

## COMMENT 194 - Resurgent Rebellion in Balochistan

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During the last few months, the security situation in Balochistan witnessed an increase in militancy. It seems that the escalating violence in the region is [linked with the growing Chinese presence](#) and intensified activities by the Pakistani armed forces<sup>1</sup> and the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI). This SADF Comment subscribes to the following rationale: Locals feel exploited and deprived from the benefits obtained from the use of their provincial resources, as well as politically marginalized by the Pakistani state. The rising numbers of Chinese development projects, companies, workers and security personnel in Balochistan are perceived as threatening to the social and economic conditions of the Baloch people seem to be directly provoking further armed responses. The situation becomes more complicated due to the persistent suppression of the freedom of expression (along with other political and human rights) and the lack of a fair, adequate representation of the Baloch people and their interests on the national level – which prevents them from translating their concerns into the country’s political processes. Chinese development projects in the framework of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are increasingly identified by the Baloch people as tools of exploitation (Wolf, 2019) of their natural resources (Coal, Oil, Copper, Gold etc.) – but also as measures supporting the central government’s grip over the province. Chinese assets are becoming the main targets of Baloch guerrillas, through actions understood as retaliation measures.

### *Increased engagement in the security sector*

There are several indications that China continues to increase its leverage within Pakistan. In the security domain, the construction of a new Chinese High Security Compound in Gwadar was started by the [China Communications Construction Company](#) (CCCC Ltd).

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<sup>1</sup> This includes also a boost in troop levels of the Pakistani Army in Balochistan.

According to a [Forbes report](#), this could constitute a crucial move towards the [build-up of a naval base](#) in Pakistan, the second Chinese Overseas Base<sup>2</sup>. The Chinese media [refute these reports](#). Despite the attacks on Chinese investments and projects – and at least for the time being - Beijing will restrain from detaching officially regular troops, namely the People’s Liberation Army/PLA, to Pakistan. Instead one should expect China to maintain its reliance on the Pakistani military and on Chinese Private Security Companies<sup>3</sup> (PSCs; in collaboration with Pakistani counterparts) so as to protect its interests. Islamabad and Beijing continue to intensify their defence and security cooperation, for example through [joint border patrols](#) in Gilgit-Baltistan. Moreover, both countries made a ‘[joint statement](#)’ on deepening their *comprehensive strategic cooperation*. However, it is also reported that Beijing is starting to doubt Pakistan’s ability to ensure the safety of Chinese citizens and assets.

*The current context of Baloch armed opposition and its rationale*

As pointed out above, the security situation in Balochistan continues to worsen - characterised by an increasing level of violence. Even the COVID-19 pandemic did not stop the [growth in violent clashes in the province](#). Baloch nationalist organisations accuse China of providing the Pakistani army and the ISI with military and surveillance equipment used not – as proclaimed – for counter-terrorism measures against global Jihadist organisations residing in Pakistan but so as to suppress legitimate political dissent. There is an increasing number of cases of [enforced disappearances](#) of people embracing the Baloch point of view. Furthermore, Baloch leaders allege that Beijing is building-up military bases along the Baloch coast<sup>4</sup> (besides Gwadar), actions which they perceive as ‘[Chinese military expansionist endeavours](#)’ and foreign occupation. Subsequently, Baloch nationalists are increasingly opposing (when possible through political protests but also through violent means) Chinese presence within their region. Many Baloch fear that the CPEC will transform Balochistan, especially the port city of Gwadar, into a ‘[Chinese Colony wherein the Baloch will become refugees in their own land](#)’. It is well-known that Baloch armed organisations have a long record of armed encounters with the Pakistani security forces. However, the attacks against Chinese entities constitute a comparatively new phenomenon.

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<sup>2</sup> It is stated that even considering the generally high security standards in Pakistan, especially in Balochistan, ‘[the level of security seen here \[in the new compound\] is extensive](#)’. Furthermore, it seems that the complex is ‘[connected to the port’s expansion](#)’.

