

# Balochistan Crisis and its Implications in the Region

Dhruv Ashok, Research Scholar and Dr Anurag Tripathi, Assistant Professor, Department of International Studies and History, Christ (deemed to be University), Bangalore, India

**Abstract :** Balochistan has always been influential on local, national and international politics. As Balochistan borders two very significant strategic countries Afghanistan and Iran which have Baloch populations. Any type of civil unrest or violent insurgency in Balochistan would disturb regional instability. Being in the middle of Central, Western Southern and South -western Asia. Balochistan is of great geostrategic and geo political importance. The maritime significance and potential of the Gwadar port to connect landlocked Afghanistan and the Central Asian states to the Indian ocean as an international trade route and an energy transit corridor, and mineral resources have increased geopolitical competition among global powers in the Eurasian region. This paper will focus on the following areas: - Strategic significance of Balochistan for Pakistan, Balochistan`s relations with the British crown, Pakistan`s construction of a border fence with Afghanistan as part of its counter terrorism efforts, Pakistan`s construction of a border fence with Afghanistan as part of its counter terrorism efforts, Iranian factor in Balochistan and the illegal drug trade between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Keywords- Balochistan, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, Islamic state, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Jundullah, ISI & RAW

## Significance of Balochistan for Pakistan

Balochistan is Pakistan`s biggest and poorest province with the least population. Balochistan has experienced a long and bloody insurgency for several decades. The combatants are the central Pakistani government and Baloch nationalist separatists who have waged an armed separatist insurgency to achieve separate statehood for Balochistan since Pakistan`s military annexation of the princely state of Kalat in 1948 which comprises most of the territory of present day Balochistan. The current insurgency began in 2003 with the killing of the Baloch separatist leader Akbar Khan Bugti by Pakistani troops on the orders of Pakistan`s then military ruler Pervez Musharaff. The Baloch separatists are organised in insurgent groups like the Balochistan Liberation Army and the Balochistan Liberation United Front. While the Pakistani government labels the Baloch separatists as terrorists the separatists have accused the Pakistani army of ethnic cleansing and human rights violations against Baloch civilians such as enforced disappearances and extra judicial killings while the government accuses the Baloch insurgents of human rights violations such as killing civilian Pashtun settlers from doctors to construction workers and intimidating and murdering journalists( Laura Secorun Pallet, 2015). The Baloch are an ethnic minority with their own language, traditions and culture. Baloch are present in Iran and Afghanistan but feel strongly deprived and alienated by the government in Islamabad whom they accuse of exploiting Balochistan, s rich natural resources like oil, gas and minerals. Balochistan has acquired geopolitical importance in recent years due to China`s construction of the strategic Gwadar port.

## Balochistan`s relations with the British crown

The first British contact with Balochistan occurred in 1839 when Britain engaged the disastrous first Anglo Afghan war. As part of their plans for the invasion of Afghanistan in 1839 Britain dispatched it`s envoy Alexander Burnes to negotiate terms for the safe passage of British troops through Baloch territory with Mehrab Khan of Kalat who was then. The Khan was prepared to allow British troops safe passage through his territory on two conditions. The first condition was that Britain would withdraw its troops from his territory once it`s intervention in Afghanistan was over and second the British would help restore Baloch control over Karachi. The British were reluctant to agree to these conditions and instead put forward the condition that the Khan of Kalat recognise the over lordship of Shah Shuja whom they were trying to install as their puppet ruler in Afghanistan who they hope would block or limit Russian influence in Afghanistan. As the negotiations became protracted the British government lost patience and ordered an invasion and occupation of the Khanate of Kalat Britain`s disastrous military experience in the first Anglo Afghan war meant that it had little interest in the area, so it was willing to return control of the Khanate to the Khan of Kalat .The invasion started in November 1839(Javed Haider Syed, 2007)Mehrab Khan was killed and was succeeded by Shah Nawaz Khan. The sought to keep control over his rule by appointing a British officer Lieutenant Loveday as Khan`s political officer. However, this lack of political independence led to a rebellion against his rule from his subjects belonging to the Sarawan tribes. As a result, Shah Nawaz was forced to abdicate to Mir Nazir Khan the second. The British negotiated with the Kalat state in 1854, and as per the terms of the treaty, British political agents were to be deputed to Kalat for the next twenty years. In 1874 Sir Robert Sandeman was sent to Balochistan. His policy was one of conciliatory intervention tempered with lucrative employment and light taxation. Soon afterwards he was able to conclude with Khan Khudardad Khan of Kalat the treaty of 1876, which brought Kalat under British sovereignty and brought stronger political control. To consolidate the territorial extension already made, Balochistan was made a separate agency under an agent to the governor general of India. This was just prior to the start of the second Anglo- Afghan war. By the terms of the treaty of Gandamak (1879) after the second Anglo Afghan war: Oishin, Sibi, Harani and Thal- Chotali were ceded by Afghan ruler Amir Yaqub Khan to the British government. ( Javed Haider Syed, 2017) During the next decade the British undertook military expeditions against theLalars of Zhob and Bori and the chiefs of Sirhani and those areas were occupied by the British.

