹ Baloch activists have been suspended on Facebook, and so X has become the platform of choice for informing the public of state-sponsored kidnappings and violence in the area.²² In more unregulated cyberspaces, such as on Telegram, BLA fighters have a robust presence online, using the platform to gain sympathy from the public and garner support, potentially even utilising the platform as a tool of recruitment. One group called 'BLA: Balochistan Liberation Army' regularly posts videos of BLA attacks on Pakistani security forces, captioned in English. Another Telegram group called 'Baloch Liberation Army' posts videos of bombings and kidnapped women, calling for their freedom in Urdu. These groups have at least a few hundred subscribers, with the former at just over 1,600 subscribers. Many such accounts that have attempted to build a following on Facebook, including those that glorify BLA fighters and violence, are banned at the request of the state.²³

¹⁹ Malik Siraj Akbar, via interview with Joshua Bowes, November 2023

²⁰ Burzine Waghmar, via an email to Joshua Bowes, November 2023

²¹ Kiyya Baloch, via an interview with Joshua Bowes, November 2023

²² Kiyya Baloch, via an interview with Joshua Bowes, November 2023

²³ Kiyya Baloch, via interview with Joshua Bowes, November 2023

Section 3

Key Actors in Balochistan

3.1 Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA)

Founded in 2000, the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) is an ethno-nationalist military organisation that aims to achieve autonomy for Balochistan, Pakistan's largest province in terms of territory. It has been designated a terrorist organisation by Pakistan, the UK, the US, and the European Union and it is the largest and most influential group among the various Baloch separatist groups.

The BLA aims to achieve complete independence for Balochistan. The main targets of their attacks are Pakistani security forces, however, the acceleration of CPEC has, in recent years, led to a rise in attacks mounted against Chinese workers and infrastructure within the province. Methods employed by the BLA include assassinations, kidnappings, suicide bombing, and attacks against security forces and civilians (most notably against non-Baloch minorities such as Punjabis and Sindhis in Balochistan). The most recent incident occurred on 13 August 2023, in which the BLA took responsibility for an attack on a Chinese convoy in the port city of Gwadar. Both attackers were killed by Pakistani security forces.

The BLA has grown and evolved rapidly in the last few years. Firstly, the emergence of an increasingly unified middle class in the province means that the movement is no longer solely led by tribal leaders (who often clashed among themselves) and has grown to incorporate a greater portion of Balochi society. A second factor is the strengthening of the AT and the resurgence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), both of which are suspected to have ties with the BLA, though this is not universally agreed upon²⁴. Cooperation between the BLA, AT, and TTP has been cited as a reason for the BLA's resilience, having boosted their ability to continue to continue operationally.

The BLA's funding is still largely obscured. Although the AT and TTP support for them is increasingly being alleged, it is still too murky to assert that they are financially backing the

²⁴ Burzine Waghmar, via an email to Joshua Bowes, November 2023



BLA. Some analysts have also accused the Indian government of funding the militant group to create instability within Pakistan, though evidence for this is similarly underdeveloped.

3.2 Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP)

Formed in 2007, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is a militant group consisting primarily of Pashtuns from Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province in the North-West of Pakistan, a region that borders Afghanistan. The TTP acts as an umbrella organisation for other militant groups in the region, aiming to unify opposition against the Pakistani military, remove the Pakistani state's influence from the KPK province, and ultimately gain an independent homeland for the Pashtun population. The TTP also aims to create a Taliban-style, Shariah-compliant state in Pakistan. The TTP has the support of the AT, who are known to provide a haven for TTP members within their own borders.

The TTP gathers funding through donations, extortion, kidnappings, and natural resource extraction. Its primary target is Pakistani security forces, and methods employed by the TTP include assassinations, suicide attacks, and kidnappings across the country. Like the BLA, it has seen a recent resurgence in power because of greater cohesion between similar militant groups in the region. It has also recently been expanding its influence in Balochistan, reflecting the common opposition towards the Pakistani state that is held by the TTP and BLA.

