



Baloch Unrest in Pakistan: A Challenge for National Security

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Abstract:

Pakistan is faced with various security challenges, among which the Baloch unrest remains one of the most significant threats to national security. Baloch militant groups challenged the writ of the state and posed serious threats to the political, economic, social and cultural sectors of the state. The primary aim of this study is to identify the major causes of Baloch unrest in Balochistan and examine its impacts on the national security of Pakistan. The study employed a qualitative research methodology grounded in the philosophical perspective of constructivism/interpretivism. Constructivism observes reality in subjective ways and interprets the understanding of those concerned with a particular issue. It assumes that people develop their own independent understandings of the world around them and the events occurring within it. The data were collected through interviews as well as the official state sources. The main findings of the study reveal that the fifth phase of the Baloch unrest has reached at the extreme edge, where militants are continuously targeting the state's installations, vulnerable sites, and local masses. Baloch militants have been supported by regional and global actors to promote instability to achieve their desired goals.

Keywords: Pakistan, Balochistan, Baloch unrest, national security, law and order, counter-terrorism measure

INTRODUCTION

Following the independence of Pakistan in August 1947, sections of Baloch political elite were reluctant to accede to the newly created state of Pakistan. Subsequently, some Baloch from Balochistan started an armed resistance against the state. Certain local leaders rejected integration with Pakistan and launched the first phase of unrest against the center in 1948. The second phase of the Baloch unrest started in 1958, the third in 1962, and the fourth in the 1970s. These earlier phases of unrest were relatively short-lived and eventually subsided. After a prolonged period of relative calm, the Baloch unrest resurfaced once again in 2006, when Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti died during a military operation. In the aftermath of the operation, Baloch representatives in both provincial and national assemblies demanded a comprehensive political resolution to the conflict. However, instead of a sustained political or parliamentary solution, Baloch militants intensified

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attacks on state's installations and the security forces in Pakistan. The principal demand of the Baloch militant groups has been the creation of an independent state. In contrast, other segments of Baloch society are of the view that they ensure Balochs' equal representation in the political sphere of the state, such as federal and provincial assemblies and seats in different departments of the state. They also demand a fair distribution of natural resources which facilitates a specific number of the Baloch population. Furthermore, the concerns regarding National Finance Commission (NFC) award require practical resolution. Although development initiatives have been introduced in the province, critics argue that their benefits have often been limited to a small segment of the population. Socially, many Baloch communities also demand equal protection of human rights and improved socio-economic conditions in the province.

In the 21st century, the dynamics at the regional and international levels have significantly transformed. Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States of America (USA) intervened in Afghanistan to dismantle the global terrorist group Al-Qaeda. Pakistan became a frontline ally of the USA in the war on terror. Meanwhile, India and Iran emerged as major stakeholders in the regional politics and they also played their part in Afghanistan. In the second decade of the 21st century, China signed a mega project of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) with Pakistan. India signed a connectivity project with Iran and their primary aim was to develop Chabbahar Port. The US-China rivalry gained momentum and affected the South Asian regional security dynamics. The global and regional politics influence the security dynamics of Pakistan, specifically Balochistan. In comparison with the last four phases of unrest, the fifth and current phase has compelled policymakers to reassess the underlying causes of unrest and its impacts on the national security of Pakistan. It is often argued that regional and international actors have sought to exploit instability in Balochistan to secure their strategic interests and destabilized Pakistan to prevent the ongoing developments.

The primary aim of the study is to understand the major causes of Baloch unrest in Balochistan and its impacts on the security of Pakistan. The main objective of this research is to analyze the underlying factors driving Baloch unrest and assess its impacts on Pakistan's national security. This research intends to answer the major causes of Baloch unrest in Balochistan and how it is challenging the national security of Pakistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

After the departure of Britain, Pakistani leaders adopted new policies toward the provinces aimed at political integration and modernization. Pakistani leaders attempted to spread political awareness by providing them with educational opportunities and all new tokens that aim to further bring modernization in the province. But most of the Baloch in Balochistan were reluctant and moved against the idea. They believed that Baloch identity is different from the whole single one (Harrison, 1981).

