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Balochistan Issue

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Why is in news? Why Balochistan remains Pakistan's 'problem province'

Pakistani security forces on March 20 repulsed a militant attack on a complex outside its strategic port of Gwadar in Balochistan province, Reuters reported.

Eight militants and two soldiers were killed in the attack, with separatist group Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) claiming responsibility.

The **Majeed Brigade** of the separatist group Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) has claimed responsibility for attack on a complex outside Pakistan's strategic Gwadar Port.

The BLA is the most prominent of the many separatist groups in Pakistan's restive Balochistan province.

The Majeed Brigade, which has been active since 2011, is the BLA's dedicated suicide squad. The unit is named after two brothers, both of whom were called Majeed Langove.

About Balochistan:

Balochistan, the **largest Pakistani province**, is sparsely populated and impoverished when compared to the rest of the country



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At the same time, its location as well as abundance of natural resources, especially oil make it **strategically vital** for Pakistan.

It has boasting abundant natural resources such as **gas, oil, copper, and gold**.

The province has been the **site of a series of bloody insurgencies, brutal state repression, and an enduring Baloch nationalist movement** since 1948.

It is located in the **southwestern half of Pakistan**, and is bordered by: Iran to the west; Afghanistan and FATA to the north; Punjab and Sindh to the east; The Arabian Sea to the south

Balochistan is located at the **eastern edge of the Iranian plateau**.

It **strategically bridges** the Middle East and Southwest Asia to Central Asia and South Asia.

It is the **closest oceanic frontage** for the land-locked countries of Central Asia.

Forced accession:

At the time of independence, the province comprised the **chiefdoms of Makran, Las Bela, Kharan and Kalat**, the tribal chiefs of which had sworn allegiance to the British. The chief of Kalat was the most powerful chief, with the rest owing feudal allegiance to him.

As British withdrawal from the subcontinent drew closer, Ahmed Yar Khan, the last ‘Khan’ of Kalat, began openly advocating for an independent Baloch state.

He hoped that his personal friendship with Muhammad Ali Jinnah would help him secure his own state rather than accede to Pakistan.

And on August 11, 1947, his vision seemed to fructify when Pakistan signed a **treaty of friendship** with him — instead of forcing him to accede.

However, the British, **wary of Soviet expansion into the region**, were vehemently against this, wanting Kalat’s accession to Pakistan instead.

What further complicated matters was that the three feudatories of Kalat all wanted to accede to Pakistan. Thus, by October 1947, Pakistan changed its tune and began pushing for accession.

Things finally came to a head when on **March 17, 1948**, the Pakistan government decided to **accept the accession of Kalat’s three feudatory states**, leaving Kalat landlocked and with less than half its landmass.

Moreover, **rumour broke on the All India Radio** that Khan actually **wanted to accede to India**. This prompted the Pakistan Army to move into Balochistan on March 26, 1948. The chief signed the **treaty of accession** a day later.

A violent conflict:

The ink on the accession treaty had not fully dried when protests broke out. In July that year, Khan’s brother, Prince Abdul Karim rebelled against the accession agreement, starting the **first of five Baloch “wars of independence”** — fought in 1948, 1958–59, 1962–63 and 1973–1977, and currently ongoing since 2003.

These insurgencies have been brutally dealt with by Pakistani forces, who have been accused of committing numerous atrocities. There have been reports of abductions, torture, arbitrary arrests and executions levelled at the forces.

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An **Amnesty International report from 2011** spoke about Pakistani forces' **'kill and dump' strategies**, wherein personnel — often in uniform — pick up activists, teachers, journalists and lawyers, torture them for information, then shoot them and dump their bodies.

While it is **hard to put an exact number to casualties afflicted on Baloch nationalists** and innocent civilians, even conservative estimates put it at tens of thousands since 1948.

However, Baloch nationalist groups and insurgents have themselves been accused of human rights violations, including the **attempted ethnic cleansing of non-Baloch people** living in the region.

In recent years, Baloch nationalist organisations such as Baluch Liberation Front and BLA have grown close to Islamist organisations including the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Islamic State.