Not only has the presence of the TTP contributed to further tensions between Islamabad and the AT, but their growing ties to the BLA are creating an even greater security crisis within Pakistan's own borders, spanning from the KPK province in the North-West to Balochistan in the South-West. The TTP's termination of the agreed ceasefire has led to a resurgence of the terror group in Pakistan. They have criticised Pakistani security forces for their presence in former no-go areas where they wish to establish their own control. While Noor Wali Mehsud, the chief leader of the TTP, is currently residing in Afghanistan, the BLA is also based in Afghanistan. Thus, both groups have ties to Pakistan's neighbouring state. While there is no concrete alliance between the two groups, Mohammad Khurasani, a TTP spokesman, congratulated the BLA following one of their attacks, claiming, 'our enemy is common'.

3.3 Pakistani Security Forces

The Pakistani army is the sixth-largest military in the world. Its military intelligence service, known as ISI is also highly influential and plays a key role in responding to insurgencies such as those of the BLA and TTP. In Pakistan, the army is commanded by the Chief of Army Staff



(COAS), a four-star general appointed by the prime minister, while the 'supreme commander' of the army is the president. According to the Constitution of Pakistan, the armed forces fall under the control and command of the Federal Government. However, there is often a lack of coordination between civilian authorities and the military, with the federal government often outsourcing policymaking on both internal and external security matters to the army.

Since the Sino-Pakistan Agreement was signed in 1963, Pakistani security forces have enjoyed close ties with China, receiving support in the form of political, economic, and military aid. The rise of terrorist attacks in Balochistan, as well as protests against CPEC projects in Gwadar, will arguably only increase the presence of Pakistani security forces in the province. Chinese pressure on Islamabad to ensure additional security for Chinese personnel has urged the government to take stronger and swifter action against militant groups in the region – if Beijing remains dissatisfied with Pakistan's attempts to address these security issues, there could be a rise in Chinese military influence in Gwadar.

Pakistani Security Forces' counter-insurgency measures include empowering the Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD) to detain anyone suspected of having connections to separatists. Such measures have led to an increase in violence in the region and greater backlash against the Pakistan Army. However, other measures include providing escorts for Chinese engineers and workers in the region, and an overall increase in the presence of security personnel.

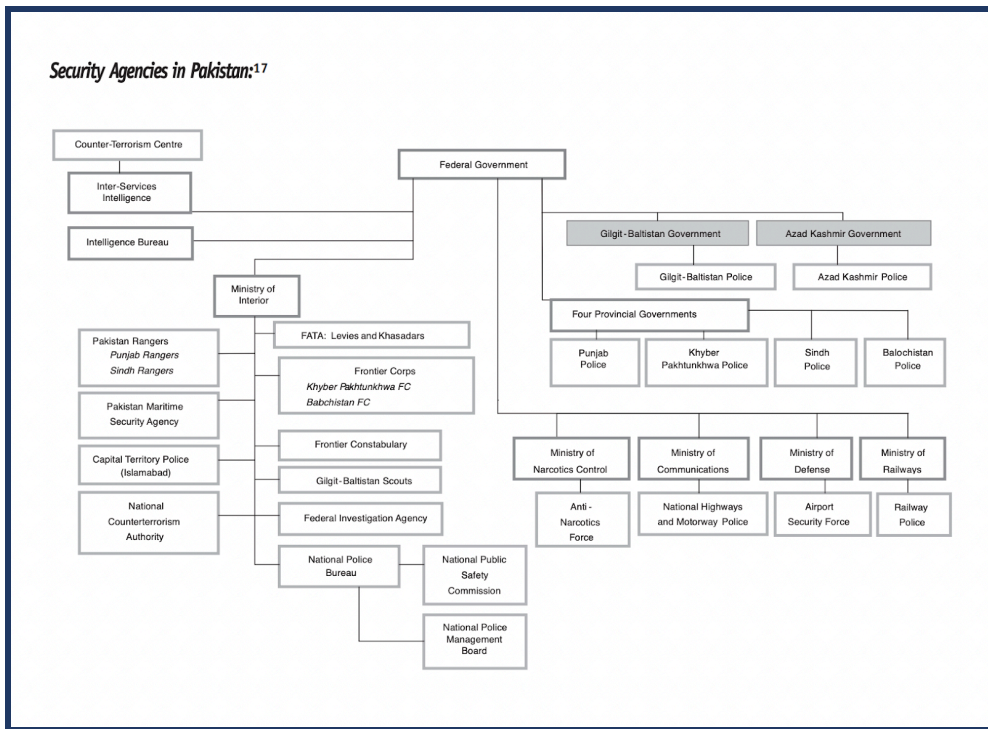
The insurgency in Balochistan has evolved and strengthened over time, and a short-term military response cannot adequately address the root of the situation. In contrast to its approach towards the TTP, the Pakistani government has so far been reluctant to initiate talks with the BLA, out of fear of legitimising the group. However, this is a matter of repairing and rebuilding the relationship between Balochistan and the central government, and this requires collaboration between all actors involved, from the Pakistani and Chinese governments to the BLA and TTP.

The Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD), Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and Intelligence Bureau all fall under the Federal Government of Pakistan. The ISI and Intelligence Bureau are responsible for gathering and providing intelligence for the Pakistani government, and both play a key role in the goal of countering separatism and terrorism (through arrests, interrogations, and allegedly, kidnappings). There are currently four CTDs in Pakistan. The CTD within Balochistan has its own counterterrorism force and aims to quell terrorists and separatist organisations such as the BLA. In September 2023, the CTD successfully conducted an anti-terror operation in Quetta (the capital of Balochistan), killing five terrorists linked to the TTP.

While intelligence services are often accused of disappearing students in the region, an Islamabad High Court (IHC) judge has claimed that the IHC will file a first information report (FIR) against the Prime Minister and the Interior Minister of Pakistan if missing Baloch

students are not found. Meanwhile, the head of the Ministry of Interior, Safraz Ahmed Bugti, has recently accused India of involvement in the recent terror attacks in Balochistan, claiming that India’s intelligence agency, RAW, is responsible for facilitating the attacks in a wider attempt to destabilise the region.

Figure two: Who Controls Pakistan’s Security Forces?



3.4 Chinese PSCs

Russia’s war in Ukraine has brought the importance and reality of private security organisations to the fore. It is important to clarify the role played by Chinese private security organisations in Balochistan. China has over 600,000 citizens working internationally on projects within the BRI and is consequently keen to deploy adequate measures to protect not only its investment, but its citizens. This is most keenly seen in projects, such as in the Balochistan province, wherein Chinese investment is viewed as intrusion, exploitation, and associated with government oppression.

Chinese private security groups, however, differ greatly to the Wagner group, which function as mercenaries. Under UN definitions, the Wagner group should be understood as a Private Military Contractor (PMC), which differs to a Private Security Contractor (PSC) that is employed to protect specific locations, assets, or people. These definitions are still emerging, with private security yet to fully defined within international law. PMCs are illegal



in China, while PSCs were legalised in 2009, from which time they have rapidly grown to number in the low-mid thousands. The existence of Chinese private security in Balochistan is, therefore, not to be treated as a separate security actor as such, with PSCs working in a deterrence role and in personnel and site security. It is believed the number of these organisations operating outside of China is just 30-40 and are generally regarded to be of a much lower level of sophistication and organisation than US, Russian, or even British firms. Constraints such as partial or full state ownership and poor regulatory frameworks have also limited their development.

Section 4

Forecasting: International and Regional Consequences

The ongoing conflict in Pakistan's Balochistan province extends beyond a domestic issue and has implications for Pakistan's broader stability and security, as well as the potential to shape regional geopolitics. The potential impacts of this long-standing conflict are multifaceted, and extend beyond Pakistan's borders, involving neighbouring countries, particularly Afghanistan, China, and India.

On top of the significant risk of violence spilling over into neighbouring regions and countries, the geopolitical importance of Balochistan attracts the interest of foreign powers. Shared borders with Iran in the West and Afghanistan in the Northwest make Balochistan a 'junction' between the Middle East and Central Asia, while also belonging to South Asia. This makes it a prime location for the development of roads, railroads, and pipelines.