Despite major changes at the global level, Balochistan largely retained its tribal social structure. The emergence of Baloch nationalism did not stem from the industrial revolution, as argued by Gellner, nor was it caused by capitalism, as Anderson believed that triggered it. Baloch nationalism emerged in response to state intervention in the province. After the independence, in 1948, the first unrest

took place in the provinces. The basic goals of the unrest were to achieve autonomous status (Khan, 2005).

Balochs perceive themselves as the representatives of an old existing nation that has its own national values, national identity, history and heroes. The Baloch leaders said that, just as Muslims and Hindus were considered distinct communities in every aspect of their lives, in the case of the Baloch, they are different from the rest of the Pakistani ethnic groups (Axmann, 2008).

The emergence of the Baloch unrest in the state was therefore based on the very basic notions of nationalism. Nationalists of Balochistan deemed that they have a centuries-old history, a specific culture and values, the same language and race, a specific territory, have their own heroes and they were living as an independent state (Saddiqi, 2012).

Pakistan is widely regarded as a complex multi-ethnic and multi-lingual state. They identified themselves as different and distinct on the basis of having specific culture, ethnicity and language, to be a nation on the basis of the mentioned elements, they seek independence and want to form on the global map their own ethnically and linguistically homogeneous state, some seek to achieve greater provincial autonomy within a state and others may be in between the two goals (Cohen, 2004).

Similarly, many Baloch have viewed themselves as a culturally and ethno-linguistically diverse group, having different history and living for a long time as an independent state. Following partition, the Baloch took arms in 1948, 1958, 1962-68 and 1973-77. During these armed fights between the central authorities and militants, the consequences brought the state to the edge as they caused too many losses on both sides.

METHODOLOGY

The study followed a qualitative research methodology. The philosophical perspective of the study is interpretivism. This philosophical school of thought observed reality in a subjective style and considers it socially constructed. From this perspective, the researcher sought to understand the external world through the experiences and perceptions of the concerned participants of the study. According to interpretivism, people have their own independent observations regarding the world and what is happening around them, and each individual has unique and different interpretations. Two broader approaches to research are commonly identified: deductive and inductive. This study adopted an inductive approach, whereby data were first collected from a specific concerned area and people and then a general conclusion from the data was drawn. The research design of this study is phenomenology. It is stated that most of the qualitative researchers follow a phenomenological design. According to this design, researchers try to understand the lived experiences of the masses and go to the direct settings of the concerned targets to know what they really observe, say and want. Through this research design, they seek to engage directly with the concerned experts and study their conscious experience of their life regarding the security threats to Pakistan. The time horizon of the study is longitudinal, where data were collected at different points.

The data were collected at different points, as it provided the researcher with the emerging trends, understanding the order, what happens initially and what were the causes of that happening. It also

reduced the likelihood of biases while collecting data for the study. The sampling strategy of was non-probability sampling, and in the same strategy, the researcher adopted the convenience method. This method enabled researcher to gather data from the participants based on their availability. It is a quick and easy method where data collected from the primary sources in a short period of time. The data were collected through interviews. There are different types of interviews based on their structure and format, and the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews. The data analysis technique of the study was interpretative phenomenological analysis, which seeks to understand what people think about the concerned issue as per their lived experiences.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical base of the study is constructivism. The Baloch unrest and its impacts on the national security of Pakistan have been analyzed by applying a constructivist approach. According to constructivism, the interests and identities of states are shaped by social norms, values and rules (Reus-Smit, 2002). Constructivists argued that the way the material world is shaped by action-interaction between or among humans relies on the normative interpretation of the objective forces (Adler, 1997). Constructivists believe that the identity of a state is socially constructed and is vital to the national interest. It is comparatively a new approach in the realm of academia and research, and it has emphasized that social norms, values and rules play a significant role in the formation of a state's identity and interest. Wendt has criticized other major theoretical approaches as they declared that states' interests and identities are fixed. Wendt claimed that states' identities and interests are basically culturally oriented (Wendt, 1992).

