

Pakistan Reader

Bleeding Balochistan through CPEC: The Sino-Pak Nexus in Action



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Introduction

Balochistan is Pakistan's largest but least populous province. It is a largely rugged and arid province with wild temperature fluctuation, which often makes living conditions hostile for its inhabitants. However, it also holds rich natural gas and mineral reserves that have been coveted by Pakistan for nearly seven decades. Balochistan has shared a complicated relationship with Pakistan since its merger was completed in 1948 and has witnessed five distinct insurgencies that have highlighted an enduring pattern of conflict. The complexities of this relationship have had a bearing on Balochistan's society and economy.

Balochistan is the poorest provinces in Pakistan and one of the poorest regions in the world. It exhibits low scores in nearly all human development parameters. China has entered Balochistan through its ties with Pakistan, thus inheriting the latter's legacy and problems. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), projects towards which formally began in 2015, was touted to be a game-changer for Balochistan as it was speculated to bring prosperity through infrastructure development. However, CPEC's ability to change Balochistan's situation remains subject to the geopolitics of the fraught Pakistan-Balochistan relationship. Furthermore, whether Balochistan actually figures in China's, or for that matter Pakistan's, intentions and imperatives behind CPEC also needs to be analysed.

Given these contexts, this study will make an attempt to analyse the socio-economic dimensions of the Pakistan-Balochistan relationship through historical and contemporary contexts, it will assess the changes that have been brought about in Balochistan due to CPEC projects, and provide an update on developments in CPEC projects as of August 2020 to attempt an explanation on their likely effects on Balochistan's socio-economic situation.

Balochistan's Tryst with Pakistan: A Clash of Identities and a History of Resource Exploitation

The trajectory of Balochistan's socio-economic progress, or lack of it, can be traced by using the region's insurgency movements as milestones. Factors that have played a dominant role in the insurgency movements in Balochistan include identity politics, allegations of resource exploitation by Pakistan, and militarization of the province for Pakistan's perceived strategic requirements.

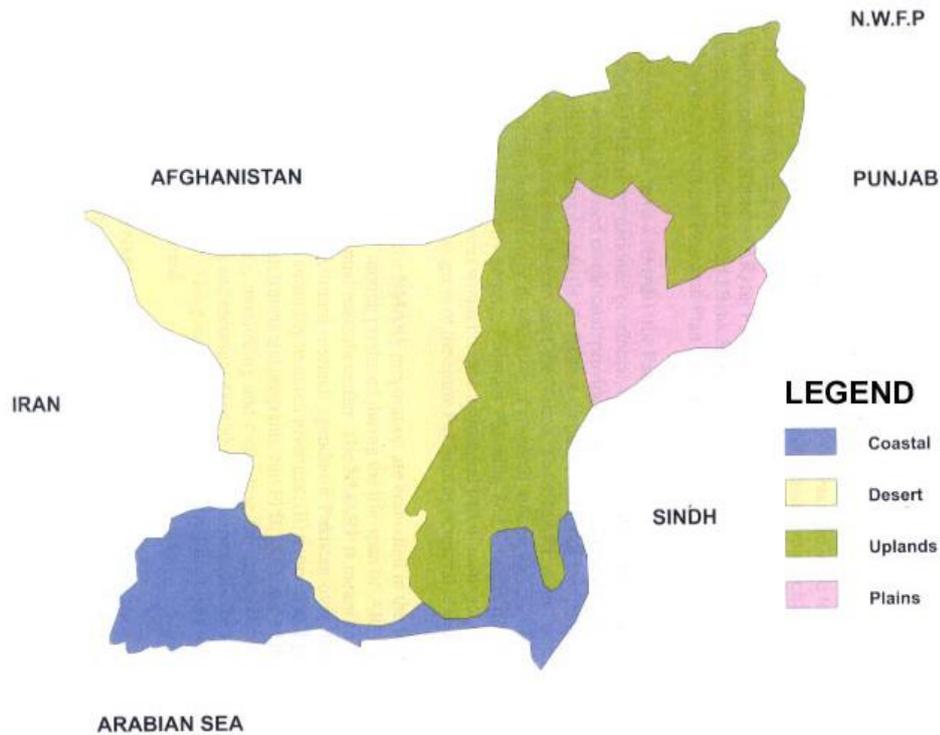


Figure 1: Geographic regions of Balochistan. ([Author: Zafar, Source: Wikimedia Commons](#))

