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Balochistan: Pakistan's forgotten conflict

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1. Overview

With the world's attention usually on Afghanistan and the Pashtun borderlands of northwest Pakistan, the protracted low intensity conflict to the southeast in the Pakistani province of Balochistan (also called Baluchistan) has often been relatively eclipsed. Only developments in the provincial capital, Quetta, also known as 'Taliban Central', and the 'Pashtun belt' in the north of the province, feature regularly in the international media.

Balochistan makes up 43% the land-mass of Pakistan but Balochs, at around six million in number, are only 4% of the total population. Much of the province is harsh, mountainous terrain. About 80% of the population is said to live beneath the poverty line. The province's human development indicators have long been the worst in the country. Along with historical grievances, this has fuelled a pro-independence insurgency. Armed groups inspired by sectarian and international Islamic extremist agendas have also been active in the province.

Balochistan is rich in uranium, copper, coal, gold, silver, platinum and aluminium and provides more than one-third of Pakistan's natural gas. Overall, it contains nearly 20% of the country's mineral and energy resources. In recent years, the province has become the focus of Chinese investment in the context of its 'One Belt One Road' initiative. However, there is debate about how much the people of Balochistan will benefit from this investment.

2. Armed groups

The latest phase of the nationalist insurgency in Balochistan began in 2004, following previous outbreaks in 1948, 1958 and 1973-77. It was fuelled by the killing by the security forces in 2006 of local political leader, Nawab Akbar Bugti, a former provincial governor who had turned to insurgency.

During the late-2000s and early years of this decade, pro-independence Baloch armed groups stepped up their military attacks against the Pakistani security forces.

The most active pro-independence armed group has been the **Balochistan Liberation Army**, established in the 1980s, which both the US and the EU have banned as a terrorist group. It is widely believed to be led by Brahumdagh Bugti, Nawab Akbar Bugti's grandson, who is in exile – although he denies that he supports violence. Another active group is the **Balochistan Liberation Front**. In recent years, insurgent groups have begun to undertake attacks against [non-Baloch](#) civilians and 'settlers', including Hindus. Journalists have sometimes also been [targeted](#).

Baloch sentiment at the time of the creation of Pakistan was very much against incorporation. Today, some might still be persuaded to accept a fairer share of the wealth generated in the province and genuine political autonomy, rather than independence. The most prominent political party to take this position is the Balochistan National Party (BNP), which has been the object of attacks by the insurgents as a consequence.

According to one 2011 [press article](#):

[...] this insurgency seems to have spread deeper into Baloch society than ever before. Anti-Pakistani fervour has gripped the province. Baloch schoolchildren refuse to sing the national anthem or fly its flag; women, traditionally secluded, have joined the struggle. Universities have become hotbeds of nationalist sentiment.

Some claim that the level of insurgency has reduced since 2012; others dispute this. According to [figures](#) from the South Asian Terrorism Portal, 242 civilians and members of the security forces had been killed in attacks by insurgents as at mid-December 2017. In 2010, the [figure](#) was over 600.

In 2016 the federal minister for ports and shipping, Mir Hasil Bizenjo, reportedly [said](#) that “if a referendum were held in Balochistan today, the militants would win.” There is no way of knowing if such a claim is accurate.

Much Afghan opium is smuggled through western Balochistan. Arms and drugs trafficking help to sustain pro-independence armed groups. There has been an increase in [human trafficking](#) in recent years too.

Not all the armed groups active in Balochistan are motivated by nationalist sentiment. Islamic terrorist groups such as the **Pakistani Taliban** and **Lashkar-e-Jhangvi** have also been active in the province, primarily targeting Shia Muslims. For example, the government hospital in Quetta was [attacked](#) by a suicide bomber in August 2016, killing at least 70 people.

Last but not least, in recent years there have also been attacks – particularly in the Pashtun-majority north of the province – by terrorists inspired by more international agendas. So-called **Islamic State** has claimed responsibility for several such attacks. For example, it claimed responsibility for a suicide bomb attack on a [church in Quetta](#) that killed at least 18.

Al-Qaeda has tried to build a presence in the province but the evidence suggests that so far it has [struggled](#) to do so. It has historically had links with the Pakistani Taliban and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (see above), but may currently be relatively eclipsed in Balochistan by Islamic State.

There was little sign of a let-up in the violence as 2017 was succeeded by 2018. In late-December 2017, it was reported that a plan by pro-independence insurgents to assassinate the Governor of Balochistan, Mohammed Khan Achakzai, had been foiled. On the last day of 2017 there was a raid on the hideout of a group of fighters in the Gul Kach area, in which two soldiers were killed. The first day of 2018 saw two bomb blasts in the town of Chaman, injuring eight people, including three security personnel.