Wendt is of the view that identity is an understanding and belief about self (Wendt, 1994). Constructivists argue that it is identity that develops the interests of any state. Human perceptions, norms, values, ideas and traditions play a major role in the establishment of a state's identity. So, it is norms, values and ideas which mature states' identities, interests and behavior at the regional and global level (Anwar, et. al., 2023). Interest remains a central theme for both the study of international relations and state behavior. Realists argue that the interests of every state are different, but they all have an interest in survival and securing their desired interests (Kauppi & Viotti, 2023). Constructivists argue that interests and threats to states are subjective in nature. So, the traditional security threats such as India, Afghanistan, Iran and non-state actors are the major survival threats to the state. While these concerns remain significant, the current dynamics show that, as compared to these challenges, the underlying causes of both traditional and nontraditional threats pose serious threats to the survival of the local masses and state.

Analyzing and understanding the security challenges to Pakistan, Baloch militants often argue that it is not only material factors which shape the identity and interests of the state, but also cultural and ideational factors which develop their identity and interests. Conversely, Pakistani state views the Baloch unrest as a threat to centralization, national integration, cohesion, territorial integrity, national ideology, and dominant state narratives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A major grievance frequently highlighted in the literature is the lack of adequate political and administrative representation of Baloch population. In 2002, for example, out of 14 provincial government secretaries in Quetta, only 4 were Balochis, out of 3200 students in the University of

Balochistan, only 500 were Baloch and 30 out of 180 faculty members were Baloch (Weaver, 2002). Baloch representation in central institutions and appointments by the center is deemed one of the major issues that Baloch people claimed that they have been denied, in granting their actual rights. (Bansal, 2005). Baloch claim that they have not been given their rights as they deserve. They feel that they are not playing any vital role in forming state policies and running the central government. Out of 342 seats of the national assembly, Balochistan held only 16 seats, which many viewed as insufficient relative to their concerns and needs (Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency [PILDAT], 2007).

Baloch groups claim that their leaders were compelled to sign a treaty to join Pakistan after independence, and they did it. They argued that the region remained relatively peaceful before the treaty, but after 1955, Baloch militants started an armed fight for independent status against the ruling powers (Fair, 2012). The constitution of 1973 and the signatures of some Baloch nationalist leaders, the chief minister and the governor of Balochistan, marked a significant political turning point. However, critics contend that constitutional reforms did not fully resolve the demands for provincial autonomy. They further argue that some parties in the province emerged with religious ideology. Finally, the influx of settlers from different parts of the state altered the local political and demographic dynamics (Cheema, 2013). With the introduction of the 1973 constitution of Pakistan, all the members agreed on the point of provincial autonomy and after that, the 18th amendment stressed the issue of provincial autonomy to the federating units. But the center is not exercising it in a proper way. So, the Baloch demanded an autonomous status to have control over their politics and resources (Javed, 2010).

The Article 158 of the 1973 constitution gives precedence to the province over the center when it comes to the natural resources of the region. But in practice, the discovery of natural resources and new development are almost in the hands of the center, the amount that the center grants to the province is extremely less than given in the constitution of the State Article 161 (Sameen, 2012). Although Balochistan is least populated, it is among the richest in natural resources. The province is the second supplier of energy resources such as gas and coal. The Baloch demanded control over the natural resources of the province (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2011). Baloch militant groups on the frontline, fighting against the center to achieve their demands for provincial autonomy and greater control over the natural resources of the province. The province is rich in natural resources, but the allocation of these reserves is too low or less than the amount that has been given to it (Cheema, 2013).

Balochistan is widely regarded as the poorest province in Pakistan, with the lowest per capita income compared to the other provinces of Pakistan. Paradoxically, the province is rich in natural resources such as gas, coal, gold, copper, aluminum, platinum and silver. Currently, Balochistan, via its natural gas resource, is providing energy to the whole state. But Baloch claimed that they are not getting any benefits from the construction of new mega projects and the exploration of natural resources, especially natural gas (Bansal, 2008).

NFC award has generated an ethnic issue in the state where small or heterogeneous ethnic groups claimed that they are getting less in strength and amount as compared to the largest and ethnically homogenous province in the state. The NFC awards are based on population, which has been deemed unfair as the people of the largest province, land-wise, perceive that they are contributing a

lot but getting fewer benefits. People of Balochistan, especially the Baloch ethnic group, having a quota of 5.2%, do not get even 3.5% fixed jobs that have been fixed based on the 1972 census and where it was reported that the province is having 33.48% highest rate of unemployment (Ali, 2005).

