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The Balochistan Conundrum

Lt. Col. Vikrant Sood



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Jaffar Express Attack

The recent attack by the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) on the Jaffar Express train in the remote areas of southern Balochistan has once again brought attention to the ongoing insurgency in the region. Following the Jaffar Express attack, the BLA launched a second assault on a Pakistan Army convoy in Balochistan. The casualty figures reported by the BLA for both the Jaffar Express attack and the subsequent attack on the military convoy differ from those acknowledged by the Pakistani Army. However, the sophistication of the intelligence gathering by the BLA and the precision of their attacks demonstrate a high level of military competence.

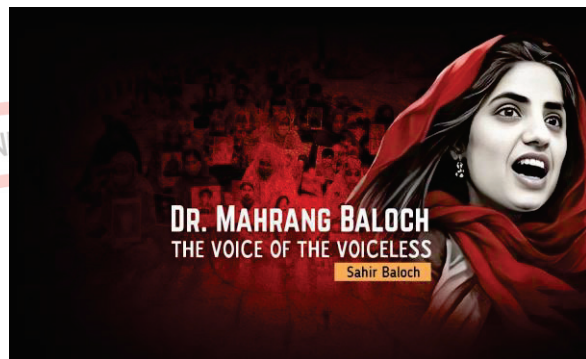
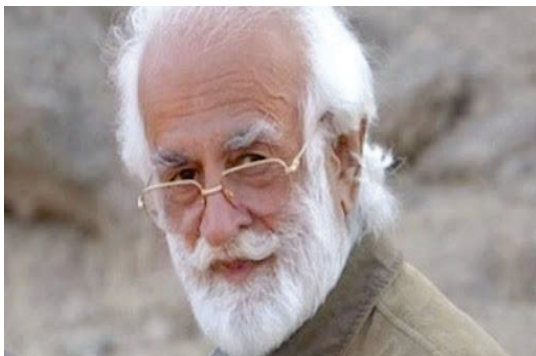
In this article, I will explore various recent variables that have marked significant turning points in the rise of militancy and insurgency in Balochistan. It's important to understand that all stakeholders play a critical role in this conflict. From the beginning itself, we must recognise that Balochistan was not a supporter of the movement for the creation of Pakistan. No leaders from Balochistan advocated for the establishment of Pakistan on Islamic principles. At the time of Pakistan's founding, Balochistan sought to achieve independent status, a notion that Mohammed Ali Jinnah initially supported. However, Balochistan was later annexed, leading to the exile of the Khan of Kalat, a princely state in Balochistan. After Pakistan declared the completion of military operations following the Jaffar express train attack, its media wing hosted a press briefing.

The key highlights from the press briefing by ISPR are as follows:

1. There was no intelligence failure.
2. The individuals managing the terrorists and militants are based in Afghanistan, while the masterminds are linked to India.
3. The operation launched to neutralise the terrorists was successful.
4. Social media has played a significant role in legitimising the activities of Balochistan insurgent groups.

To support their claims that India is the mastermind behind the rise of insurgency in Balochistan, ISPR spokesperson Major General Ahmed Sharif Chaudhary presented 15-year-old videos featuring Mr Ajit Doval, retired Lieutenant Commander Kulbhushan Jadhav, and various Indian YouTubers. This presentation led to strong rebuttals from several political analysts in Pakistan. These analysts criticised the Pakistani government, particularly the military establishment, for failing to address the underlying causes and factors contributing to the significant increase in terrorist attacks in Balochistan.

In the following paragraphs, I will discuss five key variables that have contributed to the rise of the current insurgency in Balochistan. It is crucial to recognise that in geopolitics, nothing operates in isolation; therefore, incidents occurring in Pakistan will inevitably impact its neighbouring countries, including India. Additionally, it is essential to grasp the underlying dynamics behind the rise of militancy in Balochistan, especially since Pakistan has directly accused India of being the mastermind behind these incidents.\



Sardar Nawab Khan Bugti

Backyard Syndrome

Definition of Backyard Syndrome - Backyard syndrome refers to regions within a country that are neglected and considered less critical than significant cities or cultural and political hubs. For instance, India's Northeast is often viewed as a “backyard” region, experiencing considerable neglect. Similarly, in China, Xinjiang is experiencing a similar situation. Such areas typically face excessive poverty and higher crime rates compared to other parts of their respective countries. This syndrome is evident in many countries worldwide.

