

Balochistan: The Significance of Regional and Global Players

Dr. Saima Butt

Assistant Professor Political Science Lahore College for Women University Lahore Pakistan

***Corresponding Author:** saimabtt.16@hotmail.com

Abstract

The goal of this study is to better understand Balochistan's geostrategic borders, which have given it geopolitical relevance. Balochistan is one of Pakistan's largest provinces in terms of area, sharing internal borders with Punjab, Sindh, and KPK, as well as external boundaries with Afghanistan, Iran, and Indian Ocean bodies. The province gained international notice when the Pakistani and Chinese governments launched the CPEC project. Balochistan has the biggest natural resources, including gas and copper. This essay sought to determine the internal and external constraints to Balochistan's growth. To support my position, I used both primary and secondary information, as well as a historical and descriptive research approach. Both internal and external factors contribute to the province's underdevelopment. To support regional growth, peace in the province must be established by prioritizing internal causes.

Key Words: Balochistan, Geopolitical, Geostrategic, India, Iran

Introduction

The geo-strategic importance of Balochistan is an established fact right from the colonial era. Balochistan is the only province of Pakistan which shares its border with all three provinces internally and internationally it is located in the world's most important states. Balochistan shares its borders with Iran and Afghanistan. The province is located at the entrance of the Persian Gulf and is very near to the Strait of Hormuz. Gwadar is located on the coast of Arabian Sea, which makes Gwadar as the front door of the International route of oil trade from Gulf/Middle East States to the Western world (Grare, 2006). Balochistan is located at the juncture of South Asia, Middle East and the Central Asia. This province can provide trade access to the land locked countries like Afghanistan, or the Central Asian Republic (CARs). Same is true for Punjab and Khyber- Pakhtunkhwa as well (Sial & Basit, 2010). Geographic location can or cannot be a plus point of a region or a state. The geographic location of the state or region can enhance its importance in the world and provide an edge over other states. Balochistan was important in the British era as well and remained the focal point of international activities even after independence (Effendi, 2005).



Figure 1 Geostrategic Importance of Balochistan

Literature Review

Ahmad (1992) focused on the strategic importance of Balochistan in the eyes of British colonial masters. The main focus of writer is to explore the strategic importance of Balochistan as a gateway to

Central Asia through Afghanistan and as a check post for transportation of Gulf Oil. The binding force of this linguistically diverse area is their tribal culture. The topography of Balochistan acts as a supporting force in practicing such things. He further explores that the origin of Baloch nationalism has its roots in British "Sandeman System" or Sardari-nizam. Balochistan's internal issues have links with urbanization and military rule in center.

Nuri, Ahmed & Akram (2010) in the volume of IPRI covers the geostrategic importance of Balochistan in terms of natural resources and the significance of the area for the project of gas pipeline between India, Iran and Pakistan. Apart from these, the issues related to economy, politics and geography are also examined. This issue also focuses the increased violence in the area during Musharraf's regime. The apprehension of Baloch nationalists related to Mega project, which can change the demography of Balochistan, cannot be welcome by the local people. The conspiracy of missing people becomes one of the reasons of lack of trust towards the federal government. (Muzaffar, et. al 2021).

Chattopadhyay and Sarkar (2003) discuss the historical role of Iran and Afghanistan in Balochistan. Afghanistan had bad start with Pakistan, since its inception, as they refused to accept Durand line as an international border, and supported the demand for a 'Pashtun-Ruled area namely, 'Pashtunistan' including in it the Pakistani Pashtu speaking areas, by the redrawing the 'Durand Line'. Historically, Afghanistan government has sympathetically supported the Baloch rebels and provided political asylum (to Prince Karim) against the interests of the Pakistani government. Iran shares its border with Balochistan and a small number of Baloch were living in Iran. Iranian government has always feared that any successful revolt in Pakistani Balochistan will have an undesirable impact on the Iranian-Baloch community. That is why Iranian government has always supported Pakistani government's suppressive actions in Balochistan.

Jalazai (1993) unfolds the vigorous division of Balochistan areas into three states namely Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan; Baloch resisted this dissection which divides them into pieces. Balochi areas were given to Iran in 1928 and annexed in Pakistan in 1947. Historically Baloch areas had never accepted any authority of invaders who came to Sub-continent, however Britain divides them to break down their strength. Iran had a strong hold over this small ethnic group but unfortunately Baloch had awful start with the state of Pakistan. Since independence Baloch were holding one after another insurgent movement against the state of Pakistan for their demands. The leading tribes of Mengals and Marri are supporting these movements through their covert groups.

Role of Neighboring Countries in Balochistan (Iran & India).

