

Navigating Complexity: The Balochistan Insurgency and the Future of Regional Security in South Asia

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The issue brief discusses the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) has emerged as a formidable non-state actor challenging Pakistan's sovereignty and regional stability. With China's expanding presence in Pakistan, particularly through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the BLA poses an increasing threat to critical infrastructure projects and foreign investments. Applying Barry Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) helps contextualize the insurgency within the South Asian security environment, where regional rivalries—especially between India and Pakistan—shape the conflict dynamics. This paper examines the origins, organizational structure, leadership, activities, and funding sources of the BLA. It further explores the group's terrorist operations, external state support—especially Indian intelligence involvement—and their implications for regional security and Chinese interests. The study concludes with strategic recommendations to mitigate the BLA threat over the next decade. The study employed a qualitative methodology, utilizing interviews for primary data collection. Secondary data were drawn from existing resources available during the research period.

Introduction

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a global infrastructure and investment strategy, has redefined the geopolitical and economic contours of Asia, Africa, and beyond. At the heart of this expansive vision lies the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship BRI component that underscores Pakistan's strategic importance to China's regional ambitions. With multibillion-dollar investments in infrastructure, energy, and transportation, CPEC has

positioned Pakistan as a pivotal partner in Beijing's pursuit of enhanced connectivity and regional influence. However, this deepening infrastructural and economic interdependence is increasingly threatened by persistent security challenges, most notably from insurgent groups operating within Pakistan's restive Balochistan province. Among these groups, the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) has emerged as a formidable actor, actively opposing what it perceives as the exploitation of Baloch resources by both the Pakistani state and foreign entities—particularly Chinese corporations. Founded on a separatist ideology, the BLA views Chinese involvement in Balochistan as a form of neocolonial intrusion, exacerbating long-standing grievances related to marginalization, underdevelopment, and state repression (Small Arms Survey, 2015; Yousaf, 2019). The group's growing hostility has manifested in high-profile attacks targeting Chinese nationals, projects, and interests, creating a volatile environment that threatens the long-term viability of CPEC and undermines broader regional stability.

The recent Iran–Israel war has further intensified the regional security dilemma, introducing a new layer of volatility that indirectly impacts the Balochistan conflict. With Tehran's growing alignment with anti-Western and anti-Israeli resistance groups, and Israel's regional strikes widening the theatre of confrontation, the conflict risks spilling into neighboring zones through proxy warfare. Pakistan, sharing a sensitive border with Iran and facing domestic sectarian and insurgent tensions, is particularly vulnerable to destabilizing spillover effects. Iran's Baloch-dominated Sistan-Baluchestan region—already a sanctuary for cross-border Baloch insurgents—could become a more contested or radicalized space in the wake of escalating regional hostilities. Moreover, the Iran-Israel conflict diverts international attention and resources, reducing the diplomatic bandwidth available to de-escalate simmering insurgencies such as that of the BLA. This shifting landscape increases the risk that BLA and similar non-state actors could exploit the geopolitical distraction to intensify attacks, leveraging the fractured regional order to push their separatist agenda more aggressively.

This paper offers a comprehensive examination of the BLA as a sustained security challenge to Chinese strategic investments in Pakistan over the next decade. It explores the group's historical evolution, ideological foundations, organizational structure, and operational tactics. Furthermore,

the study assesses the implications of BLA militancy for China's geopolitical strategy, Pakistan's internal security calculus, and the broader regional order in South and Central Asia.

Origins and Evolution of the BLA

The Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) is a product of deeply entrenched Baloch nationalist sentiment, which has historically challenged the centralized authority of the Pakistani state. This sentiment is rooted in the broader political context of Pakistani federalism, ethnic identity, and longstanding grievances over autonomy and resource control (International Crisis Group, 2006). The Baloch people, who inhabit the geopolitically significant and resource-rich province of Balochistan, have historically perceived themselves as politically and economically marginalized within the federal structure of Pakistan. Balochistan province is the largest supplier of natural gas that receives only one-fifth in royalty payments as compared to the Punjab and Sindh provinces and thus Balochistan – the poorest province – in effect becomes a subsidizer to the richer provinces. Meezan et al. (2009) argue that the situation is further exacerbated by the central government's failure to allocate any portion of its substantial revenues back to the province in the form of development expenditures.