Balochistan's Unique Challenges - In the case of Balochistan, the situation is even more complex. Balochistan is more extensive than all other regions of Pakistan combined, which makes its accessibility extremely difficult in many areas. This vast landscape hampers the reach of the state and its governance. Despite its size, Balochistan is sparsely populated, with much of the land being arid, non-irrigated mountainous wasteland. The province shares a long border of approximately 1,000 km with Iran, about 1,100 km with Afghanistan, and a coastline of around 1,000 km along the Arabian Sea. Additionally, Balochistan is unique in that it shares internal borders with all other provinces and regions of Pakistan, resulting in a population of ethnic Baloch spread across various areas, including substantial communities in Iran and Afghanistan.

Consequences of Backyard Syndrome in Balochistan, like other regions affected by backyard syndrome worldwide, Balochistan suffers from lawlessness, a lack of government authority, local tribal laws, smuggling, high crime rates, porous borders, and inadequate development. The economic exploitation and grievances of the local populace are illustrated by the fact that natural gas was discovered in Dera Bugti (Sui) in 1952, with extraction beginning in 1955. However, it took another 45 years for this natural resource to reach the local community in Sui.

Identifying the Aggrieved Baloch

Pakistan is home to approximately 7 to 10 million ethnic Baloch. While many Baloch people live outside of Balochistan—particularly in South Punjab, Karachi, and southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa—there is no significant resentment or insurgency against the state of Pakistan among those populations. This indicates that the discontent primarily originates from the Baloch residing within Balochistan. Therefore, it can be correctly concluded that the issues facing Balochistan are mainly local, specific, geographical, economic, and political.

Mutual Exploitation by the State and Baloch Elite: The Rise of the Baloch Middle Class

Since the first uprising in Balochistan in the 1940s, the second uprising in the 1970s, and as recently as 2006, when Nawab Akbar Bugti was killed by the military government of General Pervez Musharraf, it has been the Pakistani deep state/military establishment and the local Baloch Sardars (tribal heads) who have either been fighting against each other or exploiting each other's weaknesses for personal gain. The voices and aspirations of the local Baloch population have gone unheard by both the military establishment and the local Sardars.

Any local Baloch Sardar who instigated trouble or led a rebellion was often rewarded with a seat in the assembly to ensure compliance with the Pakistani establishment. This tactic was employed to suppress resentment within Balochistan, allowing the deep state to cover up issues like poor governance, lack of infrastructure, and lawlessness. Consequently, the local Baloch Sardars also ignored the problems faced by the community. This cycle of mutual exploitation persisted for decades, continuing until 2006. After that point, the insurgency in Balochistan underwent a significant shift. The new leadership and fighters opposing the government no longer represented local Baloch Sardars. Instead, they emerged from a newly educated middle class. Recent incidents have shown that many militants, including suicide bombers, are educated professionals such as doctors, engineers, and lawyers. For example, Shari Baloch, who committed a suicide bombing in Karachi in April 2022, was a highly educated mother of two and the wife of a doctor.

The current leadership in the Baloch insurgency is vastly different from that seen in the uprisings of the 1940s or 1970s. This new leadership is a product of student movements in Balochistan, particularly the Baloch Student Organisation (BSO). Various factions of this organisation have played a crucial role in this new wave of insurgency, especially the BSO (Azaad) faction led by Dr. Allah Nazar. The middle class associated with these student organisations initially fought alongside the Baloch Sardars. Still, they soon recognised that the mutual exploitation between the Pakistani establishment and the Sardars would not address their grievances. Consequently, a new leadership took charge of militant organisations like the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA). These new recruits and their leaders operate independently of the local tribal chieftains and aim for complete independence from the Pakistani state, rather than seeking personal gain.

Thus, the Pakistani state and its establishment face significant challenges in negotiating with this new leadership, which differs from past engagements with local chieftains. It is important to note that the recent spike in terrorist attacks is occurring primarily in South Balochistan, an area where local chieftains have minimal influence. Regions like Makran, Basti, and Gwadar are relatively educated and have a flatter social hierarchy than other parts of Balochistan and Pakistan. This presents a unique challenge for the Pakistani establishment and the military, as their areas of operation have expanded to include not just areas previously controlled by local chieftains in East Balochistan but also those in South and Central Balochistan. The dynamics have shifted significantly; the new generation of Baloch insurgents is not seeking to exploit the state or address local grievances for their benefit. Instead, they are focused on achieving nothing less than complete independence from the Pakistani state. They are unwilling to negotiate, unlike the Baloch Sardars, who have accepted representation in the Pakistani ruling assembly.