. In March 1948, Kalat State formally acceded to Pakistan and became part of the Baluchistan States Union. Two days before Pakistan declaration of statehood, the Khan of Kalat Beglar Begi Mir Sir Ahmad Yar Khan declared the independence of Kalat but offered to negotiate a special relationship with Pakistan. However, the Pakistani government took military action against them and the Khan and brought about the accession of the state of Kalat to Pakistan

Since then in Balochistan separatist insurgencies were fought in 1948, 1958-1959, 1962-1963 and 1973-1977 with the recent insurgency breaking out in 2009. Some of the causes of the separatist insurgency are as follows: -

1) Unstable politics and ethnicity- The Baloch people never had proper representation in Pakistan's politics, bureaucracy and military. Sometimes Baloch politicians were not able to complete their terms in the provincial council of Balochistan due to the direct intervention of the Pakistani central government in Balochistan's affairs. This exacerbated the ethnic conflict in the province with the goal of autonomy or possibly independence. The 1999 military coup in Pakistan that brought general Pervez Musharaff to power in Pakistan increased the sense of alienation among the Baloch. The heavy dominance of the Punjabis the main dominant group in Pakistan led to further alienation between the Baloch and the Pakistani state. Following Pakistan's transition to democracy in 2007 decreased the intensity of the situation in Balochistan to a certain extent. Currently there is an anti-terrorism mission in Waziristan division of Balochistan has led to thousands of people being internally displaced (Ahmed Naveed Noormal, 2017).

2) Resources and development issues- The resources of Balochistan include gas which is being used to produce energy for the rest of Pakistan particularly the Punjab province. Though the Pakistani government claims credit for development in Balochistan, Balochis consider the Pakistani government's policies including the economic package known as Aghaz-e- hoqooq-e- Balochistan to be exploitative and inefficient and not benefiting the local population (Ahmed Naveed Noormal, 2017). The current developmental issues are the construction of the Gwadar port as a transportation hub with Dubai. This project was announced in 2001 and is being implemented by the Chinese. The Balochis have been totally excluded from the construction of the project. The Balochistan province is also the hub for the Iran- Pakistan- India gas pipeline which has been targeted several times by Baloch separatists to show their disagreement with the government in their exploitation of Balochistan's natural resources.

3) Human rights violations - It is reported that from 2003 to 2008 more than 8,000 people were kidnapped by Pakistani security forces in Balochistan (Ahmed Naveed Noormal, 2017). Cases of torture have also been reported in which bodies of missing persons have been found with physical signs of torture such as burn marks, broken limbs.

4) Foreign support -The Pakistani government has accused the Indian government and occasionally the United States for supporting the Baloch movement to destabilize the country. Both countries have rejected these claims. Bugti the prominent leader of Balochistan stated that he would accept help from India, Iran and Afghanistan in defence of Balochistan..

5) Terrorist organisations and Islamic extremism- Several extremist groups like Al Qaeda, Quetta Shura e Taliban, Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan are active in Balochistan. The operations of these groups have complicated the conflict situation in Balochistan. The strategic location of Balochistan and the lack of a functioning economy in the province have helped these groups to carry out their organised crimes with a religious label. Hazara Shia immigrants from Afghanistan have been the principal victims of sectarian violence by groups like the Lashkar e Jhangvi in Balochistan.