Armed resistance by Baloch tribes predates the creation of Pakistan in 1947, with recurring uprisings against both colonial and post-colonial central authorities. These movements, while varied in scale and organization, have consistently demanded greater regional autonomy, equitable resource distribution, and recognition of Baloch identity and rights. The formal emergence of the BLA in the early 2000s marked a significant evolution in Baloch insurgency, shifting from sporadic tribal rebellions to a more cohesive and ideologically motivated militant organization. The BLA's formation was catalyzed by growing discontent with the state's aggressive resource extraction practices in Balochistan—particularly in the mining and energy sectors—coupled with chronic underdevelopment, militarization of the province, and the systematic exclusion of Baloch voices from national political processes. A critical inflection point came in 2006 with the killing of Nawab Akbar Bugti, a prominent Baloch nationalist leader and former chief minister and governor of the province, during a Pakistani military operation. Bugti's death not only intensified anti-state sentiment across Balochistan but also served as a

powerful rallying symbol for militant resistance, significantly boosting the BLA's recruitment and legitimacy (Khan, 2014). While the BLA has its roots in earlier tribal militias and nationalist movements, it has since evolved into a more structured and militarized insurgent group. Unlike its predecessors, the BLA combines traditional guerrilla warfare tactics with modern ideological frameworks, often framing its struggle as an anti-colonial resistance against both the Pakistani state and foreign powers—most notably China. The group's transformation reflects a broader trend within insurgent movements in South Asia, where local grievances are increasingly tied to regional and international geopolitical dynamics. As such, the BLA represents not only a continuity of Baloch nationalist resistance but also its adaptation to a changing strategic landscape.

Geography and the self-perpetuating cycle of violence

The geographical characteristics of Balochistan present unique operational advantages for insurgent movements. Characterized by vast, sparsely populated territories and challenging topographical features, the region offers natural sanctuaries that enable strategic mobility and resistance against conventional military interventions. The BLA leverages these geographical advantages, creating a decentralized operational model that frustrates traditional counterinsurgency strategies. Pakistan's institutional response to the BLA insurgency has been predominantly characterized by kinetic military approaches, a strategy that inadvertently reinforces the separatist narrative. By prioritizing military solutions over comprehensive developmental interventions, the Pakistani establishment effectively validates the BLA's fundamental critique of systemic marginalization. This approach creates a self-perpetuating cycle of violence and alienation, generating continuous recruitment opportunities for insurgent organizations.

Leadership and Organizational Structure

The BLA's leadership remains elusive and strategically dispersed, often operating from overseas locations to evade capture (Abbas, 2020). Figures like Bashir Zaib, often cited as a senior commander, reportedly operate from exile and use encrypted communication and proxy networks to issue directives. The BLA operates under a decentralized, cell-based structure,

which provides operational resilience against counterterrorism operations (SATP, 2021). Each cell—composed of a few operatives—handles its own logistics, planning, and execution. These cells report loosely to the top leadership but operate autonomously to reduce the risk of penetration or total collapse. The group also has specialized propaganda and media wings that focus on disseminating anti-state narratives and seeking international legitimacy for their cause. These units use social media, websites, and encrypted communication to amplify their message and recruit globally, particularly among the Baloch diaspora in the Middle East and Europe (PIPS, 2022).

Resource Politics, Ethnic Identity, and National Integration

Pakistan's largest province represents a complex geopolitical landscape characterized by vast territorial expanse, sparse population, and immense natural resource wealth. Historically, the region has been dominated by a tribal political system where powerful Sardars (tribal leaders) negotiated with the federal government through intricate patronage networks. These arrangements typically involved loyalty payments directly to tribal elites, who were expected to distribute resources among their communities, though in practice, these leaders often accumulated wealth while leaving their populations marginalized. During the 1970s, the Pakistani government implemented strategies to integrate Baloch elites into national institutions, including job quotas and educational opportunities. However, these efforts predominantly benefited the upper echelons of Baloch society, with local populations primarily relegated to manual labor roles. Nearly 70 percent of the population in Balochistan is identified as multidimensionally poor, followed by 48 percent in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and 45 percent in Sindh (Niaz, 2024). The selective development approach created deep-seated grievances, particularly among younger, educated Baloch who felt systematically excluded from meaningful economic and political participation. The political tensions escalated dramatically during Musharraf's military regime, marked by a significant incident involving the alleged rape of a local doctor by military personnel. This event catalyzed growing resentment against the central government, particularly when Nawab Akbar Bugti, was killed. His death triggered the fifth major insurgency in Balochistan, fundamentally altering the region's political dynamics. The Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) emerged as a primary resistance movement, strategically

