



Bloodshed in Balochistan: Pakistan's Festering Wound

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Introduction

In the latest flare-up of violence in Pakistan, dozens of militants affiliated with the banned Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) launched a well-coordinated wave of attacks on the night of 25–26 Aug across Balochistan under Operation Hereof, targeting both security personnel and civilians. At least 50 people, including 14 security personnel, were killed as militants rampaged through the province, storming police stations, blowing up railway tracks and a crucial bridge, and setting fire to nearly three dozen vehicles, including trucks loaded with coal and fruit.

The militants attacked police stations, a paramilitary camp in Bela, and levies stations, while also blocking key roads, including a coastal highway. In Khadkocha, they stormed a local police station and held levies officials hostage for several hours, managing to escape before security forces arrived but not before setting the premises on fire. In Kalat, militants attacked a levies station and set fire to a toll plaza on the national highway. In Las Bela, they stormed a Frontier Corps camp by ramming an explosive-laden vehicle into the main gate, entering under heavy gunfire.

Among those killed were 23 people in Musakhail, mostly labourers from Punjab, who were offloaded from trucks and vans and shot dead after an identity check.

The banned BLA claimed responsibility for the attacks. In a statement, the banned outfit said its Majeed Brigade carried out the assaults, with two suicide bombers, including a female attacker, targeting the corps camp in Las Bela. Pictures of the bombers were released on its social media platform. The date is significant, as Baloch leader Nawab Akbar Shahbaz Khan Bugti was killed by security forces on 26 Aug 2006 in his cave.¹

Questions That Need to Be Answered

The most obvious question that arises is the extent of the intelligence failure. There are numerous law-enforcement agencies across the province, yet the BLA managed to organise and execute an operation of this scale and coordination, involving hundreds of people, without detection.

The second concern is the immediate response. While it may be difficult to station law enforcers across the vast expanse of Balochistan, highways were blocked for hours, and reports indicate that security personnel were slow to respond. The lack of real-time information, in an era dominated by social media, is alarming. Law enforcers seemed unaware of the unfolding situation, resulting in a delayed response.

In Musakhel District, the road connecting the district to Punjab was blocked for hours. Identity cards were systematically checked of more than 100 people, and those of Punjabi descent were singled out and brutally killed. More than 30 vehicles were burned, yet security forces failed to arrive in time to prevent the massacre.²

These attacks also cast doubt on recent government claims that the Baloch insurgency and its leadership have been significantly weakened. The scale and coordination of these attacks suggest otherwise. For Pakistan, however, the most serious issue revealed by this violence is the targeting of Punjabis. This can be attributed to two factors, the first being ethnic differences.

The anti-Punjabi sentiment represents a significant challenge. The Baloch people feel that the Punjabi elite and majority are responsible for their oppression and denial of rights over the years, though the Punjabi presence in Balochistan is not large and is mainly confined to urban areas. To

further illustrate this point, the Lahore Division holds more National Assembly seats than the entire province of Balochistan, with 24 seats compared to 16.

Punjabis dominate the government and administration, both military and civil, and are seen as representatives of the Pakistani state. The province of Punjab has dominated Pakistani politics, with Punjabis having a near-unchallenged hold over the country's bureaucracy and institutions. For a country created solely based on religion, ethnic differences have historically fuelled division and disunity, leading to the East Pakistan breaking away in 1971, and driving Baloch nationalism till date.³

Second is a sense of economic alienation and injustice held by the Baloch people. Balochistan is the largest—albeit most sparsely populated—province of Pakistan, abundant in natural resources (including oil) and strategically located on the country's western border with Iran and Afghanistan. Yet its people remain relatively impoverished compared to the rest of the country.⁴

There is also resentment towards the influx of Punjabis, who are perceived as having benefited from the province's economic opportunities at the expense of the Baloch people, who feel entitled to the region's natural resources. Consequently, they now see themselves as victims of the government's biased policies, with Punjabi workers symbolising state oppression, perpetuated by the predominantly Punjabi establishment.