According to the **'Pakistan Security Report 2022'** from the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, an Islamabad-based NGO, insurgents and their Islamist allies carried out 71 attacks, both inside and outside Balochistan in 2022 alone, mainly targeting security and military personnel.

Reasons for the continuance of the conflict:

One fundamental reason is **ethnic difference**. People of Balochistan have a shared history, language and culture, and are very **different from Punjabis or Sindhis**.

Pakistan was formed on the **basis of religion**. However, skewed power relations among the different Muslim ethnicities was almost immediately visible.

Exacerbating ethnic differences are **deep economic and political grievances** held by the Baloch people. The most recent struggle was actually spurred almost completely by a sense of economic alienation.

Baloch people are **one of the poorest groups**. They have been unable to join the mainstream and still remain under the grip of poverty.

The Balochistan region is rich in natural resources, but **very little wealth trickles down to their communities**. The Baloch people **believe that their central governments exploit them** for their natural resources without actually doing anything for their welfare.

The **construction of the China-backed Gwadar Port** is in some ways **symptomatic of the economic injustice** faced by the Baloch population. Punjabi and Sindhi engineers and technical specialists were hired en masse for the project, **despite extremely high levels of unemployment** among the educated Baloch population.

The Pakistani government has itself **blamed foreign actors**, including India and Iran, as fomenting trouble in the region to destabilise the country.

In 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi triggered an outcry in Pakistan when he mentioned Pakistan's atrocities and repression of the Baloch people in his Independence Day speech. The Indian government, however, denies any surreptitious involvement in Balochistan.

India's Stand on Balochistan:

India has long **maintained a political stance of not interfering** in the internal matters of Pakistan or any other country.

Despite **Pakistan repeatedly bringing up the Kashmir issue** over the years, India had **maintained silence** on Balochistan.

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An insurgency in Balochistan could **potentially disrupt** at least a segment of **China's efforts**, particularly related to the **China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)**, in its attempt to encircle India.

India has been **concerned about Gwadar**, which gives **China strategic access to the Arabian Sea** and the Indian Ocean. It is not just being developed as a trade entrepot but as a **dual purpose port** for use by the Chinese Navy.

It is **part of String of pearls theory**, under which China is building state of the art gigantic modern ports all along the Indian Ocean and to the south of it. The string of pearls is a **strategic threat to India**, as it aims to encircle India to establish Chinese dominance in the Indian Ocean.

India's Concerns:

Human Rights and Humanitarian Concerns: Reports of human rights abuses, including enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, torture, and suppression of dissent, in Balochistan have raised humanitarian concerns. India, like other nations, is concerned about the **well-being and rights of people affected by such violence and repression**.

Ethnic and Nationalist Movements: Balochistan has a history of ethnic and nationalist movements seeking greater autonomy or even independence from Pakistan. India's concerns might relate to the **potential spread** of these movements or the broader implications of ethnic tensions in the region.

Cross-Border Terrorism and Proxy Warfare: India has accused Pakistan of supporting cross-border terrorism in Indian-administered Kashmir and other regions. If India perceives that Pakistan is using similar tactics, such as supporting insurgent groups, in Balochistan, it could raise concerns about regional stability and security.

Geostrategic Considerations: Balochistan's location near the Arabian Sea and its resources, including the Gwadar Port developed with Chinese assistance, make it strategically significant. Any instability or conflict in Balochistan could have ripple effects on regional dynamics, trade routes, and energy security.

Support for Self-Determination: India's foreign policy often aligns with supporting the right to self-determination for oppressed or marginalized groups. While India denies any direct involvement in Balochistan's separatist movements, its stance on self-determination could influence its concerns about the Baloch people's rights and aspirations.

Diplomatic Rivalry with Pakistan: India and Pakistan have a history of tense relations, marked by conflicts and disputes. Any unrest or conflict in Balochistan could add another dimension to their rivalry, potentially affecting regional stability.

Conclusion:

India emphasizes diplomatic and political solutions to address such issues. India's concerns are part of a broader regional and geopolitical landscape that includes security, stability, human rights, and its relationship with Pakistan.