These shared borders mean the province boasts a way into the Strait of Hormuz, which is significant for oil transportation from the Persian Gulf. Alongside the geographic centrality of the province to several significant regions, Balochistan is also abundant in natural resources. Pakistan's largest gas reserves are in the Sui sub-district in Balochistan, alongside the presence of coal and metals, all of which serve as an attractive material prospect. Given the interest garnered from foreign powers, namely China, via its strategic importance, Balochistan has the potential to rapidly grow in importance in South Asian geopolitics.

4.1 Impact on Pakistan's Wider Stability/Security

The conflict in Balochistan poses a significant challenge to overall stability and security in Pakistan. The province is Pakistan's largest geographically, making up 42% of Pakistan's territory, and is rich in natural resources. Therefore, the stability of the province is essential for economic development and national cohesion.

While the many insurgencies are suppressed by governments, Balochistan has been home to separatist insurgencies for over 60 years. There have been positive efforts to alleviate unrest in the province via investment and development, but the government of Pakistan has largely used military repression to stymie separatism. This can be seen as a contributing



factor to the longevity of the resistance movement, worsening relations between the Baloch population and the Pakistani government.

The insurgency not only creates insecurity and conflict in the region but also undermines the central government's authority. Situations of fragility, as in Balochistan, can be assessed via the concept of a "parallel state". Balochistan's provincial government, as well as legal and enforcement infrastructure, struggle to operate as intended as they become enmeshed in the region's violent and far-reaching conflict over independence. In such situations, fictitious and competing claims to power by formal and informal institutions can contribute to weakening the state. In this case, Baloch separatism permeates formal and informal politics at different levels, compromising the formal state's ability to operate, and increasing the fragility of governance.

On top of this, the conflict exacerbates existing security concerns. Intensifying Baloch separatism has a compounding effect on the ability of the Pakistan and Balochistan provincial authorities to operate. Without a successful de-escalation of the separatist conflict, attention and resources are diverted away from other threats of major regional significance, such as Taliban rebels and the Islamic state-Khorasan Province. Regardless of the relationship between the insurgency groups, the fact that there are multiple groups, all of which have differing ideological, and material aims, vastly complexifies the task of neutralising violent insurgencies and restoring stability. For this reason, foreign, mainly Chinese, entities will need to find a new *modus operandi* for resource extraction and infrastructure development.

The precariousness of the environment also opens the potential for external non-state actors to further degrade Pakistani sovereignty. Closely bordering Iran and Afghanistan, the province has seen terrorists cross its borders from volatile areas in Afghanistan including Helmand, Zabul, and Kandahar to find sanctuary. The influx of neighbouring extremists exacerbates and perpetuates the violence in the province, while also threatening Pakistan's ability to administer and secure its territory. While it would mischaracterize the Baloch issue to connect Baloch insurgent groups to these foreign extremists, the additional violence that subsequently plagues the province contributes to a two-pronged security threat that poses a complicated challenge to the government of Pakistan.

4.2 Impact on Relations in West Asia

The Baloch insurgency has not only created instability within Pakistan, but also complicated, and been complicated by, the roles of neighbouring states. The concept of a 'Greater



Balochistan overshadows the shared borders of Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan, where in a similar vein to the Kurdish conflict in the Middle East, ethnic and cultural identities do not line up with formal borders. Such ethnic and cultural movements, from the point of view of the involved countries, further complicate already complex relations.

Where relations grow complicated between the three states, support for each other's rebel groups becomes a component of competition. Another consequence of porous borders, Baloch militants have used Iran and Afghanistan as safe havens to launch attacks on Pakistan, increasing tensions between Tehran and Islamabad. This has only been increased in January 2024 following Iran's unilateral missile strikes on Baloch militant sites on Pakistan soil. The sites belonged to the group 'Jaish al-Adl' which fights for Balochistan's independence. It is important to note that the fall of the US-backed government in Kabul allowed many Baloch groups to acquire arms formerly used by the Afghan National Army.