According to former Indian High Commissioner to Pakistan, Ajay Bisaria, targeting of Punjabi workers introduces a new ethnic dimension, signalling that the Baloch radicals are looking to provoke and challenge the primarily Punjabi Army.⁵ Hence, rather than blaming an entity like the state, directing blame towards a particular community intensifies the grievance. This is the narrative that must be countered to 'Win the hearts and minds' of the Baloch.

The China Factor

China has naturally condemned the attacks, stating it is ready to strengthen counterterrorism and security cooperation with Pakistan to jointly

safeguard regional peace and security.⁶ The reason is clear: resource-rich Balochistan is being transformed into an economic and energy hub centred on the Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI) flagship USD 60 bn China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). However, CPEC projects have been plagued by violence.

The CPEC runs through the heart of Balochistan, linking China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region to Pakistan's deep-sea port of Gwadar. It also traverses Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir, a disputed region. The project provides China with access to the Arabian Sea, advancing its Maritime Silk Route ambitions. However, there has been growing Baloch resistance to the CPEC since 2015.

The heightened ethnic consciousness and determination to defend their homeland from 'Outsiders' have been amplified by the CPEC.

The province of Balochistan has assumed strategic significance due to its location and natural resources. With the presence of China in the province, woes of Baloch nationalists have further grown. Pakistan is unlikely to loosen its grip on the region, and its deepening ties with Beijing provide further reassurance. For the Baloch people, the CPEC has exacerbated their existential challenges.⁷

In other words, in Balochistan, the CPEC is intensifying existing grievances among a population already fuelled by perceptions of exploitation and neglect by the central government, alongside the authorities' suppression of dissent, which has long driven the insurgency. Many of these issues arise from opaque policy-making and the failure to address regional and local concerns. CPEC's Long-Term Plan (2017 to 2030) was developed by the central government with minimal input from local leaders, businesses, or civil society groups.

It was not disclosed until December 2017—and then only in broad strokes—after the rollout of some major elements had already begun. From the project's entry point, Gwadar to its exit point, in Gilgit-Baltistan, the state's response to local dissent and alienation has been an overbearing security presence, marked by army checkpoints, intimidation and harassment of local residents, and crackdowns on anti-CPEC protests.⁸

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The biggest driver of conflict in Balochistan today is Gwadar. It holds immense strategic importance for both Pakistan and China. The deep-water port counters India's naval influence strengthens Pakistan's ties with China, and serves as a vital corridor for transporting Pakistan's natural resources to China's energy-hungry markets.

However, the Baloch people were excluded from the Gwadar development process. The project is entirely managed by the central government, employing only a few Balochs in construction while relying primarily on Chinese engineers and labourers.

Army personnel have been posted in the area to secure it from insurgent attacks. One observer noted that there has been little improvement in living standards for Balochs in the area. A parallel town for workers at Gwadar is being built close to the old one to segregate Balochs from the growing influx of outsiders.⁹

Additionally, government officials have illegally sold much of the land around Gwadar, making massive profits at the expense of the local Baloch population. There is a widespread perception that China's ulterior motive behind the CPEC is to exploit Balochistan's natural resources.

CPEC facilities, along with Chinese engineers and workers, have been targeted by the BLA and other insurgent groups. Over the years, China has increasingly been seen as both arming Pakistan against Baloch separatists and simultaneously exploiting the province's natural resources.¹⁰

The attacks have raised concerns about the risks to major infrastructure projects in Balochistan, including the port of Gwadar and a planned mining project at Requo Diq in Chagai District. Coincidentally, the attacks occurred during the visit of General Li Qiaoming, Ground Force Commander of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, to Islamabad. In response, Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif accused the separatists of attempting to derail the CPEC.