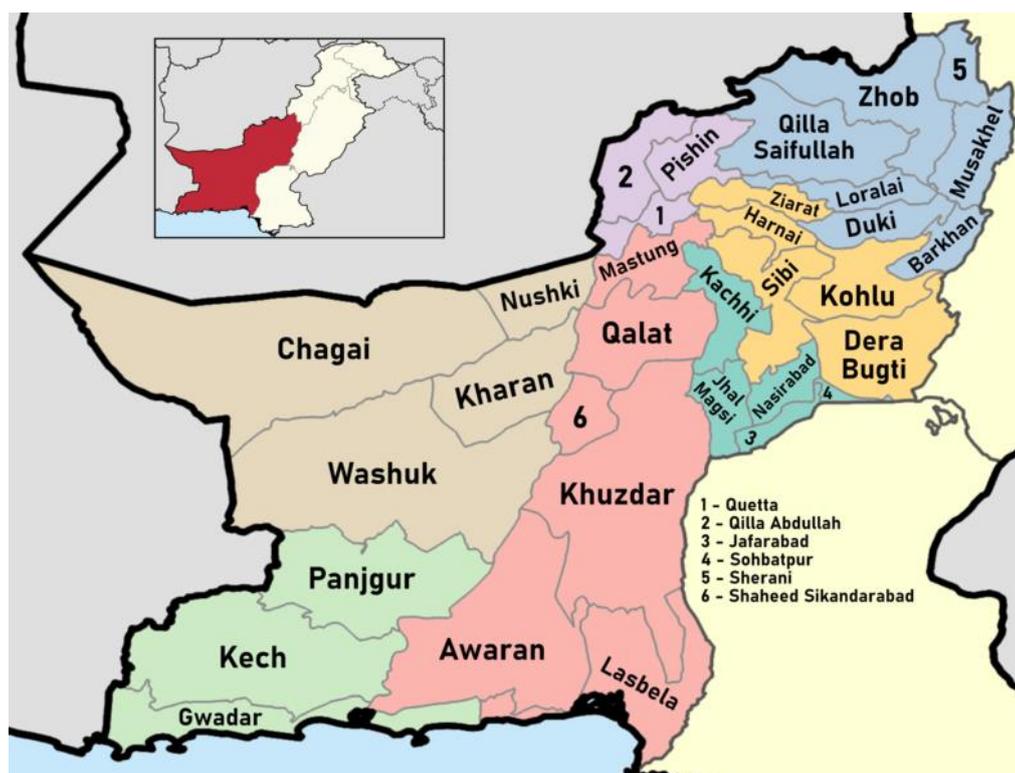


Figure 2: Districts of Balochistan. (Author: [Abdullah Ali Abbasi](#), Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Balochistan's rugged terrain and hostile climate has historically been a limitation in its interactions with the outside world and other communities. This resulted in strengthening of local identities, tribalism and feudalism. These factors disallowed the formation of a unified Baloch identity. Before its merger with Pakistan, Balochistan largely consisted of feudally held territories whose rulers loosely owed allegiance to the princely states of Makran, Las Bela, Kharan and Kalat. Infighting was common among these feudal lords, which prevented the population from reaping the benefits of British-exported industrialisation like in the rest of the Indian Sub-Continent. While the rulers of Makran, Las Bela and Kharan acceded to Pakistan in 1947, the complete merger of Balochistan was achieved when the Khan of Kalat, Ahmad Yar Khan, reluctantly acceded to Pakistan on 27 March 1948. (Yaquob Khan Bangash, "Constructing the State: Constitutional Integration of the Princely States of Pakistan", in eds. Roger D. Long, Gurharpal Singh, Yunas Samad, et. al., *State and Nation-Building in Pakistan: Beyond Islam and Security* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 82.) This led to the first insurgency in Balochistan, led by the Khan's brother Prince Abdul Karim, which was a low-level insurgency that failed to ignite popular support and was eventually quelled in 1950. (Qaiser Butt, "[Princely Liaisons: The Khan family controls politics in Kalat](#)",

The Express Tribune, 22 April 2013) However, this insurgency was an indicator that loyalties and identities would play an important role in Balochistan's future relationships with the newly-formed Pakistan state.

There are at least 130 recorded tribes in Balochistan. Each has certain distinct characteristics that contributes to a unique tribal identity, even as commonalities in cultural practices allow for the realisation of a unified Baloch identity. Of the 130 tribes, the Bugti, Marri and Mengal tribes and their sub-tribes, respectively, form the largest portion of Balochistan's population and have consequently dominated the province's socio-political sphere, including the insurgency movements. Since Balochistan's accession to Pakistan, these tribes have followed different trajectories in their involvement with the Pakistani state, mainly determined by their interests; for example, the Bugti have prioritised concerns over royalties gained from revenue generated by Sui Gas Fields in their native Dera Bugti district, while the Marri based in Kohlo district have championed the call for full independence for Balochistan and are reportedly the least integrated in the political process. (1 Muhammad Tahir, "[Tribes and Rebels: The Players in the Balochistan Insurgency](#)", *Terrorism Monitor*, v. 6, no. 7, 3 April 2008)

However, over the past seven decades, these tribes have been able to establish common ground in their opposition to the Pakistani state. Some of these common grounds include shared mistrust, a sense of social-economic and political deprivation, and annoyance at the province's militarization. These factors have helped the different tribes move towards a unified Baloch identity seldom seen in their history and a shared sense of Baloch nationalism that has dominated the Pakistan-Balochistan relationship. Incidentally, one of the earliest figures of unified Baloch nationalism did not come from the Bugti, Marri or Mengal tribes; it was Nawab Nauroz Khan Zarakzai of the Zehri tribe who led the second Baloch insurgency in his twilight years with an army of 1,000 men against Pakistan's 'One Unit' policy instituted in 1954. The insurgency was crushed in 1959, the Nawab's son hanged in 1960 and the Nawab, spared execution due to his age, himself died in Kohlu prison in 1962. ("[Historical Sequence](#)", *Dawn*, 16 December 2012) However, in his martyrdom, Nawab Nauroz Khan become a symbol of Baloch resistance for all constituent tribes.

The 'One Unit' policy was a significant milestone in Baloch resistance. It greatly reduced the power of provincial administrations and ushered the beginning of Balochistan's economic

exploitation. While Pakistan was able to crush the second insurgency, the conditions of exploitation instituted by the 'One Unit' policy became a leading cause of the third wave of Baloch insurgency from 1963 to 1969. This wave, led by Sher Mohammad Marri, was characterised by the participation of all three major tribes and operated in an area of over 45,000 sq km. It was also the first large-scale Baloch insurgency in terms of intensity of attacks, with the Baloch fighters often targeting railway tracks and army convoys with impunity; it ended with a ceasefire following the withdrawal of the 'One Unit' Policy. (Priyashree Andley, "[Balochistan: A Backgrounder](#)", *IPCS Special Report, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies*), no.32, September 2006) However, as previously stated, the third insurgency is important not only from the point of view of unifying Baloch nationalism under a single umbrella, but also from the point of view of Balochistan's economic exploitation by the Pakistani state, and more importantly the Punjabi identity that dominates the Pakistani establishment.