Balochistan shares its immediate borders with Iran and Afghanistan, but the role of India cannot be under-played in the existing regional scenario. Pakistani authorities have always claimed that it is India who is funding Baloch insurgents. RAND scholar Christine Fair, an expert on South Asian Affairs supports Islamabad's stance in this regard. There are documents called "Balochistan Dossiers"* available which prove that India has established almost twenty six centers of terrorism in Afghanistan along-side the border of Balochistan. India also supports and funds Baloch Sardars to create unrest in Balochistan. Brahamdagh Bugti openly confessed to welcome moral or material support; from whatever source it comes (The Frontier Post, 2011).

India has out-rightly denounced such claims and said that they have nothing to do with this situation. Balochistan Chief Minister Jam Mohammad Yousaf said that Indian agency RAW is supporting insurgent camps in Balochistan. This proposition is supported by RAND scholars. The possible Indian motive behind its support for such acts of destabilization in Balochistan could be an attempt to contain Chinese influence in the region. Still another view is that India wants Pakistan's role in occupied Kashmir reduced and to keep Pakistan engaged on home-fronts. In this way India could also be able to use Balochistan as a bargaining chip for dealing with Pakistan on Kashmir Issue. Indian official stance is that they want a stable Balochistan for the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline (IPI)*

Project, which has to pass through Balochistan. However, the Pakistani Government is firm on its stand that India is supporting unrest and insurgency in Balochistan. Senator Sanaullah Baloch expresses his views over the issue whether Baloch insurgents were seeking help from India or not; they were not fulfilling Indian interest in Pakistan. He said that it is possible that insurgents are getting money from smugglers or from the Afghan Government. Some of the Gulf States could also support Baloch insurgents as they had sympathy with them (ICG, 2006).

Iranian interest in Balochistan is multidimensional as Iran has built the port of Chahbahar* with Indian assistance. The Gwadar port naturally shares the trade benefits with Chahbahar. The target of Pakistan and Iran to provide an outlet to the Central Asian Republic are the same (Sethi, 2005). Iran wished for a peaceful Balochistan so that the IPI project becomes reality and it's only possible with the stability in Balochistan, as a large part of the pipeline has to pass through Balochistan.

Gas Pipeline Project

The emerging economies of the Region (China, India) badly need energy resources to fulfill their future energy needs. This is the main reason why China showed her interest to become part of the gas pipeline project between Pakistan, Iran and India (IPI). Iran has gas reserves of 26.6 trillion but consuming locally only 76.5 billion. In the year of 1988 gas reserves were discovered in the South Parts of Iran. The Iranian government wished to pipe out their gas and export it to the other countries. The proposed route of the gas line passed through Balochistan as it shared its border with Iran. In the year 2000 Pakistan, Iran and India officially began their talks for the possible route for the gas pipeline project. India had reservations over the gas pipeline project, partly due the historic rivalry between the two states and also because of US pressure over India to not to become part of the gas pipeline project. Pakistan and Iran concluded their agreement in 2005. The gas pipeline cost cheaper than any other available source of energy (abstract of gas through sea or liquid gas). The common concern of all states related with this project is the ongoing insurgency in Balochistan. The interest of all three states lies in peaceful Balochistan (Laif & Hamza, 2008).

Great Game in Balochistan (Russia, USA & China)

Balochistan has always attracted attention of the Soviets mainly, for three reasons. One was to find a trade market for the Central Asian Republics (CARs), as these were rich in natural resources and also industrially developed, but were land-locked. The second interest of the Soviets was to reach the warm waters of the Middle East. The Soviet Union tried to reach the warm waters of Balochistan through Afghanistan in 1979. The third reason was its vision of expanding communism into this part of the world (Ahmad, 1992). After 9/11 US entry in Afghanistan once again threatened Russia due to its traditional rivalry.

9/11 gave the US a reason to stay in this region. It accordingly established 02 out of 03 military bases in Balochistan i.e. at Pasni and Dalbandin. US drone attacks in the KPK area are launched from these two naval bases. This is one of the interests of the US in Balochistan as it is using these bases in the war on terror against Afghanistan. The war against terrorism compelled the Taliban's to leave Afghanistan and find safe havens in the mountains of Balochistan/KPK. The target of US forces is to wipe out all terrorists from this region of the world. They have carried out anti-terrorist operations in Balochistan as well. Moreover the collapse of the Soviet Union increased the importance of Balochistan in the eyes of the USA. (Yaseen, & Muzaffar, 2018). As Balochistan is located at the contiguity of Strait of Hormuz *and the Gulf of Oman and these points carry importance due to the US military presence in the Persian Gulf (Sial & Basit, 2010). US wanted to keep an eye on Iran and put a check on the expanding role of China in Balochistan. For this purpose the US has to stay here. US is looking forward to the oil reserves of CARs and Balochistan will help US to reach CARs. The USA is not happy with the Chinese presence in Balochistan, especially in Gwadar as it can hamper its trade designs via-a-viz CARs. The reason is strong enough to destabilize Balochistan so that Gwadar port should not become operational (Yaseen, et. al 2023)

Jabeen (2008) laid down the views of Chinese's President Hu Jintao about the Chinese interest in South Asia in the following words:

“China does not seek selfish gains in South Asia and is ready to play a constructive role for peace and development in the region.”(p. 189).