CPEC also presents the BLA with an opportunity to destabilise Pakistan's long-term military partnership with the rising global power, China. The Pakistan Army views China as a counterbalance to the United States, with whom it previously had strong relations. The BLA's anti-China militant

campaign hampers Islamabad's efforts to bolster its economy, as the group targets assets and personnel linked to the BRI's flagship regional project. The BLA's stated objective is to disrupt and undermine CPEC, which represents millions of dollars in Chinese investment, through a coordinated strategy of anti-China media and militant activity. Given the high value of CPEC, and in response to the string of attacks in the recent years, Pakistan has taken countermeasures against the BLA—sometimes in coordination with China—to protect Chinese nationals and interests.¹¹

The BLA harbours a range of grievances against Chinese activities in Pakistan. In a 2018 interview, a senior BLA commander expressed several of these concerns, stating, "China has now joined hands with the Pakistan Army, which has been perpetrating brutality on the common people of the region for the last six decades". He further added, "Pakistan is receiving high-quality intelligence, arms, and

ammunition from China to use in Balochistan, and with China's support, Pakistan is seeking to consolidate its military authority in the region". The commander also lamented that "China, with Pakistan's assistance, is strengthening its naval bases,

while the Baloch community and its future face existential threats due to the inhumane activities of Pakistan and China".¹²

The driving motive behind BLA hostility towards China is twofold: the BLA and other Baloch separatist organisations oppose Chinese influence, believing that Beijing seeks to exploit Balochistan's resources to the detriment of the local population. Additionally, they object to China's financial support of what they view as Pakistani oppression.¹³

Pakistan's Response

In response, security forces claimed to have neutralised 21 militants.¹⁴ Prime Minister Sharif visited Quetta and chaired a high-level meeting of the National Action Plan's Provincial Apex Committee, which included Chief of Army Staff General Asim Munir, Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar, Balochistan Chief Minister Sarfraz Bugti, Planning Minister Ahsan Iqbal, and other senior government and security officials.

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He stated that, “There has been a wave of great concern among the people across Pakistan due to the recent heartrending incident that occurred in Balochistan”. He went on to assert that, “However, I think that at the moment, we have to decide that we must fully eradicate terrorism from Balochistan through our collective vision, power, and unwavering determination”, further highlighting that the province was “Extremely important and beautiful” and stressed the need to remove “All obstacles from its path to progress”.¹⁵

He vowed to root out terrorism, which has resurged since 2018 from not just Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa but from the entire country. On 27 Aug, PM Sharif had said that talks could be held with those who acknowledged Pakistan’s Constitution and flag, but there could be no dialogue with terrorists. This statement clearly acknowledges solutions which lie beyond a kinetic response.¹⁶

Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi told reporters in Lahore that the decision to launch the Operation Azm-i-Istehkam in Balochistan was a complex matter but added that the political leadership would decide in a few days. He said that a tit-for-tat response would be given to terrorists, alongside seeking a political solution.¹⁷

The truth remains that similar resolutions have been made in the past regarding Balochistan. However, the recent attacks demonstrate that the separatist threat has increased in both lethality and reach. Moreover, the violence highlights a significant intelligence failure. The assaults occurred not in a single area but at multiple locations across Balochistan, with a level of sophistication that suggests extensive coordination and planning.

Heading to Quetta and reassuring its people that the state will not abandon them was the right step by the Prime Minister. He said that ‘Obstacles’ standing in the way of progress need to be removed. But while eliminating violent elements attacking the state and citizens is necessary, it is also important that the sense of deprivation that fuel the separatist narrative be addressed. Beyond rhetoric, an honest appraisal of the situation over the last few decades is required to bring long-lasting peace to Balochistan.¹⁸

After the Corps Commanders Conference on 02 Sep, the Inter-Services Public Relations issued a statement, stating that “The forum reaffirmed that the Pakistan Army, with the unwavering support of the people, will not allow the hard-earned successes against terrorism to be reversed”.¹⁹

A Look Back at History

Balochistan is a region with a distinct cultural and historical identity, now divided between three countries: Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan. The region is named after the Baloch tribe, who settled there centuries ago, and has long been contested and divided by both the Persians and the British. The largest portion lies in southwestern Pakistan, and although it is Pakistan’s largest province, comprising 44 per cent of the total landmass, its arid, mostly desert landscape makes it the least populated and least economically developed region in the country.