3. State responses

The **security forces have been the main source of political and economic power** in Balochistan since 1947. This has meant that the civilian authorities, including elected governments, have struggled to exert influence in the province.

There is a broad official consensus today that all pro-independence and Islamist extremist armed groups currently operating in Balochistan should be treated as terrorists. Whereas the possibility of negotiation is kept open with armed Baloch nationalists, the Islamic terrorist groups are seen as impossible to negotiate with.

Over the last decade or so, the Pakistani authorities have responded to the ongoing violence in the province with a mix of ‘carrots’ and ‘sticks’ – the first ostensibly aimed at addressing some of the ‘root causes’ of conflict, the latter at military confrontation of active armed groups. Most independent observers agree that, overall, the sticks have been decidedly more prominent than the carrots.

Carrots

In November 2009, the previous Pakistan People's Party (PPP)-led federal government, acknowledging that the province had long been marginalised and deprived, launched a three-year '**Balochistan Conciliation Package**' (*Aghaz-e-Haqooq-e-Balochistan*). It was intended to build stability by addressing a wide range of Baloch grievances, by promoting demilitarisation and by creating greater economic opportunities, especially for the young. Pro-independence insurgents that surrendered to the security forces were offered amnesty, money and a government job.

But although there have been significant increases in federal financial provision for Balochistan since 2009, [implementation](#) of the Package and its successors has lagged far behind official rhetoric.

When the Pakistani Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), led by Nawaz Sharif, took office at the centre following its May 2013 general election victory, it pledged to continue with efforts to boost investment and development in Balochistan. The PML-N is also the largest party in the five-party governing coalition at provincial level.

One of the biggest achievements of the previous PPP-led government was the passage of the **18th Amendment to the Constitution**, which transferred further powers to the provinces from the centre. However, some provincial governments – including Balochistan – have struggled to make much of these powers due to bureaucratic weakness and political in-fighting.

The difficulties being experienced in implementing devolution have been highlighted by the fact that the central government has announced that it is postponing a new financial 'award' for the provinces. Many expected a new settlement in the 2015/16 financial year but it has been repeatedly postponed. The sticking-point has been that several provinces, including Balochistan, want a greater share of the available resources, but the central government is unwilling to consider this. The 'award' has traditionally given much more weight to population density, on which Balochistan scores low, than on the revenue generated by its resources, on which the province scores much higher.

Under the current award, the federal government is obliged transfer 57.5% of the resources in what is called the 'federal divisible pool' to Pakistan's four main provinces, of which Balochistan is one. Under the current [award](#), Punjab gets 51.74% of the resources in that 'pool', Sindh 24.55%, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa 14.62% and Balochistan 9.09%. For the moment, this 'division of the spoils' remains in force.

Although elements of the 2009 'Conciliation Package' have continued under the current PML-led Government, it has been largely overtaken by the massive '**China-Pakistan Economic Corridor**' initiative. Launched in 2015 and currently worth US\$62 billion, the federal government and the army are both strong backers of CPEC. CPEC is an infrastructure-driven initiative that is intended to transform Pakistan's transportation networks, increase its energy capacity and establish 'special economic zones'. For China, all this will contribute to its wider 'One Belt One Road' initiative. Much of CPEC centres on the Chinese-built port of Gwadar. For example, it is due to be the site of a floating liquefied natural gas facility that will be part of the ongoing Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project. In November 2016, Chinese cargo arrived at Gwadar for the first time for onward shipment to Africa and Asia.

Critics worry that, while it has great potential, the benefits of CPEC could by-pass most ordinary Balochs. There are similar concerns about its impact in other regions of the

country. According to a recent [article](#) on the European Council on Foreign Relations website:

“The problem so far is that Chinese investment is focused on monumental infrastructure and not on rural development”, ECFR was told by an academic in Pakistan, and that “the locals have no role” in CPEC. The latter refers not only to including local voices in the decision-making process of CPEC but also failing to include local people in newly created jobs.

One of the dilemmas might be the lack of skilled and educated people in such underdeveloped regions. Estimates of CPEC creating up to two million jobs may be exaggerated but, nevertheless, there will be newly created job opportunities in fields ranging from construction and engineering to architecture and IT. The question, however, is how many Baloch (or other minorities) are educated and skilled enough to qualify for these new jobs.

The need for a greater emphasis on rural development is underscored by claims that 30 out of 32 districts are currently ‘food-insecure’. Recent years have apparently seen poor rainfall and there is poor rainwater management in most parts of the province.