targeting military installations and opposing Chinese development projects. Their insurgency represents a complex blend of ethnic nationalism, resource conflict, and opposition to perceived external economic exploitation. The BLA views these infrastructure projects as symbolic of continued marginalization, with military protection of Chinese investments seen as a direct threat to Baloch autonomy. Contemporary Balochistan remains a powder keg of unresolved tensions. The province's development has been consistently uneven, with resource extraction benefiting external stakeholders while local populations experience minimal economic improvement. The tribal leadership's complicity in this system has further complicated potential resolution, creating a multi-layered conflict involving federal authorities, military institutions, tribal elites, and grassroots nationalist movements. The ongoing conflict reflects broader challenges of post-colonial state-building in Pakistan. It demonstrates how unaddressed ethnic grievances, combined with economic marginalization and political exclusion, can transform into sustained insurgent movements. The modern trend of BLA support comes from women, educated middle class is a notable factor of social acceptance gaining traction in the society (Shaikh, 2024). The Balochistan case study offers critical insights into the complex interactions between resource politics, ethnic identity, and national integration. Resolving the Balochistan conflict requires a multifaceted approach emphasizing genuine political representation, transparent resource distribution, and meaningful economic inclusion. Any sustainable solution must address the deep-rooted historical grievances while creating mechanisms for equitable development and political participation.



Diagram A: BLA insurgency root causes, stakeholders and consequences

Activities and Funding Sources

According to Dr. Salma Malik, Geopolitically, the BLA's operational landscape is defined by complex transnational support mechanisms, with India emerging as a primary external patron. Empirical evidence suggests a deliberate, strategic approach wherein India provides comprehensive support encompassing financial resources, advanced training programs, and sophisticated intelligence networks. Afghanistan and Iran serve as critical conduits, facilitating the movement of insurgent leadership and providing operational flexibility within the region's fragmented territorial boundaries (Malik, 2025).

The BLA's activities have become increasingly sophisticated, targeting both symbolic and strategic assets. Its operations span sabotage, bombings, targeted assassinations, and suicide missions (Rana, 2020). Recent years have witnessed a disturbing increase in the use of female suicide bombers, indicating both a tactical evolution and deepening radicalization. One of the main targets of these operations is Chinese personnel and infrastructure associated with CPEC. For example, the group has attacked Chinese engineers, security personnel, and even diplomatic facilities to undermine Pakistan-China cooperation (Zahid, 2023). Funding the insurgency requires diverse streams. The BLA is believed to rely on a combination of external funding and local criminal activities, including extortion, kidnapping for ransom, and smuggling. Diaspora contributions, particularly from sympathizers in the Middle East and Europe, provide financial lifelines (UNSC, 2021). This multifaceted funding base enables the group to maintain operational capacity despite intense military pressure from Pakistani forces.

The BLA's propaganda infrastructure demonstrates remarkable sophistication in international narrative construction. By strategically positioning separatist leaders in global diplomatic capitals and systematically highlighting human rights concerns, the organization has internationalized its struggle. This approach transforms local insurgency into a global discourse, generating sympathetic international perspectives and potential diplomatic leverage. Financing

mechanisms represent a critical component of the BLA's operational sustainability. Despite Balochistan's significant resource wealth, the insurgency relies extensively on external financial support. India's role in this financial ecosystem is particularly significant, providing not just monetary resources but also intelligence and strategic guidance. The region's complex resource landscape, characterized by resources that are challenging to monetize, creates a structural dependency on external funding sources.

Terrorist Activities, Regional Impact, and External Influences

The BLA has claimed responsibility for numerous attacks across Balochistan and beyond, including assaults on Gwadar port facilities, railway tracks, energy pipelines, and convoys transporting Chinese workers (SATP, 2021). The persistent targeting of Chinese interests poses significant risks to CPEC progress, undermining not only economic growth but also the diplomatic trust between Pakistan and China. Beyond domestic dynamics, the BLA insurgency is further complicated by external state actors. Indian intelligence agencies, particularly the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), have long been accused of supporting the BLA both financially and operationally (Rana, 2020). India's strategy aims to destabilize Pakistan by exploiting its internal fissures, including fueling separatist movements in Balochistan. The Indian government's increasing security partnerships with countries in its immediate periphery—such as Sri Lanka—raise concerns of expanding influence over traditionally non-aligned states. By signing defense and intelligence-sharing pacts with these neighbors, India potentially drags them closer into its strategic orbit, altering regional balance and complicating Pakistan's security calculations. These developments have added a geopolitical dimension to the BLA conflict, transforming it from a localized insurgency into a proxy battleground within South Asia. Such external interference risks prolonging violence, eroding prospects for political reconciliation, and heightening tensions among regional powers.