As mentioned earlier, one of the main causes of insurgency has been the perception that the Baloch have been denied representation in the government. There are scarcely any Baloch personnel in the Pakistani army, civil service, or diplomatic corps.²⁰

Throughout history, the Baloch have been marginalised within their respective countries. Relations between Baloch nationalists and the central government have been adversarial since Pakistan’s creation in 1947. This conflict partly arises from the central government’s imposition of a historical narrative portraying Pakistan as a religiously homogeneous nation, which clashes with the ethnically distinct identity of the Baloch.

Balochistan has a long history of resistance against the government of Pakistan, and militant insurgencies by groups fighting for an independent state for the Baloch people began in 1948, reemerging in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and significantly post-2003.²¹

In the mid-1940s, some Baloch leaders called for an independent Balochistan.²² However, Baloch separatism was supported by only a few tribal chiefs and failed to become a cohesive ideological movement. Upon independence, Balochistan was partitioned into four princely states: Kalat,

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Kharan, Las Bela, and Makran. These states were presented with three options: merge with India, join Pakistan, or maintain their independence. Under the influence of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Kharan, Las Bela, and Makran chose to become part of Pakistan.²³

Kalat, however, held a unique position due to the Treaty of 1876. This agreement granted Kalat internal autonomy, free from British interference, placing it in category B alongside Sikkim and Bhutan, unlike other Indian princely states. Finally, on 27 Mar 1948, Mir Ahmad Yar Khan Ahmadzai, the ruler of Kalat, signed the instrument of accession.²⁴

Incidentally, in 1946, the Khan of Kalat had appointed Muhammad Ali Jinnah as his legal advisor to represent his case before the British. On 11 Aug 1947, a treaty was signed between Kalat and the Muslim League, recognising Kalat as an independent state, and promising that the Muslim League would respect Balochistan's independence. On 15 Aug 1947, Kalat also declared its independence.²⁵

The Khan of Kalat expected the territories acquired by Britain through treaties in the late 19th Century to be returned after 1947. Despite meetings with Mountbatten and recognition of Kalat's status as an independent sovereign state, the British issued a memorandum on 12 Sep, stating that the Khan of Kalat was not able to undertake the international responsibilities of an independent state. This was just what Pakistan under Jinnah needed to force the merger of Kalat.²⁶

The forceful integration of Kalat into Pakistan on 27 Mar 1948 sowed the seeds of discontent and resistance among the Baloch people. Many Baloch nationalists viewed the annexation as a betrayal of their autonomy and an infringement upon their cultural identity. They rose in defiance under the leadership of Prince Abdul Karim, the brother of Khan of Kalat, in 1948. The Baloch nationalists consider this uprising as the first revolt, wherein, the Baloch started to struggle to gain more autonomy and freedom from the Pakistani federation. However, this insurgency was suppressed by the Pakistani Army and Prince Karim was arrested.²⁷

If a date were to be given to the emergence of Baloch nationalism, it would be 1929, when Mir Muhammad Yusuf Ali Khan Magsi and Abdul Aziz Kurd set up the Anjuman-i-Ittehad-i-Balochistan, marking the beginning of a secular, non-tribal nationalist movement. The Anjuman was renamed the Kalat State National Party (KSNP) in 1937.²⁸ However, the KSNP was declared an outlawed party throughout Pakistan. It is claimed by Baloch nationalists that the Khan of Kalat unwillingly signed the accession instrument effective ending the Baloch State.²⁹