Given the track-record of Pakistan’s national elites, there are also concerns about whether CPEC will fuel official corruption. The BNP has been highly critical of CPEC.

In November 2017, there were indications that the authorities were recognising that focusing too narrowly on CPEC might not be enough. The federal government [unveiled](#) a ten-year ‘**Equalisation Development Package**’ for Balochistan. Details, including figures, are hard to find in English. However, although the announcement highlighted the provision of clean water, gas supply, education and health facilities to ordinary Balochis in order to bring the province up to the level of Pakistan’s other main provinces, there will be those who worry that this could prove to be another cosmetic exercise and that large-scale infrastructure linked to CPEC priorities will remain the priority in practice.

A few weeks’ later, the army [announced](#) its own ‘**Prosperous Balochistan**’ initiative. While welcomed by some, with national elections due in 2018 and relations between the PML-N led federal government and the army fractious, there will be concerns about the extent to which the Pakistani authorities can maintain a coherent or unified approach to development across the province.

The Pakistani authorities continue to make offers of amnesty to pro-independence insurgents who voluntarily lay down their arms. These offers do not extend to members of the jihadi armed groups. The authorities [claimed](#) recently that over 2000 suspected insurgents had surrendered to the security forces since the beginning of 2016. The authorities are also trying to entice nationalist leaders currently in exile back to the country. In November 2017, one such leader, Nawabzada Gazain Marri, returned to Pakistan after a decade in exile.

Sticks

While security operations are often successful on their own terms, the Pakistani security forces have often been accused of committing human rights abuses when carrying them out; these can act as a ‘recruiting sergeant’ for the armed groups that they are supposedly trying to defeat.

In October 2010, Amnesty International called on the then PPP-led federal government to investigate the killing of more than 40 Baloch political activists by the security forces, in what it called a ‘kill and dump’ policy. In July 2011, Human Rights Watch highlighted

dozens of enforced 'disappearances', in which the authorities had taken people into custody and then denied all responsibility. Investigations into the alleged 'disappearances' of hundreds of Baloch civilians at the hands of the security forces have so far produced few results.

In late 2016 there were [claims](#) that nearly 1000 dead bodies of political activists and suspected armed separatists had been found in the province since 2011. Activists asserted that most of the victims had been picked up by security agencies. The authorities responded by saying that these were victims of infighting among insurgent groups. Baloch activists in other parts of the country – including the city of Karachi, to which many have migrated – have also reportedly been victims of serious [abuses](#) at the hands of the security forces.

4. International dimensions

Although from time to time it has raised concerns relating to human rights issues and called for action to address the causes of instability in the province, **successive US Administrations** have taken the [view](#) that Balochistan is an internal security matter for Pakistan.

The US has consistently provided support for Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts, despite sometimes feeling that its partner is not doing as much as it could do to tackle the jihadi armed groups on its territory – including the Afghan Taliban, many of whose leaders are [based](#) in Quetta, the provincial capital of Balochistan. Since taking office, US President Donald Trump has often been [critical](#) of Pakistan's counterterrorism performance; he is threatening to significantly reduce funding to the country.

US security personnel have in the past been based in Balochistan, including at Shamsi base, southwest of Quetta, from where [drone attacks](#) targeting Afghan Taliban figures in Afghanistan were reportedly launched between 2004 and 2011. This presence was ended in the wake of the killing by US forces of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan without the prior consent of the Pakistani government. To our knowledge, no US security personnel are currently based in the province.

There are US concerns that Gwadar, which is strategically located at the head of the Straits of Hormuz, might be used by the Chinese as naval base in future. It is currently used by the Pakistani navy.

The **UK's stance** on Balochistan has been [similar](#) to that of the US. Between 2009 and 2011 UK personnel [provided](#) counterinsurgency training for Pakistan's Frontier Corps at a facility in Balochistan. However, this also came to an end following the killing of Osama bin Laden. At the time the MOD told the [Guardian](#) the training teams were ready to redeploy at the first possible opportunity". But there is no indication that this training ever resumed.

So far **China** has viewed insurgency in Balochistan as very much a [security](#) issue – the Pakistani army, which has allocated thousands of soldiers to defend CPEC projects, comes under relatively little pressure from it to explore political solutions.

India has regularly expressed [concern](#) about human rights abuses in Balochistan, including at the UN. However, some doubt whether this reflects a genuine concern on its part, arguing that India largely uses Balochistan to counter Pakistan's criticisms on the issue of Kashmir. There are fears that Balochistan has [become](#) an additional site of proxy conflict between India and Pakistan.

5. Further reading

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