At the centre of the Baloch narrative of economic exploitation have been the Sui Gas Fields, Pakistan's largest natural gas reserves. They were discovered in 1952 and commercial scale extraction began in 1955. While the Baloch demand during the third wave of the insurgency was for a share in the revenue generated by the gas fields, the subsequent insurgency waves have also been characterised by demands for an increase in royalty payable to the provincial government for exploitation of Balochistan's natural gas and mineral resources. Notably, most gas extracted from Sui is diverted eastwards and north-eastwards into Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Azad Kashmir, supplying nearly 3,250 cities and towns, ("[Distribution Network](#)", *Sui Northern Gas Pipelines Limited*) and southwards into Sindh, where it travels along the Indus to Karachi. ("[Gas Infrastructure](#)", *Sui Southern Gas Pipelines Limited*)

The 'One Unit' policy not only provided an impetus to the province's economic exploitation, but also fuelled development schemes whose dividends reached outsiders, but not the Baloch people. For example, following construction of the Pat Feeder canal, most arable land in Nasirabad and Jafarabad districts in western Balochistan was transferred to Punjabis. Such developments led to Baloch apprehensions towards migration of Punjabi-speakers into Balochistan, a trend which continues to date. The third wave of the insurgency also saw the beginning of extreme force tactics by the Pakistani military, which have gone on to

characterize Pakistani counterinsurgency operations in Balochistan since. (“Pakistan: The Worsening Situation in Balochistan”, *Asia Report, International Crisis Group*)

The fourth wave of insurgency in Balochistan began in 1973 when the barely nine-month old provincial government of Chief Minister Attaullah Mengal, the first ever directly elected government in Balochistan, was dissolved by President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto on the charge of treason, citing arms found in the Iraqi embassy that were allegedly meant for Baloch separatists. (Adnan Aamir, “[Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto: The Forgotten Villain of Balochistan](#)”, *The Nation*, 3 April 2015) This made it clear that identity politics in the Balochistan-Pakistan relationship was a two-way street and brought into focus the use of political disenfranchisement as tool to subvert Balochistan’s social and economic demands.

The dissolution of the provincial government was followed by widespread civil disobedience that soon turned into an armed struggle. This insurgency also saw the participation of all major tribes and was notable for the formation of the Balochistan Peoples Liberation Front (BPLF) under the leadership of Mir Hazar Khan Marri. Meanwhile, Khair Bakhsh Marri, Attaullah Mengal and Akbar Bugti (in the later stages) emerged as major political leaders at the forefront of Baloch nationalism. The insurgency declined in 1977 due to a variety of factors, these included the brute force tactics of the Pakistan Army, Air Force and the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) that caused more than 15,000 Baloch casualties, the restoration of the provincial government by Pakistan’s new President Zia ul-Haq, an impetus to development in areas around Dera Bugti that came to be seen as dividends for the exploitation of Sui, and Zia’s offer of amnesty for those willing to give up arms. (Yasir Babbar, “[Balochistan-Separate Ways](#)”, *Indus Asia Online Journal*, 17 June 2009) However, the insurgency strengthened the Baloch perception of a Punjabi-Baloch divide and increased their wariness to Pakistan’s top-down approach to nation building that prioritised Punjabi speakers.

The Punjabi-Baloch divide is visible in the current insurgency as well, which began in 2004, where Punjabi-speakers are often the target of Baloch insurgents. The primary demands of Baloch separatists during this fifth wave of insurgency are nearly unchanged from the previous demands. They include an increase in royalties for mineral and natural gas exploration for the provisional government, reduced militarisation of the province and

preference to Baloch locals over outsiders while availing employment. (Carlotta Gall, "[In Remote Pakistan Province, a Civil War Festers](#)", *The New York Times*, 2 April 2006)

Strategic Rationale and Ramifications of Balochistan's Militarization

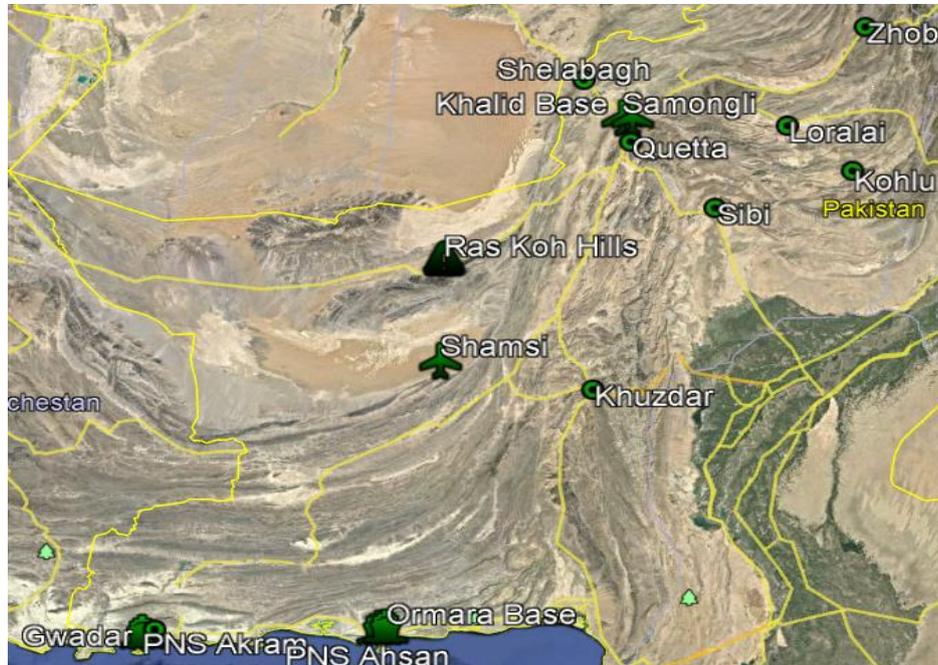


Figure 3: (Pakistan Army cantonments, Pakistan Air Force bases, Pakistan Navy base/stations and Pakistan's nuclear test site in Balochistan (Source: Google Maps).

Balochistan is of critical importance to Pakistan for its strategic depth. Though Pakistan is a medium-sized country by global standards, it dwarfs its arch nemesis India. For example, Pakistan's capital is just 216 kms from its eastern border with India. Similarly, most of the prosperous Punjab province and the Indus plains too are uncomfortably close to India's borders. Pakistan can hope to offset this strategic disadvantage by effectively utilizing Balochistan's large size and small population. As a result, Balochistan becomes the ideal location for basing of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. An evidence of Pakistan's realisation of Balochistan's potential in its nuclear strategy can be found in Pakistan's use of Ras Koh Hills in Chagai district of western Balochistan for its Chagai I and Chagai II nuclear tests in May 1998. (Feroz Hassan Khan, *Eating Grass: The Making of the Pakistan Atomic Bomb* (Palo Alto: *Stanford University Press*, 2012). Thus, it would not be a stretch to theorise that Balochistan holds the key to Pakistan's nuclear strategy.