A speech by Mir Ghous Bakhsh Bizenjo, a Baloch nationalist, in 1947, summed up how the Baloch felt about joining Pakistan: "Pakistani officials are pressuring to join Pakistan, because Balochistan would not be able to sustain itself economically... we have minerals, we have petroleum and ports. The question is where would Pakistan be without us?"³⁰

A Baloch uprising followed the implementation of the One Unit scheme in 1955. Although the plan was not initially aimed at the Baloch, it was driven by Punjabi interests to consolidate the four ethnically diverse provinces of West Pakistan, including Balochistan, into a single administrative entity to counter the ethnically homogeneous and numerically superior East Pakistan. The One Unit scheme prompted a violent response from Baloch nationalists, as it reduced Baloch representation at the federal level and delayed the creation of a provincial assembly, which had still not been approved by the central government nearly a decade after partition. The Khan of Kalat successfully mobilised various tribal chieftains against the scheme. The revolt was eventually crushed in 1958 through severe government repression and the arrest of key leaders. Following the dissolution of the One Unit scheme in 1972, Balochistan held its first provincial elections, bringing the highly ethno-nationalist National Awami Party to power. However, in early 1973, the-then Pakistani President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto dismissed the Baloch provincial government, accusing it of conspiring with foreign governments. This action triggered the most violent Baloch insurgency to date.

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For many Baloch, nationalism does not extend beyond specific tribal loyalties. The three largest tribes—the Marri, Bugti, and Mengal—each have large numbers of fighters but remain highly suspicious of one another. Today, the leadership of the movement has shifted from tribal elders to the middle class. Historically, a key driver of Baloch nationalism has been the Baloch-Pashtun divide. The British fought several wars in Afghanistan with the strategic aim of maintaining it as a buffer against Russian expansion, developing extensive road and rail links throughout the northern parts of present-day Pakistani Balochistan, predominantly inhabited by Pashtuns. The effects of these colonial-era infrastructure projects remain, leading to greater economic progress for the Pashtuns in northern Balochistan, compared to the Baloch, due to the commercial and infrastructural advantages established during the British period.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 further aggravated the Baloch fear of political domination by Pashtuns. As Afghan Pashtuns fled across the border into Pakistan, Balochs viewed them as foreigners in a land they claimed as their own. Stunted economic development resulting from colonial-era policies, as well as perceived marginalisation due to increased Pashtun migration during the Afghan War, also contributed to Baloch ethno-nationalism.³¹

There is no doubt that the Baloch insurgency has gained momentum since Taliban 2.0 came to power in Afghanistan. As per reports, not a single Baloch insurgent has been handed over to Pakistan since then by Afghanistan. Last year, Balochistan experienced 170 militant attacks, which led to the deaths of 151 civilians and 114 security personnel, according to the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies.³²

The militant insurgency has also been a source of tension between Pakistan and Iran, with both countries accusing each other of harbouring terrorists. Cross-border attacks have been frequent, resulting in numerous deaths.

Iran has accused Pakistan of allowing militants from the Sunni separatist group Jaish al-Adl (Army of Justice) to operate freely from Balochistan and carry out attacks on Iranian authorities. As recently as Dec 2023, 11 Iranian police officers were killed

and several injured when Jaish al-Adl militants attacked a police station in Iran.³³

Asma Jahangir, the iconic human rights advocate-campaigner, once told her critics, who targeted her for supporting talks with Baloch separatists while opposing any such dialogue with Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), that “There is a difference. The Baloch are struggling for their political and economic rights, while the Taliban want to impose their warped interpretation of faith on the country at gunpoint”.³⁴

What Fuelled the Growth of Baloch Militancy

While there is unanimity regarding the state’s right to use force to combat terrorism, there is also a need to examine the roots of the political unrest

that fuels insurgency. Despite resorting to kinetic measures, Pakistan has failed to contain the insurgency. Bugti’s death highlighted the shortcomings of military action, as it failed to address the true needs and aspirations of the tribal population. The lack of genuine engagement has led

to the rise of additional armed separatist groups, which now not only target Pakistani security forces and Chinese interests but also attack migrant workers.