China entered in the ongoing great game (i.e. the tug-of-war between the noted Great Powers of the World, for grabbing on to the natural resources of Central Asia) quite late. The interest of China in Balochistan is to launch her products to the international market through Gwadar port and also to secure its oil supply from the Middle East. There is another perception that China is looking to establish its naval base to look after its oil supply line from the Gulf to Beijing. To develop Gwadar port for China's oil trade is natural as the Strait of Hormuz is likely to become congested in near future, due to the growing trade activities in this area. The other route for China's 80 percent oil supply is from the Gulf through the Strait of Malacca, which is not preferable due to security reasons. Also, this route means that China has to cover the distance of 3,500 Kilometer from eastern seaboard to reach Kashgar, the distance may be reduced to 1,500 Kilometer if China could use the Gwadar-Kashgar route. China also has reservations over US presence in the Central Asian states (Haider, 2009).

External Support to Baloch Militants

BLA was declared as a terrorist organization by the Musharraf regime in the year 2006. The leader of this party (belonging to the Marri tribe) went to Afghanistan during the 1970s, but later returned to Pakistan during Nawaz Sharif's tenure and settled down in the Kohlu district. At present Nawab Khair Bakhsh Marri sons hold the strings of this party. They are in contact with different international actors to seek their support. One of the Khair Bakhsh Marri sons namely, Hairbiyar Marri (currently settled in Dubai) reportedly has contacts with Indian intelligence and is getting full support from India and helps them in return. Secondly he also has contacts with anti-Pakistan Afghan leaders like Younis Qanooni and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah. Hairbiyar Marri established Baloch Militia and has connections with smuggling rackets at Dubai. BLA militia camps are established in Bolan, Sibi, Shoran, Tilli areas. Bugti Militias were converted into the Balochistan Republican Army in 2003. Brahamdagh Bugti is leading this group and is seeking support from Russian and India. This group is involved in kidnapping activities and also paid their militants and their families. No independent source confirms their links with India. The third main player in Balochistan is that of Mengals. Nawab Attaullah Mengal created the BLF and authorities believe that BLF is sponsored by the USA. Mengal spent his exile period in London and established contacts with the USA. Mengal only returned to Balochistan after the end of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan because of his anti-Taliban stance. He has connections with Balochistan United Front of Iran (BUFI) an anti-Islamic government group. Mengal is the right choice for the USA to watch its interest in and around Pakistan. BLF is involved in sabotage activities against the Pakistani state (PIPS, 2009).

Marri's BLA holds influence over the areas of Kohlu, Sibi, Quetta, Khuzdar, Mand, Mastung, Kalat, and Makran. Bugti's militia has influence in the areas of Dera Bugti, Quetta, Mastung, Kalat, Noshki, Chagi, Jaffarabad and Naseerabad. BLF of Mengal's is effective in the areas of Makran, Quetta and Awaran (Sial & Basit, 2010). These areas are considered to be the Baloch majority areas and the intensity of insurgency in these areas has been on the rise since 2005.

There is ongoing conspiracy on the subject of the leadership of BLA, BLF and BRA. No one owns the headship of these militant organizations on the contrary their sabotage activities were owned by some anonymous persons. Pakistani authorities believe that Brahamdagh is running the setup of BRA whereas Hairbiyar Marri is involved in BLA activities. The BLF is a militant offshoot of BSO. These groups are involved in anti-state activities but no individual claims the headship of these organizations (Zeb, 2011).

Post 9/11 Balochistan

Pakistan had to side with USA in her war on terrorism after 9/11*. This cooperation envisaged logistics support, Intelligence sharing and providing base to US planes and a land supply route to Afghanistan.

NATO Supply Line

Pakistan is the next door neighbor of Afghanistan and its two provinces Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan share borders with the Afghan Provinces of Konhar, Nangrahar, Paktia, Paktika, Khost, Zabul & Kandhar, in the same order. According to the United States transportation command, there are three international routes of NATO supply. Strategically, the US cannot rely on a single supply line exclusively, so it is utilizing all three options. The first and the most suitable option are the routes passing through Pakistan. The supply of NATO within Pakistan is carried out through three routes; one is from Karachi via Peshawar to Kabul. This route fulfills the needs of northern Afghanistan.

