

Neutralizing secessionist tendencies in Balochistan, way forward 2021

Hamzah Rifaat Hussain

June 2021

Executive summary

Balochistan is a province which continues to confront challenging problems such as chronic unemployment, low literacy rates, widespread poverty and lack of adequate infrastructure.¹ The province now confronts a low level insurgency led by the Baloch Raaji Aajoi Sangar or 'BRAS' which is an alliance between the Baloch Republican Army (BRA), the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) and the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA). Its presence has added additional challenges at a time when the country is grappling with extremism and terrorism.² Attempts at neutralization of secessionist tendencies would require an understanding of the current dynamics of militancy and an appraisal of grievances of the people of Balochistan aimed at mainstreaming the disgruntled elements. This study analyzes the causes and effects of the militancy and suggests the following strategies:

- Initiate a political dialogue with the dissidents and prosecute rogue militants as per relevant legislation.
- Initiate a provincial operation with parliamentary approval in the province of Sindh to tackle the Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army which is in cahoots with BRAS.
- Address grievances of the Baloch population on subjects such as the 7th National Finance Commission Award of 2009 and tackle issues such as youth unemployment as it fuels militancy.
- There is a need to expose Indian involvement in stoking unrest in Balochistan at the international level. Iran must also be cautioned diplomatically that dissidents from the BLF taking shelter in Sistan Balochistan and launching attacks against the Pakistani state must immediately cease.
- Law enforcement agencies in pursuit of establishing the writ of the state must exercise caution in avoiding excesses committed against the civilian population.
- Pakistan must implore the international community to discourage political activism from wanted BRAS activists and demand their extradition. The BLA is designated as a terrorist organization by the government of the United Kingdom as well as the United States State Department.

¹ Silvia Redaelli, "Pakistan @100 From Poverty To Equity," *World Bank Group Policy Note*, March 2019, accessed February, 11, 2020, <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/868741552632296526/pdf/135319-WP-P163618-14-3-2019-20-44-35-PakPNFromPovertytoEquityFinal.pdf>. pg. 5.

² Zeus Hans Mendez, "Repression and Revolt in Balochistan-The Uncertainty and Survival of a People's National Aspirations" *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, Fall 2020, accessed January, 8 2020, https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:IPDG7O_38esJ:https://media.defense.gov/2020/Aug/31/2002488092/-1/-1/1/MENDEZ.PDF+&cd=3&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=pk .

Issue to be analyzed

In terms of area, Balochistan is Pakistan's largest and most impoverished province which has faced unrest intermittently since 1948.³ While the intensity of the insurgency has declined over the years, in 2020 numerous attacks registered a rise in casualties, damage to infrastructure and challenges posed to the writ of the state.⁴ The underlying motivations of insurgents must be analyzed to develop cogent neutralization strategies to defang secessionist tendencies. Such strategies can only be devised after analyzing current data depicting the potency of the threat that the state faces alongside an appraisal of grievances in Balochistan.

Analysis

Secessionist movements in Balochistan peaked in 2015 with a total of 96 events and 383 reported fatalities across the country.⁵ From 2017 to 2019, violence steadily decreased which can be attributed to major gains for the law enforcement agencies and previous amnesty schemes offered by the government to Baloch separatists. Internal divisions within separatist ranks as well as a leadership crisis have also contributed to their decline. Secessionist tendencies were never defeated however, despite close to 1,025 Baloch militants surrendering under one of the many amnesty scheme offered by the federal government in 2016.⁶

Senior officials of the government of Pakistan believe that a host of factors have resulted in secessionist tendencies persisting in the province which interalia, include:

- Lack of implementation of the National Action Plan⁷
- Lack of capacity building of the Baloch population in terms of provision of adequate infrastructure, educational and health facilities.
- Pervasive unemployment among the youth segments of the Baloch population driving militancy has been left unaddressed.⁸

³ Frederic Grare, "Balochistan The State Versus the Nation," *The Carnegie Papers*, April 2013, accessed January 10, 2020, pg. 7 <https://carnegieendowment.org/files/balochistan.pdf>.

⁴ Umair Jamal, "Amid a Pandemic, Pakistan Focuses on a Baloch Insurgency," *The Pulse, The Diplomat*, June 16, 2020, accessed January 11, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/amid-a-pandemic-pakistan-focuses-on-a-baloch-insurgency/>.

⁵ Ashik KC, "Rising Organized Political Violence in Balochistan: A Resurgence of Baloch Separatism?" *ACLEd*, 2020, accessed January, 11, 2020. <https://acleddata.com/2020/09/04/rising-organized-political-violence-in-balochistan-a-resurgence-of-baloch-separatism/>.

⁶ Ashik KC, "Rising Organized Political Violence in Balochistan: A Resurgence of Baloch Separatism?" *ACLEd*, 2020, accessed January, 11, 2020. <https://acleddata.com/2020/09/04/rising-organized-political-violence-in-balochistan-a-resurgence-of-baloch-separatism/>.

⁷ National Action Plan, 2014, *National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA)*, Accessed February, 11, 2021. <https://nacta.gov.pk/nap-2014/>.