The Ideological and Moral Support

This paradigm shift is not only geographical but also ideological and technical in nature. The current insurgency is primarily supported by the middle class and enjoys widespread backing from the local populace, including a significant number of women joining its ranks. The insurgents have developed a sophisticated media arm, amplified by social media. Their safe havens have shifted from hilly terrains to more localised areas like hotels and houses.

Support for these groups has increased internationally, with liberals in Pakistan and pro-democratic forces, notably a sizable faction of the PTI, expressing solidarity with the insurgents. They recognise the brutalities inflicted by the Pakistani military on local Balochs. While many in Pakistan do not necessarily endorse Baloch separatism, they empathise with the grievances expressed by Baloch individuals against the military. This growing sympathy has enabled the insurgents to gather inside information for carrying out their attacks. For example, the attack on Chinese nationals arriving from Bangkok in February 2025 at Karachi airport demonstrated that the insurgents were aware of the specific flight's details. Additionally, the significant presence of Pakistani soldiers on the Jaffar Express on the day of the attack indicates a marked increase in the intelligence-gathering capabilities of Baloch insurgents.



The Ideological and Tactical Shift

While it can be accurately stated that the entire population of Balochistan follows Islam, it is essential to understand that the insurgency in Balochistan is not religious or Islamic; instead, it is rooted in leftist ethnic nationalism. None of the videos published by the insurgents through their media arm indicate any religious motivation for their struggle. The movement in

Balochistan is a socialist, left-leaning, ethnic issue. Historically, Islam has never served as a motivating factor for insurgency in this region.

Tactically, in 2018, most insurgent groups in Balochistan came together under an umbrella organisation to better consolidate and coordinate their efforts. This organisation is called the Baloch Raji Ajohi Sangar (BRAS). However, BRAS has strategically opted not to establish a unified command headquarters for its operations. In interviews with various journalists, BRAS leadership has emphasised that they have learned from the mistakes of the LTTE during the Sri Lankan civil war. They argue that having a single unified command headquarters would be counterproductive when facing a superior adversary like the Pakistani state. Despite being part of one organisation, all the insurgent groups (such as the Baloch Liberation Army and the Baloch Republican Army) will operate independently. This approach ensures that if the Pakistani state targets one leader or one group, the broader movement will not be halted. In the case of the LTTE, when the command headquarters in Jaffna was captured, the entire organisation collapsed.

Conclusion

The problems faced by Pakistan in Balochistan cannot be viewed in isolation. The situation becomes significantly more complex when compared to other insurgencies occurring along Pakistan's western borders. The Pakistani state has notably failed to engage in any meaningful and productive dialogue with the various stakeholders involved in the Balochistan crisis. This includes insurgent groups and mainstream protesters, such as Mehrang Baloch of the Baloch Yakjehti Committee and Sardar Akhtar Mangal of the Baloch National Party. The heavy-handed approach taken by the Pakistani establishment has further alienated the Baloch population, contributing to an increase in the recruitment of middle-class Baloch individuals into insurgent groups like the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), which recently claimed responsibility for an attack on the Jafar Express.

During a recent briefing to the Parliament of Pakistan, which many political analysts interpreted as a warning and directions to the parliament rather than a straightforward update, General Asif Muneer Ahmed, the Army Chief, emphasised that Pakistan needs to adopt a tough stance to combat the insurgency in Balochistan. This reflects a significant misunderstanding of the underlying issues in the Balochistan crisis. As a result, it appears unlikely that a peaceful resolution to the challenges in Balochistan can be achieved. Rather than blaming its neighbouring countries, Pakistan should look inwards and address the real issues at hand such as economic exploitation and abduction and disappearance of young men in Balochistan. Currently, Pakistan is ranked second in the global terrorism index, following Burkina Faso, in terms of the number of terrorist attacks. In contrast, India ranks fourteenth. Readers need to note that the top eleven countries on this list account for a staggering 85% of casualties from terrorist attacks.

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About the Author

Lt Col Name Sood Vikrant Vinay is an alumnus of OTA. Officer was commissioned into the 68 Armd Regt in 18 Mar 2006. He is currently holding the appointment of Second in Command of 68 Armd Regt. Other than Regt duties, the officer has served in the NSG. The Offr is also expert in Chinese Language and has served in various appointment as Chinese language expert in IHQ of MoD and in a foreign Country.



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