Similar is the case with the port of Gwadar, which not only provides an alternative to decongest Karachi, but can also help Pakistan increase the time Indian airplanes and missiles would need to strike its critical naval assets. This has been the rationale for the Jinnah Naval Base in Ormara in the past and Gwadar seems to be following the same trajectory, including in the sense that establishment and strengthening of military facilities has not been replicated in the civilian domain. (Zahid Hussain, "[Gathering Storm](#)", *Newsline*, 4 February 2005) With regard to air power, Balochistan serves as a pivot to enabling operations in Afghanistan, especially the opium producing centres in southern and eastern Afghanistan that are traditional Taliban strongholds. As a result, Pakistan Air Force bases in Balochistan, especially Shamsi and Samungli have been widely used by the United States Air Force and other military wings during Operation Enduring Freedom. Furthermore, the civilian airports in Pasni and Dalbandin have also been routinely used for operations in Afghanistan. (Chris Woods, "[CIA Drones Quit One Pakistan Site – But US Keeps Access to Other Airbases](#)," *Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, 15 December 2011)

Yet, despite its inherent value, it is observed that most of Pakistan's military cantonment areas are in regions where Balochistan closely borders the neighbouring provinces of Sindh, Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, with Gwadar and Quetta cantonments being the only major exceptions. This raises a question as to how committed the Pakistani establishment is in securing Balochistan. In fact, it also raises a further question as to whether an attempt exists to secure these provinces from Balochistan. Furthermore, the cantonment areas and other military establishments are inherently problematic in the Balochistan-Pakistan relationship because they fall outside the purview of the provincial government and strengthen the infrastructure required for an exclusively military response to the question of Baloch nationalism.

Lending credence to the argument that militarization of Balochistan is not intended to improve the security situation of Balochistan but rather to secure Pakistani interests in Balochistan is the methods used by Pakistan to deal with the security situation. Rather than a campaign of winning hearts and minds, the Pakistani establishment has gone against most modern guidebooks on counterinsurgency and opted for a policy of establishing rule through a reign of terror. Two salient features of Pakistan's reign of terror in Balochistan are the policy of 'kill and dump' and enforced disappearances. In the former case, the Pakistani establishment has sought to use torture, mutilation and extrajudicial killings of

suspected militants, sympathisers and other perceived threats as the means to showcase the state's power; in such cases, the bodies are found dumped in garbage bins or on the roadside wrapped in Pakistani flags or with Pakistan Zindabad (Long live Pakistan) etched on them. In the second case, the suspected persons are never seen again. (Shakoor Ahmad Wani, "The Changing Dynamics of the Baloch Nationalist Movement in Pakistan", *Asian Survey*, 2016). Needless to say, such policies have only added to the rift between the Punjabi-dominated Pakistani military establishment and the people of Balochistan.

The Punjabi-Baloch Divide: Analysing Arguments through Statistics

The province of Punjab is undoubtedly Pakistan's heartland and as per Pakistan's 6th national census of 2017 is home to 110.01 million of Pakistan's 207.77 million people, i.e. nearly 53 per cent of Pakistan's population. In contrast, Balochistan is home to 12.34 million people, just under six percent of Pakistan's population. (Umair Javed, "[Enumerating Pakistan](#)", *Dawn*, 28 August 2017) This demographic divide gets reflected in the political sphere as well. Pakistan's lower house of parliament, the National Assembly or Aiwān-e-Zairin, allots 174 of a total 342 seats to Punjab and only 20 to Balochistan. This poses severe limitations on the Balochi political establishment's capability to alter Pakistan's policies, including those related to Balochistan. Furthermore, it empowers Punjab's political establishment with the power to accelerate Punjab's development at the cost of other provinces. The result is a low degree of industrialisation and productivity in vast, resource-rich Balochistan, whose Gross Domestic Product (GDP) contribution hovers around three per cent of Pakistan's total GDP; in contrast Punjab's GDP contribution is around 57 percent. ("[Economics and Extremism](#)" *Dawn*, 5 January 2010)

Similarly, in terms of average household monthly incomes, Balochistan fares the worst among all of Pakistan's administrative units with an average monthly income of Pakistani Rs 36,387 per household in 2019, nearly Rs 5,000 lower than the national average of Rs 41,545. Punjab fares the best at Rs 42,861 monthly per household, while Khyber Pakhtunkhwa averages Rs 42,736 per household and Sindh averages Rs 39,078. (Shahbaz Rana, "[Punjab Leads in Household Income](#)", *The Express Tribune*, 21 April 2020) The statistic also does not account for the huge disparity in Balochistan's society between the common people and the elite class. While basic amenities are hard to come by for the public in Balochistan, the elite, especially the political elite, are said to be living lifestyles 'more

glamorous than royal families of the Arab world' and holding lands larger than most Pakistani towns. (["Baloch Ruling Elite's Lifestyle Outshines that of Arab Royals"](#), *Dawn*, 21 March 2012) As per multidimensional poverty index statistics released in 2016, 71 per cent of Balochistan's population faces some or the other form of deprivation. (Qazi Khurshid Baloch, ["Poverty in Balochistan"](#), *Dawn*, 8 November 2016)

Balochistan ranks last among Pakistan's seven administrative units (accounting for merger of Federally Administered Tribal Areas with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) in the Human Development Index (HDI) as per the United Nations Development Programme's 2018 report. Three years after the launch of CPEC, the HDI scores of Balochistan's districts had seen little change; of 32 districts, only provincial capital Quetta was placed in the 'medium' category with an HDI score of 0.666, while 10 districts were placed in the 'low' category and 21 districts were placed in the 'very low' category; Awaran district garnered the lowest HDI score in the country at an abysmal 0.173, while Dera Bugti, Harnai, Washuk, and Kharan scored less than 0.300. (Nadil Shah, ["Deteriorating Condition of Human Development Index of Balochistan,"](#) *Daily Times*, 25 September 2018)