Date	Location	Target	Reported casualties / outcome
7 Oct 2016	Jaffar Express / Bolan Pass (Balochistan)	Passenger train (two blasts)	Several killed and wounded (reports vary); BLA claimed responsibility for blasts on Jaffar Express ¹ .
23 Nov 2018	Chinese Consulate, Clifton, Karachi	Chinese consulate / security personnel	4 dead (2 policemen, 2 civilians); 3 attackers killed ² .
11 May 2019	Pearl-Continental Hotel, Gwadar	Hotel / security forces (CPEC-linked site)	Several killed and injured (hotel attack involving suicide/armed attackers) ³
20 Aug 2021	Near Gwadar / Chinese convoy (Balochistan)	Convoy of Chinese engineers / workers	2 local children killed, several injured; Chinese national(s) injured/killed in related attacks around that period ⁴ .
2 Feb 2022	Panjgur & Naushki (Balochistan)	Frontier Corps / security camps (coordinated raids)	Pakistani military reported militants killed during repulse; BLA claimed the operations (disputed casualty figures) ⁵ .
26 Apr 2022	University of Karachi (Confucius Institute)	Chinese academics / staff	4 killed (including 3 Chinese academics). Suicide bombing claimed by BLA female suicide bomber reported ⁶ .
26–27 Aug 2024	Multiple locations across Balochistan (coordinated)	Police stations, railway lines, highways, convoys	Dozens killed (official tallies and reporting varied; Reuters reported ~73 dead in initial coverage) ⁷ .
9 Nov 2024	Quetta Railway Station	Civilians, security personnel	Dozens killed (reports initially 24–32; several soldiers among the dead); many injured ⁸ .
11–12 Mar 2025	Jaffar Express hijacking (Bolan Pass)	Civilians, railway staff, soldiers (hostage crisis)	Reported deaths later revised (dozens killed overall in ensuing clashes); hundreds rescued/released after military operation ⁹ .
21 May 2025	Khuzdar (Army Public School bus), Balochistan	School bus carrying students at Army Public School (military-run)	Reported fatalities: initial reports 5; later reporting revised totals (AP and Reuters report up to 8 dead and dozens injured); no definitive public claim — Pakistani authorities publicly suggested BLA involvement ¹⁰ .

Table 1: Major Terrorist Attacks Attributed to the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), last 10 years (2015-2025).

¹ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1288604>

² https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-baloch-insurgency-in-pakistan-evolution-tactics-and-regional-security-implications/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

³ https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-baloch-insurgency-in-pakistan-evolution-tactics-and-regional-security-implications/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁴ https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/two-killed-suicide-bombing-targeting-chinese-nationals-southwest-pakistan-2021-08-20/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁵ https://www.dawn.com/news/1672907?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁶ https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/van-blast-pakistans-karachi-kills-four-2022-04-26/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁷ https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/twenty-three-people-killed-pakistan-militant-attack-interior-minister-says-2024-08-26/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁸ https://apnews.com/article/quetta-railway-bombing-pakistan-30457309ca4b4c29bd3a5149509acb2e?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁹ https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/death-toll-pakistans-train-hijacking-rises-31-army-says-2025-03-14/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

¹⁰ <https://apnews.com/article/pakistan-baluchistan-suicide-bombing-school-bus-2cfd2c0f98752e775ca47a5cb66083ce>

Regional Security Complex Theory and Dynamics of the Baloch Insurgency

Applying Barry Buzan's *Regional Security Complex Theory* (Buzan & Wæver, 2003) clarifies that the Baloch insurgency is embedded within a South Asian security complex shaped primarily by the India–Pakistan rivalry. Allegations of Indian intelligence support to Baloch groups can be interpreted as instruments of intra-complex competition rather than as classical external intrusion, although they functionally resemble external penetration by introducing outside resources and incentives into the local conflict (Rashid, 2020). China's engagement through the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) constitutes a textbook case of external penetration: Beijing's substantial economic and security presence reshapes local incentives and prompts securitization by Pakistan, thereby elevating the risk of proxy escalation (Small, 2015). RSCT further suggests that neither covert sponsorship nor large-scale external investment alone can resolve the conflict; instead, durable stability requires reducing rivalry incentives for proxy sponsorship, de-securitizing development initiatives, integrating local economic and political grievances, and establishing regional diplomatic mechanisms that limit sanctuary and diminish the effectiveness of proxy networks (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Wirsing, 2013).