The Baloch unrest has remained dominant in the province. In response to the deteriorating law and order conditions, the military operations were launched, and Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti was killed along with his thirty tribe members in the operation. The death of Nawab Akbar fueled the armed resistance against the state and their demands moved far beyond the provincial autonomy and Baloch rights (Gall, 2011).

These are the major grievances of the Baloch's residing in Pakistan and they deem themselves to be denied relatively. They have been ignored almost in every sphere of public representation in Pakistan, such as parliament, state army and diplomatic corps and so on forth to achieve and sustain their presence in the state and its affairs as an integral part of the state.

To bring stability and counter-terrorism steps in Balochistan, Pakistan initiated a non-kinetic approach. It was important to identify the challenges and building blocks to bring stability and peace. The initiatives were to ensure the success of provincial government, harmony among institutions, rational environment for reconciliation.

Political measures regarding Balochistan crisis, Pakistan's Peoples' Party (PPP) introduced several confidence building measures aimed at addressing the Baloch grievances. The initiatives include Balochistan peace programs, engaging youth return of missing persons (Nabeel & Asif, 2019). After the election of 2008, government stressed to follow the non-military approach to address the issue of Baloch. Dialogue, negotiations and reconciliation were adopted to resolve the major issues of Baloch in Balochistan (Pertiwi et al, 2024).

To bring economic progress in Balochistan, center had adopted the policy of development. Kachhi Canal project was started to strengthen the agricultural sector of Balochistan. Gwadar Port was developed as part of CPEC project to connect the major regions of the globe and over the economic crisis in the region (Jilani & Mujaddid, 2020). Riko Deq Project was initiated to overcome the economic challenges in the province. Oil and gas fields were developed to facilitate the region in the required domain.

In social sector, people centric initiatives were adopted where local masses were given the opportunity to get standard health facilities, proper education. Schools, colleges, universities, research, technical and women institutions were developed to bring stability and progress in the region (Jilani & Mujaddid, 2020). During Musharraf several major infrastructure projects were initiated to enhance regional connectivity and promote development in Pakistan. These included Gwadar port, Mirani Dam and Makran coastal Highway projects. Educational and employment opportunities were introduced to uplift the province and masses in the concerned areas (Nabeel & Asif, 2019).

A Challenge for Pakistan's National Security

The crisis in Balochistan has had a significant impact on the national security of Pakistan. Balochistan is facing various challenges such as political instability, economic crisis, lack of good

governance, unemployment, poverty, illiteracy and absence of health facilities, scarcity of water, transportation and infrastructure challenges, as well as the rise of terrorism and ethnic insurgencies. Collectively, these challenges generated internal uncertainty and posed a serious threat to the security of Pakistan. Among these challenges, the Baloch unrest remains one of the most critical threats to national security of Pakistan.

Officials of Pakistan have found that Baloch rebels are being assisted by neighboring nations such as India and Afghanistan in proxy warfare. India has been providing financing and armaments to the Baloch militants as it seeks to advance the national interests of the region (Latif, 2009; Naazer 2019). Some scholars have also argued that the presence of militant networks across the Afghan border has strengthened the unrest and created additional security challenges. India favors and provides financial assistance to the Baloch militants. The external assistance that makes this unrest stronger is a significant danger of the safety of Pakistan. (Brown, 2012).

According to Pakistan, Afghanistan allowed Baloch militants to train in Afghanistan in order to fight against Pakistan and its army with the hope of attaining their objectives. Afghanistan seeks confirmation of this and claims that it does not give money or training to the militants, and does not want to make trouble or advance the interests of Pakistan in Balochistan (Latif, 2009). According to Pakistani media the militants have relations with Afghanistan, India, Iran and Russia. Without their backing, the Baloch militants would not be able to continue their drive in the region (Bansal, 2006).