The average HDI for Balochistan was 0.421. In contrast, the average HDI score for Punjab was 0.732, followed by Sindh at 0.640 and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa at 0.628. Only six districts in the country out of 154 were categorised as highly developed, four of which were in Punjab. Punjab also enjoyed a lion's share in the medium HDI category with 19 districts. In parameters assessed, including healthcare, education, gender equality, youth development, and poverty and unemployment, Punjab consistently topped the charts while Balochistan consistently found itself at the bottom. (["Punjab Tops Human Development Index Report, Balochistan Lowest,"](#) *Pakistan Today*, 20 May 2018)

The Balochistan-Punjab socio-economic disparity is reflected in relative growth rates over the past three decades as well. In 1990, when the concept of HDI value calculation was first applied albeit with a slightly different methodology, Punjab had recorded an average HDI value 0.393, while Balochistan had recorded an average HDI value of 0.383; Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa recorded values of 0.390 and 0.396 respectively. (["Subnational Human Development Index \(4.0\)"](#), *Global Data Lab*) This means that in comparative terms Punjab's HDI score has improved by approximately 86 per cent since 1990, Sindh's by 64

per cent, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's by 58 per cent. However, Balochistan's improvement has only been 9.92 per cent.

These statistics lend currency to arguments made by Baloch legislators, separatists and other public figures who state that Balochistan is being 'colonised' by China after being sold out by Pakistan. Balochistan's leaders have for long complained of step-motherly treatment by Islamabad and this gripe has heightened in recent years as the socio-economic gap between Balochistan and Pakistan's Punjabi heartland has grown. Balochistan holds an overwhelming majority of Pakistan's natural gas and mineral reserves that have been systematically exploited by the Pakistani establishment without profits reaching the local populace, which remains involved in low-income occupations like animal husbandry and small-scale farming. Taken from this viewpoint, the increasing Chinese investment in Balochistan is merely accelerating the exploitation of Balochistan's resources without giving anything back to its people. (S. Khan, "[Why Chinese Investment Is Stoking Anger in Pakistan's Balochistan Province](#)", *Deutsche Welle*, 15 July 2020)

Locating CPEC through Chinese, Pakistani and Baloch Perspectives

The China-Pakistan nexus began as early as the 1960s, when the two countries entered into a boundary agreement as part of which Pakistan ceded a large chunk of territory in northern Kashmir and Ladakh. This concession was made by Pakistan despite the said territory being disputed between India and Pakistan. Thus, it was clear from the outset that the China-Pakistan nexus was a partnership that was aimed at contesting India's dominance in South Asia. This partnership has maintained a distinct military flavour with India's ability to project power in South Asia being the uniting factor for China and Pakistan. Over the years, this military partnership has resulted in China becoming a major arms supplier to Pakistan and approximately 40 percent of all arms sales to Pakistan have come from China. ("[Asia and the middle East lead rising trend in arms imports, U.S. exports grow significantly, says SIPRI](#)," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, 12 March, 2018,)

The strategic rationale for the China-Pakistan relationship emerges as a result of Pakistan's threat perception from India and China's need for a reliable ally in the Indian Ocean Region in general and South Asia in particular. The permanence of Pakistan's threat perception from India, its need for an anti-India stance as a *modus vivendi* and the increasing gap in

conventional military capabilities between India and Pakistan grant China the desired reliability in Pakistan. These factors have resulted in both countries viewing each other as all-weather friends and iron brothers. (James Schwemlein, "[Strategic Implications of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor](#)," *Special Report, US Institute of Peace*, December 2019) Over the years, China has attempted to transpose this military and strategic relationship into the economic domain as an economically strong Pakistan is better suited to take Chinese interests forward. For Pakistan, whose economy continues to struggle due to a plethora of internal and external factors, Chinese investment is all the more vital. (Andrew Small, "[First Movement: Pakistan and the Belt and Road Initiative](#)," *Asia Policy*, December 2017) Herein lies the genesis of CPEC.

The 2015-launched CPEC has brought with it the promise of bringing prosperity to the impoverished province of Balochistan and all of Pakistan. By 2020, the value of projects under CPEC has swelled to around US\$50 Billion despite reductions as compared to previous forecasts. (Adnan Aamir, "[Pakistan Slashes Budget for Belt and Road Initiative Projects](#)," *Nikkei Asian Review*, 19 June 2020) CPEC is a part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which envisions enhanced connectivity between China and different geographical regions. CPEC projects encompass several infrastructure and connectivity projects that connect Xinjiang province in north-western China to Gwadar Port on Balochistan's Makran coast through a slew of mega highways and railway lines that cut across Pakistan. Besides the inherent strategic value of CPEC to the China-Pakistan partnership, CPEC is also of vital importance to China as it enables China to reduce its dependency on Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) for its energy imports and trade exports.

Unsurprisingly, Gwadar has been the jewel in the crown of CPEC, with the Gwadar Port Project being the centre of attention and nearly all infrastructure focussed on improving connectivity with Gwadar. In fact, the Gwadar Port Project precedes CPEC by at least a decade, with the Gwadar Development Authority (GDA) being formed as early as 2005 with plans to built a mega port that would subsume half of what was then the small fishing town of Gwadar. As a result, Gwadar has witnessed industrial-scale growth though its original population continues to be seeped in poverty and has now been largely deprived of its livelihood, besides also facing forced relocations. (Mariyam Suleiman, "[How CPEC Left Behind the People of Gwadar](#)", *The Diplomat*, 30 June 2020)

Meanwhile, areas in Balochistan that lie in Gwadar's proximity have seen rapid construction of roads and other infrastructure projects. However, this has done little to improve the socio-economic situation in Balochistan. The people of Balochistan continue to reel under poverty, low-levels of education, poor healthcare, inadequate housing and sanitation, and lack of access to potable water; the population is also caught in a tug-of-war due to the long-drawn insurgency waged by the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) against the Pakistani Army, whose ham-handed tactics have only served to strengthen the insurgency. Furthermore, CPEC projects, and especially those in Balochistan, continue to face the problem of lack of transparency and allegations of corruption. A major factor for this is that the Pakistani military establishment has dominated the CPEC Authority, which makes it difficult for the public institutions to attack accountability on the authority. (Kathrine Houreld, "[Pakistan should Be More Transparent on 46 Bn China Deal, State Bank Head Says](#)", *Reuters*, 4 December 2015)