Strategic Implications and Regional Security Forecast

The BLA insurgency, fueled by a combination of historical grievances and external support, represents a serious threat to Pakistan's internal security and to the future of Chinese investments under CPEC. The persistence of violence undermines Pakistan's ability to ensure a stable environment necessary for economic development, deterring further foreign investment and eroding public confidence. China's strategic response must therefore combine enhanced security cooperation with Pakistan alongside efforts to foster socio-economic development and political inclusion in Balochistan. Militarized responses alone have proven insufficient; a comprehensive approach addressing local grievances while countering external interference is essential. The broader regional security implications are significant. India's engagement with immediate neighbors through defense pacts and intelligence sharing serves to extend its strategic reach but risks polarizing South Asia further. Non-aligned states find themselves pressured into choosing sides, potentially destabilizing the existing regional order.

The escalation of the Iran–Israel war adds yet another volatile layer to this already complex strategic environment. With Iran bordering Pakistan’s Baloch-majority regions and potentially becoming more entangled in regional proxy warfare, the conflict could further radicalize segments of the Baloch population or lead to the creation of transnational militant linkages. Iran’s Sistan-Baluchestan province, a historical sanctuary for cross-border insurgents, may become a vector for destabilization amid a broader Middle East security vacuum.

Over the next decade, the trajectory of the BLA insurgency will likely be influenced by these regional power dynamics. Pakistan’s ability to manage internal dissent, counter foreign interference, and maintain strategic partnerships with China will be critical determinants of lasting peace and stability in Balochistan. Additionally, it will require robust regional diplomacy to prevent external conflicts—such as the Iran–Israel war—from fueling local insurgencies or drawing Pakistan into a broader theatre of confrontation.

The recruitment strategy employed by the BLA goes beyond traditional militant approaches. By presenting a nuanced narrative that combines legitimate developmental critiques with revolutionary rhetoric, the organization attracts educated, politically conscious youth. This approach differs markedly from simplistic militant recruitment models, representing a more sophisticated ideological engagement strategy. Counterinsurgency efforts must transcend traditional military paradigms, requiring a holistic approach that addresses fundamental structural inequalities. Sustainable solutions necessitate comprehensive developmental interventions, inclusive political representation, and genuine economic empowerment strategies. The current elite-driven governance model must be systematically dismantled and replaced with genuine grassroots participatory mechanisms. The research conclusively demonstrates that military solutions alone cannot resolve the complex Baloch insurgency. A multidimensional approach integrating political dialogue, economic development, and cultural recognition represents the most promising pathway towards sustainable conflict resolution. The BLA's insurgency must be understood not merely as a separatist movement but as a sophisticated political expression of long-standing systemic marginalization. By comprehensively analyzing the BLA's strategic dynamics, this research provides critical insights into contemporary insurgent movements' evolving methodologies.

Conclusion

The Balochistan Liberation Army represents a significant and complex threat to Pakistan's sovereignty and to China's strategic investments in the region. Rooted in long-standing grievances and exacerbated by external state support—most notably from Indian intelligence—the BLA insurgency challenges both state authority and foreign infrastructure projects. The group's decentralized structure, evolving tactics, and diversified funding underscore its resilience. The resulting instability threatens not only Pakistan's national cohesion but also regional economic integration under the Belt and Road Initiative.

As Buzan and Wæver (2003) emphasize, “security interdependence among states in a region is so intensive that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another”. The Baloch insurgency exemplifies this principle within the South Asian regional security complex, where the India–Pakistan rivalry forms the core security dynamic. External factors, such as China's deep engagement through CPEC, introduce new layers of complexity, serving as forms of regional penetration that reshape local conflict dynamics.

The present Iran–Israel conflict further complicates the geopolitical calculus. As the Middle East descends into deeper instability, adjacent regions such as Balochistan risk becoming strategic conduits or flashpoints in transnational proxy struggles. The potential for spillover, radicalization, and cross-border militancy necessitates urgent preventive diplomacy and regional intelligence coordination. For China and Pakistan, this means that insulating Balochistan from these wider geopolitical tremors is as crucial as managing the internal drivers of insurgency.

Effective mitigation requires a multidimensional strategy—combining robust security cooperation, political reconciliation, socio-economic development, community engagement, and international diplomacy. RSCT reminds us that sustainable security solutions require addressing the underlying interlinked insecurities of all actors involved rather than relying solely on coercive measures or unilateral interventions. Only through sustained, inclusive efforts can Pakistan and China hope to overcome the insurgency's challenge and realize the full potential of their strategic partnership. The coming decade will be critical in determining whether peace and

progress can prevail in this geopolitically pivotal region—or whether it will be swept into the broader tides of regional upheaval.

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