6) Education- Is also one of the main factors in the Balochistan conflict. The Balochis allege that their right to education is neglected. Although the Pakistani governments is seen to have taken steps by doubling scholarship numbers in 2010 onwards, Balochis claim that the Pakistani government is neglecting their duties in terms of providing education and not enough is being done towards the development of educational institutions.

### **Sectarian militancy in Balochistan**

Religious extremism is on the rise in Balochistan particularly in Balochistan's northern regions specifically Zhob district which adjoins Pakistan's Federally Administered tribal areas (FTA). Following the Pakistan army's operation Zarb- i- Azb in FATA against Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants, TTP fighters and other banned religious outfits penetrated deep inside Balochistan where they are reportedly regrouping. As a result, several terrorist attacks have taken place in Balochistan's provincial capital Quetta such as the August 2016 bombing of the Quetta civil hospital which killed more than 70 people many of them lawyers (Muhammad Akbar Notezai, 2017). This was followed by the October 2016 on the Police Training college in Quetta in which more than 60 police cadets were killed. ISIS has claimed credit for both attacks (Muhammad Akbar Notezai, 2017)

In order to understand the root causes of religious extremism in Balochistan it is necessary to go back to the mid 1970's when Balochistan which was historically a secular province began to transform itself during this period Afghan mujahedeen were given safe sanctuary in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces bordering Afghanistan by the Pakistani government headed by prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto as a response to Afghan government's support for Pakistani Baloch and Pashtun separatists. However, following the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan (1979-1989) the arrival of Afghan refugees in Quetta and other parts of Balochistan led to a change in Baloch politics. From the Pashtun belt of Balochistan up to Sibi, religious elements or to be more specific mujahedeen elements brought with them the sentiments of jihad. Besides the northern parts of Balochistan which are predominantly populated by local Pashtuns, Afghan refugees also poured into Baloch districts such as Chaghi and Nushki bordering Afghanistan. As a result, these regions have become susceptible to religious extremism (Muhammad Akbar Notezai, 2017)

In the 1980's sponsorship of extreme Wahhabism by General Zia Ul Haq's regime in Pakistan changed the nature of politics in Balochistan. In the 1960's and early 1970's educated Baloch youth were mostly left oriented and formed the provincial government under the umbrella of the National Awami party. According to Niamat Gichki a Baloch author `` During the days of Zia, in

Balochistan, for the first time, different ideas were sponsored against other sects in Balochistan, particularly the Zikri Baloch. Annually religious clerics would go to Turbat for functions like Khathme Nabuwat (Finality of Prophethood). He added, "Basically it was used for elections in Balochistan's Makran division where nationalists were winning. That was why political parties and the government of Islamabad thought that the nationalists were winning with the support of Zikri's. So, by cutting their relations with Zikri Baloch, they were creating rifts by weakening the strength of the Baloch nationalists so that the nationalists would lose. They continued to do that, and they succeeded to some extent by breaking this bond between them. They also bribed the Zikri sects of Muslims. But it was short-lived.

Even after his assassination Zia's policies remain unchanged by successive Pakistani governments. For example, in the 1980's the Zikri card was again used by clerics. As a result, in the 1990's Zikri Baloch began to face persecution at the hands of the religious fundamentalists. However, the fundamentalists did not completely succeed in wiping out the Zikri Baloch. One reason is that Makran and its adjoining areas, where Zikri Baloch are predominantly populated and where their sacred religious shrines are located are traditionally secular areas with high rates of literacy.

From the Mid 1980's Hazara Shia's in Balochistan began to be targeted. The banned sectarian militant group Lashkar e Jhangvi continues to exclusively target Hazara Shia's in Balochistan. According to Baloch nationalists' sectarian attacks have been used in the last fifteen years to counter the Baloch nationalist movement in Balochistan by promoting Salafi Islam. They further argue that since Balochistan neighbours Iran the Saudi riyal has been used to promote Salafism against Shia state Iran, where Sunni Baloch are marginalised. Both Pakistan and Iran fear secular Baloch nationalism in their respective provinces (Muhammad Akbar Notezai, 2017).