Yet, the Pakistani establishment stresses that the economic deprivation Balochistan has been subjected to and the social development that has eluded the population for decades will witness a turnaround with completion of CPEC projects. (Saleem Shahid, "[CPEC to Change Fate of Region: Balochistan Governor](#)," *Dawn*, 11 July 2020). The socio-economic upliftment of the province is premised on further development of Gwadar, establishment of economic zones and increasing connectivity in Balochistan. For this, the government plans a slew of measures to boost Pakistani investments in the province such as tax incentives, increasing transit trade and corporatizing the agriculture, fisheries and animal husbandry sectors; it also aims at providing vocational training to the local youth. ("[Chairman CPEC Authority, Chinese Ambassador Stress Importance of Gwadar Port in the Region](#)," *The Nation*, 8 August 2020)

However, a fundamental problem with this approach is that a vast majority of Balochistan's population lacks the capital to make such investments. Besides this, corporatisation of key rural industries is likely to further impoverish and alienate the local population. Clearly then, the benefits of these schemes are geared towards increasing investments from other parts of Pakistan rather than Balochistan, which in turn has the potential to alter the province's demography, a point that Balochistan's population has shown extreme sensitivity

to. Driving the local youth from traditional occupations into low-income vocations hence only serves to change the structure of exploitation from centralisation to de-centralisation. Recent global developments amid the Covid-19 pandemic and resulting economic crisis have seen an increase in China's assertive behaviour that have brought it eyeball-to-eyeball with major powers such as the US and India. While currently limited to sabre-rattling and aggressive actions below the threshold of conflict in areas such as the Line of Actual Control (with India) and the South China Sea, China's contestations have the ability to fast develop into a conflict. In such a scenario, an adversary is highly likely to exploit China's maritime vulnerability and its Malacca Dilemma as a vast majority of China's trade and energy passes through the narrow Malacca Strait. The overland CPEC is China's answer to this dilemma and increasing the pace of infrastructure development in Pakistan is hence likely to gain traction in China's strategic calculus in the near future. However, political rhetoric over development of Balochistan via CPEC does not figure in China's strategic imperatives, which is speedy infrastructure development irrespective of the route to ensure economic and energy security for China in times of crisis through access to an Indian Ocean port.

As a result, far from the benefits of CPEC reaching Balochistan like it has done in the rest of Pakistan, CPEC projects have instead become synonymous with oppression and forced population displacements. This not only includes eviction of local inhabitant from sites proposed for CPEC projects, but also displacement of villages that lie along major roads out of fear that they will be used as launchpads for attacks by the BLA or its affiliates. The use of the Pakistani Army for these forced evictions is further adding to existing tensions. ("[Kech: Military Forcibly Evicts Residents](#)," *The Balochistan Post*, 6 May 2020) Despite assurances by Islamabad, the ground realities of CPEC are worsening the socio-economic situation in Balochistan by displacing locals, depriving them of their livelihood and turning the province into a heavily militarized zone. Furthermore, most projects, especially in Gwadar, provide no direct financial benefits to the local population. As a result, the heavy-handed military approach adopted by Pakistan is further alienating the local population and strengthening the insurgency. ("[China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Opportunities and Risks](#)," Asia Report *International Crisis Group*, 29 June 2018)

Status of CPEC Projects as of August 2020: Ramifications for Balochistan

CPEC projects can be divided into roadways (mainly involving upgradation of existing roads to four or six-lane highways), railways, infrastructure development in Gwadar, power projects, power transmission projects and other infrastructure projects. Of these, the Gwadar Port Project and roadways appear to be a priority. A general trend observable in the development of CPEC projects is a focus on development along the east-west axis that connects Gwadar with cities in Sindh, and the north-south axis between Xinjiang and Karachi through Punjab. The preference given to these routes means that most towns and cities in Balochistan are being circumvented.

With regard to Gwadar, the city's port has been open for commercial operations since 2016 with three berths and a capacity to carry 50,000 deadweight tonnage after completion of Phase I of the project. Phase II of the project is currently underway, but the Pakistani government recently invited bids for various developments, one of which included upgradation of existing berthing facilities. (Javed Mirza, "[Govt Seeks International Contractor to Upgrade Gwadar Port](#)", *The News international*, 8 August 2020, URL:) Phase II of Gwadar Port's development also includes establishment of a Gwadar Free Zone as a manufacturing hub and development of affiliated infrastructure in Gwadar city. As of August 2020, four plants and workshops are said to have been completed in the Gwadar Free Zone, though none is operational so far. Supporting projects such as the New Gwadar International Airport, East Bay Expressway, Gwadar Technical and Vocational Institute and China-Pakistan Friendship Hospital are said to be under construction. ("[Gwadar Free Zone Attracting Investment Despite COVID-19: Chairman COPHC](#)", *Associated Press of Pakistan*, 8 August 2020)



Figure 4: Infrastructure at Gwadar Port as per imagery accessed in November 2020. (Source: Google Maps)