Poor socioeconomic conditions and lack of adequate representation in the decision making institutions of the country are contributing factors in fomenting unrest in the province. This situation has been taken advantage of by India which through its intelligence agency, RAW, has been involved in sabotage activities. The arrest of Kulbhushan Yadav is a glaring example of Indian mechanisms to destabilize the province.

According to Anwar Sajidi, editor of the Daily Intekhaab, secessionist tendencies date back to the 'Riyasat-e Kalat' resistance which predates independence. The insurgency in 2020 gained momentum due to disgruntled youth suffering from challenging problems such as chronic unemployment, alienation, economic deprivation and lack of infrastructure.⁹ A consensus is required between the civilian and military leadership towards neutralizing secessionist tendencies. According to Sajidi, there exists a divide between the civilian and military leaderships over this subject where the former considers negotiations, dialogue and rapprochement to be the best strategy whereas the military believes in the use of force.¹⁰

It is equally important to distinguish between various groups of Baloch militants and their modus operandi. The Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) for example, is a transnational threat which became active in Pakistan in the 1970s.¹¹ All groups however, share a joint goal of securing Baloch independence. A formal alliance of three Baloch militant groups, the Balochistan Liberation Front, Balochistan Republican Army and the Balochistan Liberation Army was announced in September 2019.¹²

Baloch militants attacked the Chinese consulate in 2018 and in June 2020 attack on the Pakistan Stock Exchange.¹³ The attacks denote an intention to harm the Pakistan economy including CPEC and a give a signal to China to stay away from investing in the country. In order to gain greater operational capabilities, the separatist movement led by BRAS also forged an alliance with the Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army (SRA) in July 2020.¹⁴ Both

⁸ Durrani, Akbar, (Former Federal Secretary for Information and Broadcasting), in discussion with the author, January, 4, 2021, the officer also served as Home secretary and Finance secretary of the Balochistan Province.

⁹ Sajidi, Anwar, (Editor Daily Intekhaab), in discussion with the author, January, 4, 2021.

¹⁰ Sajidi, Anwar, (Editor Daily Intekhaab), in discussion with the author, January, 4, 2021.

¹¹ Mapping Militant Organizations, "Balochistan Liberation Front," *Stanford University Web*, August, 11, 2015, accessed January 11, 2020. https://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/print_view/457.

¹² Ashik KC, "Rising Organized Political Violence in Balochistan: A Resurgence of Baloch Separatism?" *ACLEDA*, 2020, accessed January, 11, 2020. <https://acledata.com/2020/09/04/rising-organized-political-violence-in-balochistan-a-resurgence-of-baloch-separatism/>.

¹³ BBC News Asia, "Pakistan attack: Deadly raid on stock exchange in Karachi," June, 29, 2020. Accessed January, 12, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53217227>.

¹⁴ Naimat Khan, "Sindhi, Baloch 'separatists' forming ties in Sindh, Pakistani officials say," *Arab News*, July 13, 2020, accessed January, 9, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1703931/world>.

BRAS and the SRA oppose infrastructural projects under the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) with Chinese investments being equated with exploitation of natural resources and demographic changes.¹⁵ CPEC is a pretext to justify their operations with Indian support.

In 2020, Public opinion in the province on the federal government's policies has also been largely negative. According to a survey conducted by Professors at the Government College University in Faisalabad, over 75% of Baloch respondents disagreed with the current functioning of the federal and provincial bureaucracy and on subjects such as the seventh National Finance Commission Award of 2009, over 40-50% of the Baloch respondents agreed that the NFC mitigated deprivation for the people.¹⁶ The electoral system in Pakistan, economic security and the construction of the Gwadar port also garnered negative responses among civilians.

¹⁵ Fahad Nabeel, "Interpreting BRAS-SRA Alliance," *Centre For Strategic And Contemporary Research*, July, 27, 2020, accessed January 12, 2020. <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/defense-security/interpreting-bras-sra-alliance/>.

¹⁶ Dr. Abdul Basit Khan, Ali Shan Shah, Tariq Aziz, Mian Muhammad Azhar, "An Assessment of Public Opinion in Balochistan about Federal Form of Government in Pakistan," *Journal of Business and Social Review in Emerging Economies*, Center for Sustainability Research and Consultancy, Pakistan, June, 2020, accessed January 12, 2020, <https://publishing.globalcsr.org/ojs/index.php/jbsee/article/view/1217/893>, pp.706-712.

Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed to address the grievances of the Baloch population as well neutralize secessionist tendencies:

- Investor friendly policies and incentives should be introduced by the government to attract investment and generate business activity in the province. Subsidies and incentives such as tax holidays should be considered for the above purpose.
- Provide assurances to the local population that citizens would be provided with adequate opportunities in development projects such as Gwadar.
- All necessary measures must be initiated to enforce the writ of the state while perpetrators should be brought to justice as per the law of the land.
- The international community must be approached for extradition of BRAS activists taking refuge in various countries with demands for a blanket ban on their activities.
- A message must be conveyed to New Delhi that if subversive activities continue unabated, Pakistan would respond befittingly. India should be warned that it should refrain from conducting subversive activities on Pakistan's soil given that it confronts a multitude of insurgencies itself.
- Forcefully take up the matter with Iran where BLF activists have been taking refuge for rest and recuperation.