

The CPEC and its Discontents: Security, Unrest and the Human Cost of Development in Pakistan's Balochistan

Imran Ahmed



Summary

The unrest in and emanating from Balochistan in Pakistan reveals the limitations of a security-centric approach to managing development projects. Lessons from this context emphasise the need for inclusive governance and active local participation to ensure that development initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor genuinely benefit the populations they intend to serve. Balochistan's conflicts reflect the broader challenges that arise when large-scale foreign investments refract existing political and social tensions in the host country.

Insurgencies, ethnic tensions and confrontations between local separatist groups and state security forces have long marred Pakistan's Balochistan province. The [violent attack](#) on 11 October 2024 at the Junaid Coal Company mines in Balochistan's Duki district, where armed militants killed 20 miners and injured several others, serves as a stark reminder of the region's ongoing instability.

Although no group has so far claimed responsibility for the attack, the fact that ordinary labourers were targeted in such brutality highlights the profound unrest and discontent that permeates Balochistan, particularly within its resource extraction and development sectors. Despite the substantial presence of both private and state security forces in the province tasked with safeguarding lucrative mining and infrastructure development projects, violence remains a frequent occurrence in the region. This ongoing unrest raises pressing concerns about the [efficacy of a security-centric approach](#) to managing insurgency, safeguarding development projects and maintaining stability. The recent violence in Balochistan reveals a clear gap between security measures and the everyday challenges faced by the local communities. It also shows the harmful effects this approach can have on civilian populations.

Balochistan's conflicts reflect the broader challenges that arise when large-scale foreign investments intersect with existing political and social tensions. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a comprehensive multi-billion-dollar development initiative often touted as [transformative for Pakistan's economy](#), offers both opportunities and significant risks. While the CPEC promises to boost infrastructure, energy and trade, it has exacerbated local grievances, particularly in Balochistan, where the military plays a dominant role in its implementation. The project is framed as a crucial development initiative; yet its execution often neglects the needs and voices of the very communities it is supposed to benefit.

Historically, Pakistan's military has wielded considerable influence over political affairs, often at the expense of civilian governance. With the CPEC framed as a national priority, this

influence has expanded, especially in Balochistan, where the province's geostrategic importance and resource wealth have led to militarisation. The militarisation – protecting infrastructure and Chinese workers from insurgent attacks – has done little to address the underlying grievances driving local unrest. The recent attack in Duki is a grim reminder that increased security does not necessarily lead to peace or stability. Instead, the region remains caught in a cycle of violence, where strategic and security priorities overshadow local oversight.

The lack of transparency surrounding the CPEC has served to fuel mistrust and suspicions that the CPEC disproportionately [benefits China and Pakistan's political elite](#) at the expense of the local communities. Indeed, many residents feel alienated from the developmental promises made by the government and foreign investors. [Baloch activists argue](#) that the corridor is a continuation of exploitative state policies and reinforces historical patterns of neglect and exploitation. Despite promises of development, many residents continue to face [poverty, water scarcity and inadequate infrastructure](#). As [Mahrang Baloch](#), a prominent activist, articulates, "[The] CPEC is not a development project for the people of Balochistan. It is a tool of exploitation that has only brought more suffering to our land. Our resources are being taken, our environment is being destroyed and our people are being displaced, all in the name of development."

Pakistan's political and federal structure further complicates this situation. While efforts have been made to decentralise power, the [military's pervasive influence in Balochistan](#) remains a significant barrier to effective local oversight. This [centralisation of authority](#) stifles regional autonomy and hinders meaningful local participation in the decision-making processes. The recent suicide bombing near Karachi, which [targeted Chinese engineers](#) working on a power project, was claimed by the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), demonstrates the volatile nature of this development model. For separatist groups like the BLA, foreign investments are perceived to be instruments of further exploitation, exacerbating existing tensions rather than alleviating local grievances.

These incidents highlight the human cost of development projects. In Balochistan, development devoid of meaningful local representation, consultation and accountability has deepened societal divides. A disconnect between development goals and local realities deepens the rift between the state and its citizens. Ultimately, the lesson from Balochistan suggests that development projects must be rooted in inclusive governance and participatory decision-making.

Without genuine local participation, foreign investments can exacerbate exploitation and disenfranchisement and undermine long-term stability. As Pakistan and other developing countries, particularly in South Asia, navigate the complexities of large-scale foreign investments, ensuring that development serves both [economic growth and local needs](#) is essential. Only [through this balance](#) can such projects provide sustainable benefits for local populations and contribute to broader political stability.

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Dr Imran Ahmed is a Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He can be contacted at iahmed@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.