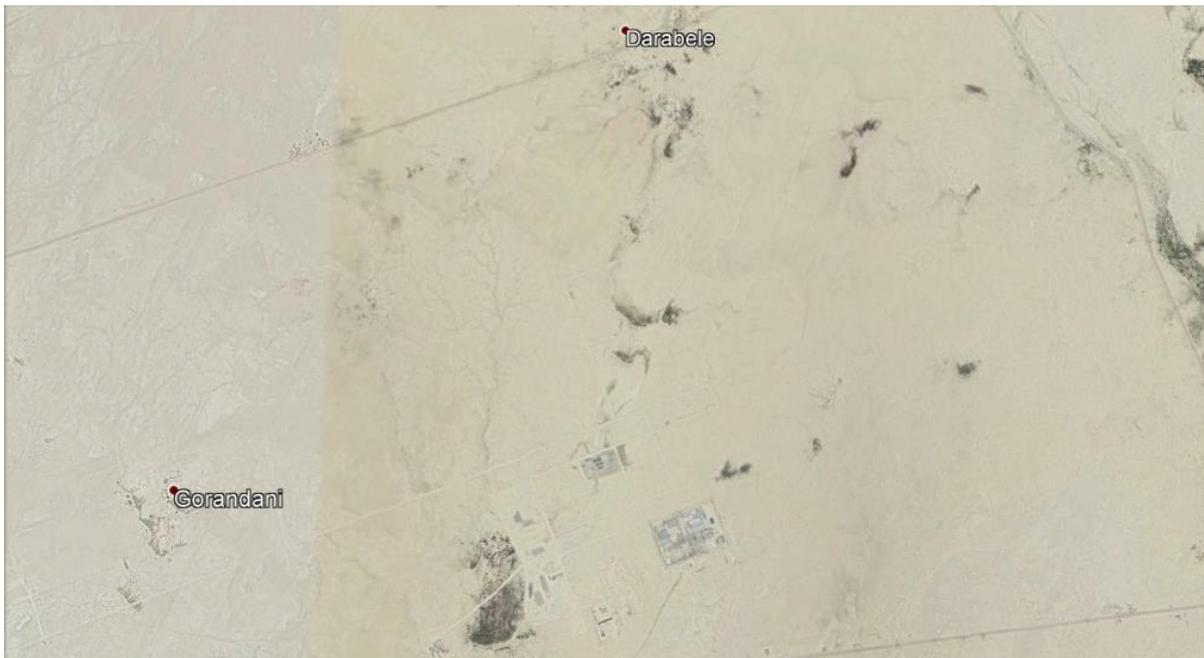


Figure 5: Infrastructure, or the lack of it, at the site of New Gwadar International Airport as per imagery accessed in November, 2020 (Source: Google Maps).

Notably, the 19-km East Bay Expressway is scheduled for completion later in 2020, though it was originally scheduled for completion in 2018. ([“Gwadar Port Will Soon Become a Game-changer: Michael”](#), *Dawn*, 19 May 2016) It will connect Gwadar port to the Makran Coastal Highway, thereby creating a direct link between Gwadar Port and Karachi in Sindh through the towns of Ormara and Pasni; the 653-km Makran Coastal Highway currently

reaches up to Gwadar's old city limits only. Hence, the East Bay Expressway will further strengthen the east-west axis from Gwadar to Sindh. The 892-km M8 motorway out of Gwadar will meanwhile connect the port with the cities of Sukkur and Larkana in Sindh. The 193-km Gwadar-Turbat-Hoshab section of the M8 was inaugurated in 2016, while the rest remains under construction. Notably, the Gwadar-Turbat-Hoshab section and the 487-km Hoshab-Surab section, which has been completed and joins the M8 at Hoshab, are also part of the 1,153-km long Western Alignment (of motorways); nearly 870 km of the Western Alignment passes through Balochistan. (["Western Route"](#), *CPEC Authority*). The Western Alignment merges with the 1,300-km Karakoram Highway on the outskirts of Islamabad; the Karakoram Highway serves as the road link road between Pakistan and China through the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir.

However, apart from the Gwadar-Turbat-Hoshab and Hoshab-Surab sections, the rest of the Western Alignment is in doldrums. Of the remainder of the Western Alignment, the 285-km Hakla-Dera Ismail Khan Motorway, which joins Hakla near national capital Islamabad to Dera Ismail Khan in southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, is only 70 per cent complete. Of the sections passing through Balochistan, the 210-km Yarik-Zhob section is still under the procurement process, while the 331-km Zhob-Kulchak section is in the bidding process. (Mohammad Ali, ["NHA Striving for Early Accomplishment of Western Alignment of CPEC"](#), *Urdu Point*, 22 July 2020) Ironically, the 211-km Kulchak-Surab section, which would cover Balochistan's capital Quetta and important towns of Kalat and Mastung, is not even part of CPEC's portfolio; notably the Zhob-Kulchak section was also absent from the CPEC portfolio in 2018, even though the initial projected schedule for the Western Alignment had set a completion target of 2020. (Rafiullah Kakar, ["No Progress Made on Balochistan Component of CPEC's Western Route"](#), *Dawn*, 15 December 2018)

Pace of infrastructure development and trends in planning of the Western Alignment have cast serious doubts over CPEC's claims of bringing developments to Balochistan. This data also strengthens the 'exploitation by Punjab' argument when the contiguity of Dera Ismail Khan with Punjab's Mianwali and Bhakkar districts is taken into account.

In contrast, the 1,152-km long Eastern Alignment passing through Sindh and Punjab has seen relatively faster progress. The 136-km M9 Motorway between Eastern Alignment's southern terminal point Karachi and Hyderabad and the 392-km M5 Motorway between

Sukkur and Multan in Punjab were opened for public in 2018 and 2019 respectively, while construction of the 333-km M3 between Multan and Lahore (Northern terminal point) is said to have been completed as per data from August 2020. (Mehtab Haider, "[Federal Govt Completes 132 Development Schemes](#)", *The News International*, 1 August 2020) The last remaining section, the 296-km long Sukkur-Hyderabad Motorway (M6), is being built by private players on a build, operate transfer basis. (Khaleeq Kiani, "[Govt to Give Rs 204bn Sukkur-Hyderabad Motorway to Private Sector on BOT Basis](#)", *Dawn*, 3 January 2020). The Karachi-Lahore Eastern Alignment merges with the Karakoram Highway via the existing 375-km M2 between Lahore and Islamabad.

In terms railway lines, the progress has been far slower, with the 1,687-km Mainline-1 (ML-1) project the only rail project approved so far, and that too as late as June 2020; the project involves upgradation of existing railway lines that follow a north-south axis between Peshawar and Karachi. (Mehtab Haider, "[CDWP Approves \\$7.2 bn ML-I Project](#)", *The News International*, 7 June 2020)

Given the pace of the ML-1 project, which was to be undertaken as part of the first-phase of CPEC, the 1,254-km ML-2 and 560-km ML-3 projects to be undertaken as part of the second-phase appear to be a distant dream. The ML-2 is a proposed upgrade on the existing line between Kotri in Sindh and Attock in Punjab. The ML-3 is the only rail project that holds any relevance for Balochistan, as it envisages construction of a new railway line between Bostan near Quetta and Kotla Jam in Bhakkar district. Initial estimates of ML-3 projected completion of the project by 2025. ("[Havelian to Khunjerab Railway Track to Be Upgraded Under China-Pakistan Economic Corridor](#)", *Sost Today*, 15 January 2016)