### India and Balochistan crisis

Soon after 2002 in the wake of the US overthrow of Afghanistan's Taliban regime India began developing its covert infrastructure to develop what Indian officials called their 'Pashtun' and 'Baloch cards' (Avinash Paliwal, 2017, p.236). Afghanistan's intelligence agency the National Directorate of Security (NDS), then under Mohammad Arif Sarwari, who had an excellent rapport with India during the civil wars years was considered a reliable ally by Indian officials (Avinash Paliwal, 2017, p.238). With then Afghan president Hamid Karzai's approval Arif dispatched NDS officers to India for training which led to greater intelligence cooperation between India and Afghanistan (Avinash Paliwal, 2017, p.238). Arif's successor Amrullah Saleh similarly had a close working relationship with India's then national security advisor MK Narayanan. These developments subsequently led to a perception among Pakistani officials of a RAW- NDS nexus against Pakistan.

In 2004, a full-blown insurrection broke out in Balochistan with the Balochistan liberation front, the Balochistan Liberation Army and the Balochistan Republican party launching attacks against Pakistani military installations (Avinash Paliwal, 2017, p.239). Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, with the support of his grandson Brahamdagh Bugti and Mir Balach Marri led the insurrection, and Pakistan's then military dictator Musharraf openly blamed India and Afghanistan for supporting the insurgency in Balochistan. Apart from harassing Pakistan, Pakistani officials perceived that India's motivations for supporting separatism in Balochistan are linked to its geopolitical rivalry with China which began constructing the Gwadar port in Balochistan as the growing alliance between China and Pakistan threatens India's naval and economic dominance in the region. Further China's policy of sending its own nationals to construct the Gwadar port and denying Baloch employment in the construction of the port has increased Baloch fears of being reduced to a minority in their own land. These are strong reasons for collaboration between Indian and Baloch separatists when they happen. Pakistani officials allege that Indian consulates in Afghanistan are safe havens from which Indian intelligence officers contact and provide support to Baloch separatists. India denies these allegations.

Pakistan's attempts to internationalise the Kashmir issue at the United Nations and increased support for militant groups in Kashmir such as the Jaish e Mohammed and Lashkar e Taiba which resulted in several fatalities among personnel of Indian security forces serving in Kashmir the most deadliest of which was the attack on an Indian military camp in Uri by Jaish e Mohammed militants which killed 18 soldiers and led to a surgical strike by Indian commandos across the line of control against militant launch pads in Pakistan controlled Kashmir. Considering these developments Indian prime minister Narendra Modi in his Independence Day speech on August 15th, 2016 highlighted the Baloch cause of self-determination. Until recently India's only official engagement with the Baloch issue was a shortwave radio service run by the External Services Division of All India Radio since 1974 (Prateek Joshi, 2016). In September 2016 the service was made available through a mobile and website application as part of the Indian government's efforts to increase its outreach to the Baloch diaspora settled across the world. Exiled Baloch leaders and activists have begun visiting India to participate in news debates and to address foreign policy think tanks, apprising Indian strategic circles of the bleak human rights situation in Balochistan (Prateek Joshi, 2016). Policy research institutions with the ruling Bharatiya Janata party have been hosting Baloch activists who openly urge India to play an active role in liberating Balochistan (Prateek Joshi, 2016). Brahamdagh Bugti, the exiled leader of the Baloch Republican party and the grandson of the deceased Baloch separatist Baloch leader Akbar Khan Bugti has filed an application for asylum in India, which is currently being examined by the Indian government's Ministry of External Affairs. Another Canada-based Baloch activist duo, Professor Naela Baloch and her son Mazdak Dilshad Baloch, regularly visit India to garner support for the Baloch movement (Prateek Joshi, 2016). However apart from providing merely rhetorical support to the Baloch cause the Indian government officially denies providing any other assistance to the Baloch separatist movement.