<sup>3</sup> It is reported that Chinese PSCs have been quietly making forays into Balochistan.

<sup>4</sup> [A claim made by former leader of the Majeed Brigade Aslam Baloch](#) in another video on YouTube.

It is interesting to mention Baloch armed groups are also combatting [pro-Pakistan religious extremist organisations](#), foremost the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) - which are sponsored by the military and ISI to operate and weaken Baloch resistance as well as add to the recent increase of violence in the province.

Many the recent attacks were conducted by the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA). The most remarkable one during the period under review was the attack against the Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX) building in Karachi on June 29, 2020. The [Majeed Brigade of the BLA took responsibility](#) for the attack. The BLA described the assault against the PSX building as a '[self-sacrificing attack](#)'. Such 'suicide-type' attacks are not unknown to Baloch guerrilla fighters<sup>5</sup>. However, the kind of determination - in combination with a high-profile target in [a major urban area](#) - mark a new level of violence in the context of Baloch militancy. It is crucial to note that the PSX was not an 'exclusively Pakistani target'. [Chinese companies have large interests and investments](#) in the PSX, which sold [40 per cent strategic shares to a Chinese consortium comprising](#) three Chinese exchanges.<sup>6</sup> This stresses the PSX's significance for the BLA as a 'high profile, double target' (targeting both China and Pakistan). Furthermore, the PSX attack was the second by the BLA in Karachi. The first was conducted in November 2018, when the BLA claimed a strike on the city's Chinese consulate. Besides the BLA, also the Baloch Liberation Front (BLF), another armed [oppositional organisation](#) operating in Balochistan, stepped up its use of coercive force. Besides the general increase in assaults inside Balochistan, it also seems that the different armed oppositional groups are starting to act more cooperatively. Traditionally, the Baloch radical movement sector was featured by '[divisions and infighting](#)' among various groupings. Now one can witness more collaboration, starting with the formation of the *Baloch Raaji Aajoi Sangar* (BRAS)<sup>7</sup>. However, it appears that this gained more momentum in the first half of 2020.

### *Concluding remarks*

Pakistan's civilian and military authorities are blaming a 'foreign hand' to lay behind the resurgent rebellion in Balochistan – foremost India and Afghanistan, partly Iran.

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<sup>5</sup> There are numerous reports of suicide bombings against both individuals and soft-targets inside Balochistan.

<sup>6</sup> Namely: the China Financial Futures Exchange Company Limited (lead bidder), the Shanghai Stock Exchange and the Shenzhen Stock Exchange.

<sup>7</sup> [BRAS is an alliance of four Baloch armed organisations](#): the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF), the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), the Baloch Republican Army (BRA) and the Baloch Republican Guard (BRG). [The BRAS originated in an earlier collaboration](#) between the BLA and the BLF on 30th October 2017. The BRG joined the alliance on 20th April 2018. On 10th November 2018, the creation of the BRAS was formally announced.

Both New Delhi and Kabul reject those claims and Islamabad [does not offer any evidence](#) for these accusations. However, blaming ‘arch-rival’ India, which possess more conventional military capabilities than Pakistan, serves the interests of the Pakistan military and ISI in several aspects. It provides justifies the disproportional defence budget and other social and economic privileges of the Pakistani military. It also distracts from Pakistan’s security sector agents’ own involvement in the sponsorship of cross-border terrorism. Here, we witness an attempt to blur the rationale behind the attacks conducted by Baloch oppositional forces. Last but not least, it attempts to draw the attention of the international community towards the India-Pakistan tension, especially Islamabad’s propagated view on the conflict over Kashmir.

In sum, it is apparent that the attacks by Baloch armed groups against Pakistani and Chinese entities are originated by the tense relationship between the Pakistani central government and the Balochistan province - as well as from the increasing Chinese presence in Balochistan. The notion of retaliation for repressive measures against Baloch nationalists and dissidents (inside as well as outside Balochistan) opposing the federal government by non-violent means is another major element in the rationale behind armed responses by the Baloch resistance.

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