However, this now seems highly unlikely. On the other hand, Chinese largesse has reaped dividends for Punjab's capital Lahore, which is expected to begin operations on its 27.1-km Orange Line inter-city metro corridor in October 2020 following its construction being completed in August. (APP, "[Punjab Govt Decides to Launch Orange Train Project in Last Week of October](#)", *Business Recorder*, 26 August 2020)

Taken in the context of Chinese imperatives for CPEC, it should come as no surprise that the trajectories of CPEC's power, power transmission and other infrastructure projects lag behind connectivity projects. Of the energy projects envisaged under CPEC, nine have been

completed, eight are in the construction phase and work on five is yet to start. In terms of establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in Pakistan, only three out of nine 'priority' SEZs have seen any type of progress as of August 2020, none of which are in Balochistan; the SEZs under construction include Allama Iqbal in Punjab, Rashakai in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Dhabeji in Sindh. (Mehmood Ul Hassan Khan, "[CPEC: A Living Miracle](#)", *Pakistan Observer*, 12 August 2020)

More importantly, whether energy projects based in Balochistan are intended for the local population's benefit or to fuel Chinese activities remains debatable. For example, power from the 300 MW power plant at Gwadar is mainly used for port activities, while the 1,320 MW power plant at Hub that was operationalised in 2019 is just 22-km from Karachi and appears more oriented towards supplying power to Sindh rather than Balochistan. ("[CPHGC 1,320 MW Coal-fired Power Plant, Hub, Balochistan](#)", *CPEC Authority*)

Given the developments related to CPEC projects, the arguments of colonisation of Balochistan by a Sino-Pakistan nexus have gained currency. Certain Baloch senators who had visited China to discuss Balochistan's prospects through CPEC had expressed dissatisfaction over the responses provided by Chinese authorities to questions over Balochistan's development as early as December 2017, further pointing out that no mention was made to provision of drinking water or electricity to Gwadar's local population. (Adnan Aamir, "[Claims of Development from CPEC are Delusions: Senators from Balochistan](#)", *Balochistan Voices*, 7 December 2017) Further strengthening the argument is a study dated December 2016 by the Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FPCCI), which states that Chinese nationals would outnumber the province's Baloch population by 2048 given the rate of influx of Chinese nationals. (Fawad Yousafzai, "[Chinese to Outnumber Baloch Natives by 2048](#)", *The Nation*, 19 December 2016) It is also worth noting that the start of the current phase of the Baloch insurgency is often traced to a car bomb attack by the BLA in Gwadar in May 2004, where Chinese engineers working on the Gwadar port project were the primary target. (Salman Masood, "[Bomb Kills 3 and Injures 11 In Pakistan](#)", *The New York Times*, 4 May 2004)

Baloch resistance to CPEC projects could be one of the factors that have resulted in a preference for the Gwadar-Karachi and Karachi-Lahore axes over the Western Alignment. It

may also prove an impediment to future CPEC projects in the region. The BLA and its affiliates have made it abundantly clear that CPEC and other Chinese investments in Balochistan, besides also Chinese personnel, are legitimate targets as China is perceived to be hand-in-glove with Pakistan in exploiting the region. (Yumi Washiyama, "[Balochi Militants Take Aim at Chinese Interests](#)," *The Diplomat*, 24 July 2020) The insurgents, led by the BLA, have grown in strength over the years. Their areas of operation are largely in western and north-western Balochistan, but are likely to expand as their strength grows. Hence, forays by CPEC into the interiors of Balochistan may see the insurgency and Chinese interests acting in overlapping, which can prove a potential powder keg for the volatile region.

For its part, China has been wary of insurgents targeting its interests in Balochistan, especially Gwadar. In response, China has been reinforcing its economic interests around Gwadar with its own troops and military infrastructure. However, this has further strengthened the perceptions in Balochistan of a Sino-Pakistan nexus that now aims at not only economic exploitation of Balochistan, but also military subversion of legitimate Baloch demands. ("[Balochistan: China Secretly Building High-Security Compound at Gwadar](#)", *The Balochistan Post*, 3 June 2020)

By attempting to find a military solution to a problem that stems from socio-economic factors and poor political emancipation, China appears to have fallen in the same precipice as the Pakistani establishment.

Conclusion: CPEC in Balochistan Designed to Discriminate and Colonise

Balochistan's low socio-economic development is grounded in the identity politics and resource exploitation that have been the dominant features of the Balochistan-Pakistan relationship. Pakistan's use of military power, political disenfranchisement, resource diversion and other exclusionary tools to favour the development of its Punjabi heartland at the cost of Balochistan has led to a majority of Balochistan's people suffering from poverty, low levels of development, poor education and healthcare, lack of access to housing facilities and potable water, and other forms of deprivation. Pakistan's attempts to find a military rather than socio-economic and political solution to the insurgency in Balochistan has further contributed to the province's woes.

CPEC has been touted as an answer to Balochistan's problems since conventional wisdom states that infrastructure development in a region is followed by an uptick in socio-economic indices. However, Balochistan fails to follow this trend due to CPEC's failure to address core socio-economic issues, which are grounded in a history of disparity between Balochistan and Pakistan's Punjabi heartland. CPEC approaches Balochistan as yet another tool by Pakistan, this time in cohorts with China, to exploit the region. Furthermore, Balochistan does not figure in China's strategic imperatives from CPEC, which has led to China too preferring development along the Eastern Alignment, which passes through Sindh and Punjab. The development trends in CPEC projects thus provide infrastructure to hasten resource exploitation from Balochistan.

This has led to a perception in Balochistan of China 'colonising' Balochistan and jointly exploiting the province with Pakistan. As a result, CPEC projects now face the ire of Baloch nationalists and find themselves in insurgents' crosshairs, further limiting the ability of CPEC projects to expand in the region. The solution that China and Pakistan have envisioned for safety of CPEC projects is increasing militarisation in the region instead of practicing inclusive policies and addressing the socio-economic factors that contribute to the insurgency. This is likely to drown Balochistan further into the mire of poverty, backwardness, alienation and prolonged violence.