Transnational crime poses another significant issue faced by the bordering countries, Pakistan in particular, that is exacerbated by conflict in the region. It has been estimated that \$30 billion worth of drugs are smuggled from Afghanistan via Pakistan, approximately a third of which travel through Balochistan. Therefore, a significant fraction of this travelling through Balochistan poses major criminal and security risks. Alongside this, arms and weapons are smuggled into the province as well. The ongoing conflict, and subsequent tension it causes between the neighbouring states, make it more difficult for the Government of Pakistan to effectively address these issues. The potential degradation of Pakistani sovereignty in Balochistan will harm its ability to work with its neighbours and international partners, as it would be seen as incapable of managing its affairs and reinforces suggestions that Pakistan could become a failed state.

4.3 Pakistan-China Relations & CPEC

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), is a 3000 km network of major infrastructure projects running from Balochistan's Gwadar Port to China's Xinjiang region. The project, under China's Belt and Road umbrella, is highly valuable to Pakistan's development and subsequently a strategic priority, as evidenced by the creation of a large special security division to protect associated Chinese personnel. Islamabad's strategy of increased militarisation to protect CPEC interests, however, has subsequently incensed Baloch opposition.

Many Baloch people argue that the mega-infrastructure projects, in particular the development of Gwadar port into a deep-water port, are exploitative and an example of

contemporary colonialism. Since 2003, Baloch separatists have focused attacks on Chinese infrastructure, consulates, and nationals within Pakistan. Six mobile towers along the CPEC route in Balochistan, owned by Pakistani and Chinese firms, were allegedly set on fire by the BLA. Other such attacks as have been mentioned in this report, such as in August and October of 2022, are intended to impede Chinese development in Balochistan. These attacks pose a threat to not just operational progress, but also to China-Pakistan relations which will struggle if Pakistan is unable to defend Chinese investment projects.

Islamabad's reliance on Chinese loans and investment means it must ensure the success of CPEC, therefore the Balochistan insurgency poses a major threat to wider Pakistani development and foreign policy aims. Despite the obvious detriment of these attacks to the province, relations appear thus far unaffected. The Chinese Foreign Ministry has condemned attacks and claimed any attempts to sabotage the China-Pakistan friendship or CPEC will never succeed. However, they have also conveyed concerns and urged Pakistan to ensure the safety of Chinese nationals in the country, necessitating a solution to the ongoing violence in Balochistan.

4.4 South Asian Geopolitics

Beyond Chinese investment and relations with neighbours in the Middle East, the Balochistan issue also has implications for South Asian geopolitics, namely the interest of India. The Indian Ocean has been a geopolitical hotspot in which China and India compete to project influence and power. The interest of China in Balochistan, therefore, particularly the port of Gwadar, has evoked concern from competing states like India and the U.S., because of the trade advantage it will allow China in the region.

The interest of India in Iran's Chabahar port in Iran has also been a source of rivalry between India and Pakistan, particularly as India's similar project in Iran is not facing attacks as CPEC is. As CPEC poses a threat to Indian interests, there is suspicion of Indian involvement in the Balochistan insurgency. India has been accused of covertly supporting the secessionist movement in Balochistan, with India in turn being accused by Pakistan of supporting militant groups in Kashmir. Exiled Baloch leaders have often called for India to help, escalating tensions between the two states. India, moreover, has raised the issue of Balochistan in international forums, often as a response to Pakistan's condemnation of policies in Kashmir.

These incidents highlight how Balochistan has significance for the surrounding states – even if for different reasons – and elevates Baloch separatism beyond the provincial or domestic, to the realm of Indo-Pacific geopolitics. With Islamabad's ability to govern its domestic



affairs already being questioned on several fronts, its neighbours may begin to view it as a failed state, increasingly degrading the value of diplomatic engagement and cooperation mechanisms. At a basic level, therefore, the existence of the issue of Baloch independence acts to fuel suspicion and competition between an already fractious Pakistan-India relationship. In this sense, Baloch separatism poses further threat to the creation of stable and institutionalised ties in South Asia, which is already one of the most disconnected regions in the world.



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