The increasing alienation of the population, driven by the deprivation of democratic and economic rights, the use of force to suppress protests, and the growing incidents of enforced disappearances, has particularly angered the youth. This discontent has provided separatist groups with increasing sympathisers and recruits. The failure to address the people’s legitimate demands has undoubtedly contributed to the rise in such attacks.

The pricing of natural gas exemplifies this alienation. Despite being Pakistan’s most abundant province in natural gas, Balochistan has seen little benefit compared to Sindh and Punjab. The 1973 Constitution set provincial gas royalties at 12.5 per cent, but the wellhead price of gas varies by province based on 1953 per capita income, resulting in a wellhead price five times lower in Balochistan than in Sindh and Punjab. As a result, Balochistan receives fewer royalties. Further complicating matters, the government has returned little of the

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royalties owed, citing the need to recover operating costs, leaving the province heavily in debt. Although natural gas was discovered in Balochistan's Sui area in 1952 and piped to Punjab and Karachi soon after, it took 30 years for gas to reach the capital city of Balochistan, primarily because it was first needed in Quetta Cantonment.

Tariq Khosa, the former Director General of the Federal Investigation Agency and Inspector-General of Police Balochistan, wrote an article before this incident, explaining how state atrocities turned Dr Allah Nazar, a gold medallist from Bolan Medical College, into a dissident, and how the leadership of Baloch dissidents shifted from tribal sardars like the Marris, Mengals, and Bugtis to the lower-middle and middle-class youth.

The policy of persecution also transformed Mahrang Baloch, whose father was murdered, into a leading human rights activist against enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings. Her increasingly vocal Baloch rights-based movement, the Baloch *Yakjehti* Committee (Baloch Unity Committee), primarily comprising women activists, is gaining popularity. Opposing violence, she has stated, "The solution to the Balochistan conundrum lies in the rule of law, which those in power do not want because chaos strengthens their grip on power".

Moreover, the massive rigging during the 08 Feb 2024 elections in Balochistan has provoked widespread anger at the blatant misuse of authority and corruption by those who conducted the polls, further eroding the state's writ. Controlled elections continue to elevate the same type of leadership, disconnected from the people. While these leaders may wield some influence in small pockets, the real leadership has shifted to the educated middle class.³⁵

Pakistan has a complex relationship with democracy, often imposing unrepresentative governments on its people. Mandates are denied, winners declared losers, and even court judgments are disregarded to prevent certain parties from gaining their rightful share. This undermines the democratic process and fosters a deep sense of alienation.

Former Balochistan Chief Minister Abdul Malik Baloch has said disappointment is pushing people into insurgency, "Many Baloch are losing faith

in Islamabad because of what they perceive to be its political intervention in the province. Political activists tell me that democracy here is a fraud. They feel we are wasting their time".³⁶

In his article published in Dawn, Khosa wrote about citizens "Feeling that the social contract between them and the state is on the verge of collapse. National purpose, postulated through constitutional frameworks and based on the rule of law, justice, and equity, no longer holds them together, and the state seems to have lost its narrative of national cohesion due to the follies of those who wield actual power in the province".³⁷

The leader of the Baloch Liberation Front, Allah Nazar, was detained by intelligence agencies in 2005, and his brother was killed in illegal custody. The ongoing enforced disappearances and the dumping of tortured bodies are pushing many

victims' family members toward militancy. Even those peacefully protesting state excesses are branded as traitors. Additionally, many Baloch harbour concerns over so-called 'Developmental' projects like CPEC and mining rights. Historic fishing communities in Gwadar, for example, have seen their livelihoods destroyed by

corporate trawlers, while the wider population suffers under state and private profiteers, with the province receiving minimal royalties for its mineral wealth.