The construction of the Gwadar port is something that Iran dislikes as Iran has a large port as well the Chahbahar. There are several states that desire to utilize Chahbahar with their intentions. In case Gwadar is constructed, Chahbahar will lose its significance both locally and globally. Iran, which has been estranged in the global politics, has reported that it would have its own strong port and no other nation would assist in developing Gwadar (Khetran, 2018).

Some studies suggest that regional actors have sought to influence developments in Balochistan in order to safeguard their own strategic interests, particularly in context of broader tensions involving Iran, US and other western powers. Such geopolitical rivalries have occasionally intersected with Pakistan's internal security environment. (Idrees, 2025).

Baloch unrest in Balochistan has intensified in recent years and continues to challenge the security apparatus of Pakistan. It has intensified over the last 4 to 5 years. Militant groups have reportedly acquired sophisticated weapons and adopted modern attack tactics. Baloch Liberation Army attacked the Jaffer Express train on 11 March, 2025 and it resulted in heavy losses. They are attacking CPEC projects, which is weakening the state in the economic domain (Verma et al., 2025). Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi condemned Baloch militant activities in Balochistan and said that these attacks are an attempt to destabilize Pakistan. He reaffirmed the government's commitment to restoring peace and order. He stated that these acts of terror would not prevent Pakistan from achieving peace and development (Farooq & Ashraf, 2025). militants are involved in militant activities against the state's vulnerable sites and installations. They are trying to get control over natural resources and some territories in Balochistan. Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), Baloch Republican Army (BRA), Baloch Raji Aajoi Sangar (BRAS) and Baloch Liberation Front (BLF) are attacking government installations in different parts of Balochistan. These attacks have contributed to instability and undermined the security of Pakistan (Shabir et al, 2023).

Regional and global players intervened in the province and tried to secure their interests, and contained economic developments in the province (Ejaz et al., 2023). Balochistan is facing both internal and external issues due to various factors. These issues gave birth to extremism and unrest. The security agencies have undertaken various initiatives to counter extremism and unrest, especially in Balochistan. (Talal et al., 2023).

Baloch militants have adopted new operational tactics to attack the targeted sites in order to prevent counter-terrorism operations. Asymmetrical warfare is one of the complex types of war where militants attack the vulnerable sites and run without having any loss. These new tactics and weapons are challenging the national security of Pakistan (Khattak et al., 2022). Due to the advent of social media tools, militant groups have changed their attacking tactics and coordination patterns. Militants are recruiting and radicalizing youth and as a result of such developments, the unrest gained momentum to secure its desired goals. These technological adaptations have contributed to the persistence of the unrest and posed additional threats to Pakistan's security environment. (Niamat & Akhtar, 2025).

CONCLUSION

The rise of the Baloch unrest is not a new phenomenon; rather, it has deep historical roots. After the independence of Pakistan, a segment of the Baloch ruling elites was reluctant to join Pakistan. The unwillingness resulted in the first armed conflict, which started in 1948 and continued for almost a year. Subsequent phases of unrest emerged at different stages and eventually subsided. However, the fifth and current phase of the Baloch unrest began after military operation in which Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti was killed. Currently, the unrest is at the ultra-extreme edge. Militant groups are using their own tactics against the state. Baloch people demand an equitable share in political, social and economic spheres. Politically, they seek greater representation in the national and provincial institutions. The economic demands of the Baloch nation are to grant them control over their own resources. Developments are taking place in the province, but they are not facilitating the Baloch Nation; rather, the benefits are going to a few people. Socially, Baloch continue to demand the protection of their fundamental rights and equal treatment under law.

In the 21st century, the regional and global security dynamics have undergone significant transformation. The attacks of 9/11 was one of the major events which changed the political, economic, social, cultural and religious dynamics at the global level. The USA intervened in Afghanistan against Al Qaeda, Pakistan became a frontline ally of the USA, India and Iran started the Chabbahar port project and Pakistan and China signed mega project of CPEC. China-US economic rivalry further destabilize the region. Pakistan, being a geostrategic and geo-economics significant state, has been intervened in and exploited by regional and global players for their national interests. The Balochistan crisis was exploited by Afghanistan, Iran, India and other non-state actors. They provided financial and military aid to Baloch militants and the armed fight resulted in insecurity, thereby posing serious challenges to the national security of Pakistan.

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