### Pakistan's construction of a border fence with Afghanistan as part of its counter terrorism Efforts:

Amid worsening ties with Afghanistan Pakistan in March 2017 announced that it was building a fence along the volatile Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Pakistan said that the move aimed at restricting the movement of Pakistan Tehrik E Taliban militants who cross over the porous border and launch attacks on Pakistani soil targeting Pakistani soldiers, civilians and politicians. The fence is

also seen as an answer to Afghan and international claims that Pakistan's army and intelligence service the ISI support insurgents' groups like the Haqqani network and the Afghan Taliban which launch attacks targeting US troops, Afghan security forces as well as Afghan civilians. The fence which is more than 3 meters tall along the nearly 2,500 –kilometre 19th century Durand line is unlikely to address the real causes which have led to terrorism in both countries (Abubakar Siddique, 2017). Instead the fence has become another point of contention in the volatile relations between Kabul and Islamabad.

The fence has been dubbed the Berlin wall by the Afghan government for attempting to create a physical barrier between the estimated 50 million Pashtuns divided by the Durand line between the two countries (Abubakar Siddique, 2017). The barrier when completed will increase resentment among trans-border tribes and communities affected by years of terrorist attacks and military operations. In Chaman, a Balochistan border crossing connected to Afghanistan's Spin Boldak border town. The distinction between who is a Pakistani citizen and who is an Afghan is not easy. For members of local trans- border Achakzai and Noorzai Pashtun clans, it was a seamless society where they could freely move and trade between the two towns. The main supporter behind the fence has been Pakistan's powerful army. Pakistan's government says the fence will cost more than \$ 500 million and will help regulate cross-border movement and prevent militant attacks inside Pakistan (Abubakar Siddiqi, 2017)

### Iranian Factor in Balochistan issue

Following the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 that saw the ouster of the shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in Iran, and the instalment of Ayatollah Khomeini as the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Sunni Baloch felt marginalised and persecuted at the hands of the Shia state of Iran. As a result, Baloch nationalism among the Iranian Baloch further strengthened. The Iranian Baloch who are today fighting for their rights against the Iranian state are not secular and are mostly Islamists. Iran and Pakistan do not enjoy the same level of cooperation they had in the 1970's when the Shah of Iran provided aerial support to the Pakistan army when it fought Baloch insurgents in Balochistan (1973) following the dismissal of the provincial government by Pakistani prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. There are reportedly more than three militant Iranian Baloch groups operating along the Pakistan Iran border the most prominent of which Jundullah which is accused of carrying out the armed attack on Iran's parliament in June 2017 and other armed attacks against targets inside Iran. Iran holds Pakistan responsible, along with the United States and Saudi Arabia and occasionally Israel, for supporting these groups. Pakistan strongly denies Iran's allegations.

### Conclusion

It is important that Balochistan has long been the operational base of several militant formations operating in Afghanistan with the backing of the Inter-Services Intelligence. Given Pakistan's unchanged game plan to continue with its mischief in Afghanistan, and to use Sunni fundamentalist mobilization and terror as an instrument for domestic political, the current crisis can only deepen the crisis. Islamist militants' groups are not mentioned in this listing, though they are responsible for a greater proportion of attributed attacks and killings in the province. Fortunately, or unfortunately, however, nothing much has been done to.

### Reference list

- 1) Laura SecournPalet (2015). Balochistan The Bloodiest War You Have Never Heard Of . Retrieved from <https://www.ozy.com/acumen/balochistan-the-bloodiest-war-youve-never-heard-of/63187>
- 2) Abubakar Siddique (2017). Can A Fence Help In Fighting Terrorism In Afghanistan and Pakistan .Retrieved from <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-pakistan-durand-line-fence/28842512.html>
- 3) Muhammad Akbar Notezai (2017). Rise of religious extremism in Balochistan. Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/regions/south-asia/>. Muhammad Akbar Notezai (2018). Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/regions/south-asia/>.
- 4) Javed Haider Syed (2007). The British Advent in Balochistan. Pakistan Journal of History and Culture, Vol.XXVIII, No.2 (2007) 60- 64
- 5) Ahmad Naveed Noormal (2014) Root causes of conflict in Baluchistan, Pakistan. Retrieved from [https://www.beyondintractability.org/sites/all/themes/at\\_headliner/apple-touch-icon-120x120.png](https://www.beyondintractability.org/sites/all/themes/at_headliner/apple-touch-icon-120x120.png)
- 6) Paliwal, A. (2017). My Enemy's Enemy. London: Hurst Publishers
- 7) Prateek Joshi (2016). Where is India's Baloch policy heading? Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/wp-includes/css/dashicons.min.css>