The current insurgency in Balochistan, now in its second decade, was initially triggered by General Pervez Musharraf's regime, when he infamously declared, "They won't know what hit them". The flawed approach of the security apparatus is largely responsible for the ongoing unrest. It is evident that Baloch militants are now better organised, with a stronger support base enabling them to operate more effectively. The attacks have occurred in a region long considered the epicentre of political discontent, and the province is rapidly descending into a full-blown insurrection due to the growing alienation of the local population.

The government now faces mounting challenges from public dissent, as evidenced by recent protest marches in Gwadar and Turbat. The latest high-profile militant attacks followed weeks of mass protests in southern Balochistan. In Jun,

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Pakistan launched Operation Azm-i-Istehkam, a counterterrorism initiative, but the recent violence is seen as a retaliatory response. Continuing with a militarised security approach to resolve the crisis suggests that lessons from the past have not been learned.

Way Forward

Implementing an effective strategy to counter the insurgency requires a multi-pronged approach that combines military, intelligence, and law enforcement operations with political and socioeconomic measures. Pakistan's leaders must adopt a whole-of-government approach, focusing on all aspects simultaneously and in a mutually supporting manner to address the various dimensions fuelling these conflicts. Domestic insurgencies necessitate political solutions, as they raise questions about governance, legitimacy, and the aspirations of the local population. Human rights abuses, disappearances, and staged encounters often exacerbate tensions, agitating the population and undermining the institutions they aim to protect. Therefore, resolving the conflict in Balochistan requires reforms to improve the political institutions that govern the region.

The province's abysmal health and education systems must be improved, and Balochistan's people should be given priority in jobs and training in both local and foreign projects. Despite its resource wealth, Balochistan remains economically marginalised, further fuelling local grievances. Instead of addressing these internal issues, historian Ishtiaq Ahmed described the situation as "A declaration of war on Pakistan by the BLA", stating that a separatist movement can only succeed with the backing of 'A powerful neighbour'.

Geography also plays a critical role. The unsettled border with Afghanistan and the rise of the Taliban 2.0, which is no longer a puppet of Pakistan, have allowed groups like the BLA and TTP to find sanctuary in Iran and Afghanistan when pressure mounts. This safe haven enables them to regroup, as evidenced by the TTP's ability to reconstitute itself in Afghanistan after being routed by the Pakistani military. This shows that geography makes a purely military victory nearly impossible.

Unfortunately, while Pakistan feels the pinch of terrorism along its western border and makes statements about the 'Elimination of all forms of terrorism', it acts differently regarding its eastern border with India, particularly in Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab. Such contradictory actions render these statements of little consequence.

Conclusion

The latest surge in violence demonstrates the growing capacity of separatist groups to carry out high-profile terrorist attacks, while also highlighting the state's failure to address the serious security challenges spanning from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) to Balochistan. Both of Pakistan's strategically important western provinces have become battlegrounds for diverse militant groups that challenge the writ of the state. In KP, the conflict is primarily driven by the TTP, while in Balochistan, it is waged by an assortment of Baloch ethnonationalist groups.

While security forces are engaged in fighting the TTP, which seeks to enforce Taliban rule in parts of KP, Baloch separatist organisations have expanded their operations in Balochistan. The recent escalation in violence has exposed the vulnerability of an increasingly fragmented state. The heavy toll on security forces underscores the gravity of the situation. As Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, a Pakistani political worker, wrote in Dawn, "Balochistan has bled for so long that the mainstream Pakistani consciousness has turned it into the background".

There is no doubt that the Baloch people are demanding their constitutional and political rights and representation. However, Islamabad perceives these demands as anti-state, with little effort being made to heal these festering wounds.

In battle, success comes from destroying the enemy's capacity and will to fight. However, in an insurgency, the will to fight is rooted in political and social grievances, often due to perceived injustices or a lack of legitimacy and competence on the part of the government. Addressing these underlying issues is key to achieving stability. Until then, the insurgency remains a stark reminder of the failure of the Pakistani state.

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