Karachi port-----Khyber Pass-----Torkham----- Kabul

The second route is through Wagha border to Kabul. The third route through which NATO supply is delivered is Karachi port via Balochistan to Kabul. This one is the shortest trucking route of NATO supply as it is the most cost effective and meets the needs of southern Afghanistan. The last one almost took eight days to reach its destination. The transit route of NATO through Balochistan is given below

Karachi-----Sukkur----Shirkarpure-----Jacabad-----Quetta-----Chaman-----Kandahar-----
Kabul

The two other routes for supply are through northern neighbors of Afghanistan (CARs states). This Route is technically too long which also adds the high transit fee. This route started from Germany and took sixty days to reach its destination, the Bagram air base of Afghanistan. The third supply line to NATO is by air (Media point, 2012). Ex-President Musharraf declared to provide all logistic support to the US to fight against terrorists in Afghanistan. The percentage of NATO supply through different routes is given in figure 1.1 below

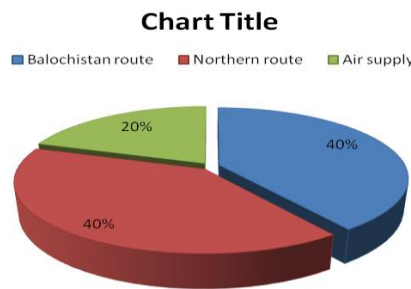


Figure 2 Percentage of NATO Supply Transit Routes Source (Sial & Basit, 2010)

The Baloch insurgency of 2005 also had a negative impact on NATO supply lines as 35 attacks were recorded on NATO lines before 2010. The important thing to note was that the attacks reduced on Pakistani security forces in the same time period. A Baloch insurgent believes that Pakistani forces are using those arms against them, given to them by the USA for fighting the war on terror in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The political situation has deteriorated as ex-President Musharraf policies created unrest at large scale in Balochistan. He not only tore the social fabric of the province but also annoyed Baloch

tribal leaders by his authoritative attitude. His policies turned Baloch nationalists into secessionists. There is less flexibility in their behavior than ever before. In the early years of political turmoil there were few groups who were working against the state. The continuous negation from the rights of the Baloch people has significantly increased the number of insurgent groups. The continuous pushing of Baloch leaders to the wall, during the last half a century, has filled them with extreme anger, disappointment and bottom-less frustration. The long seething cauldron of this resentment is now ready to spill over and is about to spread like fiery lava. Baloch do not appear to be settling now for anything less than complete autonomy/sovereignty. The continuous tug of war between Baloch tribal heads and the Pakistani establishment has left the Baloch lay men in utter backwardness. The common man in Balochistan is in fact worse-off today than what he was at the time of partition. A common Baloch has got nothing out of the series of the insurgencies that have been waged in Balochistan so far, except displacement, loss of life, loss of property and business. Balochistan had always been an area of great strategic importance. It was important during the colonial era, it was considered to be a buffer zone between the British colony and the USSR. After independence it continues to haunt Pakistani government for one or the other reason i.e. Insurgencies, Russian invasion and 9/11 were the important events which enhanced the role of the province in the region. The strategic location of the province attracts the attention of a number of countries. USA, China, Iran, India are the countries who have direct interest in this area. China wants to capture world markets and Gwadar has the potential to fulfill her dreams. The US after 9/11 got the sensible reason to stay in the area and watch her interest in CARs. US policy towards Iran demands her presence in the region and Balochistan shares her border with Iran. Iran and India jointly construct Chabahar port for trade. Gwadar provides better options for the regional and international traders. This is one of the reasons given by scholars for the Iranian and Indian role in Balochistan.

Recommendation

- The avowed purpose of creation of any State is to improve the quality of life of its subjects, through provision of socio-economic justice, and protection of life, liberty & property of its people.
- Dispensation of even handed justice, upholding of rule of law and equitable representation of all federating units in the legislature and executive is the only way a federation can survive. Empty sloganeering, without any meaningful and substantial efforts, to back-up, cannot hold the federating units together for too long. Autocratic way of thinking and an approach to crush dissent with brute force is inimical for the concept of federation.
- The dilemma of Pakistan is that it was ruled by those who were democratic in name only; otherwise their approach and actions were totally undemocratic. Politicians did not get much chance to groom themselves up as democratic leaders. Consultation and mutual trust is the key to democracy, which is lacking in the military rulers. Shared decision making leads to shared responsibility.

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