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Balochistan & Pakistan: Strong Conflict Drivers and a Frail Hope for Peace?

Belucistan ve Pakistan: Güçlü Çatışma Dinamikleri ve Barış İçin Kırılgan Bir Umut

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Abstract

The Baloch people who inhabit Balochistan, a crucial area in and of itself, contend that their low living conditions are created by design and that their political or societal demands are intentionally being neglected. There is a pervasive belief among Baloch people that they are the victims of Pakistan's economic drive. The area is home to a very strong tribal culture. Some Baloch groups have been known to resort to violence as a result of many factors, including the ones highlighted. But there are other factors and motivations for the fight than just internal politics. One could see Balochistan as a region where the current global energy conflict is being fought out. This region is directly tied to the initiatives that the People's Republic of China finds very important. Nonetheless, numerous states would oppose the success of such initiatives. This raises the possibility that regional unrest, regardless of its root causes, could be used by other states as a tool to further their own foreign policy goals. This study will try to include the historical context of the Baloch uprisings as well as the future implications of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor for the area. It aims to delineate the conflict drivers and how a lasting peace could be built despite them through negotiations and peace-building measures.

Keywords: Pakistan, Balochistan, China, Belt and Road Initiative, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

Öz

Belucistan'da yaşayan Beluç halkı, başlı başına stratejik öneme sahip olan bu bölgede maruz kaldıkları düşük yaşam koşullarının bilinçli bir tercih sonucu ortaya çıktığını ve siyasi ya da toplumsal taleplerinin kasıtlı olarak görmezden gelindiğini ileri sürmektedir. Beluçlar arasında, Pakistan'ın ekonomik kalkınma hamlesinin mağduru olduklarına dair yaygın bir



kanaat bulunmaktadır. Bölge, son derece güçlü bir aşiret kültürüne ev sahipliği yapmaktadır. Vurgulanan nedenler de dâhil olmak üzere pek çok etken sonucunda bazı Beluç grupların şiddete başvurduğu bilinmektedir. Ancak çatışmanın nedenleri ve motivasyonları yalnızca iç politikayla sınırlı değildir. Belucistan, güncel küresel enerji rekabetinin sahnelendiği bir bölge olarak da değerlendirilebilir. Bu bölge, Çin Halk Cumhuriyeti'nin büyük önem attığı girişimlerle doğrudan bağlantılıdır. Buna karşın, söz konusu girişimlerin başarıya ulaşmasına karşı çıkan çok sayıda devlet bulunmaktadır. Bu durum, kökeni ne olursa olsun bölgesel istikrarsızlığın, diğer devletler tarafından kendi dış politika hedeflerini ilerletmek amacıyla bir araç olarak kullanılabileceği ihtimalini gündeme getirmektedir. Bu çalışma, Beluç ayaklanmalarının tarihsel arka planını ve Çin-Pakistan Ekonomik Koridoru'nun bölge açısından gelecekte doğurabileceği sonuçları ele almayı amaçlamaktadır. Ayrıca çatışmayı besleyen dinamikleri ortaya koymayı ve bu dinamiklere rağmen müzakereler ve barış inşa edici önlemler yoluyla kalıcı bir barışın nasıl tesis edilebileceğini tartışmayı hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Pakistan, Belucistan, Çin, Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi, Çin-Pakistan Ekonomik Koridoru

Introduction

Pakistan is an ethnically, religiously, and linguistically diverse society. Pakistan has five ethnicities and five corresponding administrative units; Sindhis, Punjabis, Saraikis, Pashtuns, and Baloch (Khan and Ahmed, 2024). These ethnicities are in confrontation with one other and ultimately with the state. The ethnic conflict in Balochistan constitutes an immense security threat to Pakistan. This is nothing new in Balochistan. Its history is drenched with violence, military operations, and secessionist movements (Gassebner et. al, 2023; Kalin and Siddiqui, 2020, p. 65; Shah, 2023; Shukla, 2020, p. 296). The Baloch insurgency in Pakistan is the outcome of both historical and modern events, with far-reaching consequences for Pakistan as well as South Asian stability (Kupecz, 2012).

For the purposes of this paper, a conflict is to be understood as a relationship between two or more parties who have, or believe they have, irreconcilable interests or ambitions (Engel & Korf, 2005, p. 35). Conflicts typically arise when people pursue goals that contradict or are incompatible. Conflict involves people's ideas, emotions, and actions (Engel and Korf, 2005, p. 36).

As Bercovitch and Jackson remind (2001, p. 59) wherever conflict happens, there is a risk of violence or of other negative outcomes and without clear laws directly and unequivocally applicable on

international fora, such conflicts can quickly escalate into deadly and disruptive wars. Within the framework of this paper, violence is to be understood as the threat or use of significant physical force. In this understanding, violence also consists of any actions, words, attitudes, or systems that may potentially cause harm to individuals and/or prohibit them from achieving their livelihoods and well-being (Engel and Korf, 2005, p. 35).

This paper aims to throw light upon the conflict drivers rampant in Balochistan, a region which also lies at very heart of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), since the most important component of the whole project is the Gwadar Port (Khan and Ahmed, 2024, p. 2). Then, the impact of the CPEC upon the region shall be probed into. Finally, the paper aims to discuss whether de-escalation of the fragile situation would ever be possible so that it will be lastly imaginable to prevent violence firstly and then resolve the conflict in a sustainable manner. In this discussion, the author wishes to inquiry whether peace-making measures could contribute to the peace-oriented strategies of the parties.

Literature Review

A review of the literature reveals that there are studies on Balochistan from different perspectives, i.e. from ethnic, economic and geopolitical points of view. The main purpose of this section is to review the literature and emphasize the perspectives from which Balochistan has been evaluated. However, to make a general assessment, the studies mostly focus on the historical roots of the conflict, the socio-economic factors causing the conflict, the impact of international actors and especially China's approach to the events.

Kupecz (2012) and Grare (2013) have examined the historical roots of events in Balochistan. They comprehensively analyse the history of Balochistan's problematic ethnic marginalization by Pakistan, tracing the root of the problem back to Pakistan's annexation of the autonomous Baloch Khanate of Kalat in 1948. When these studies are examined in detail, it is observed that the forced integration of the region into Pakistan and the subsequent neglect of the region by the central government exacerbated the problems. Gassebner, Schaudt and Wong (2023) argue that the ethnic marginalization of the Baloch people has fuelled nationalist sentiments and demands for greater autonomy or independence.

In the historical context, it is also evident that the insurgency in Balochistan has gone through different phases, with the current wave of insurgencies starting in 1958, 1973 and 2004. Grill et.al. (2013) argue that these uprisings stemmed from both ethnic identity and resistance to the central government's neglect of the region and its exploitation of natural resources. Shah (2023) even notes in his study that the assassination of prominent Baloch leader Akbar Bugti in 2006 further inflamed nationalist fervour among the population, which naturally led to widespread unrest and calls for secession.

Another factor that triggers such phenomena is the economic problems faced by the local population. As previously mentioned, Pakistan exploits the region's natural resources but neglects its people. This situation exacerbates economic deprivation in the area and serves as a driving force for conflicts. Marzen (2020) addressed this issue in his study. According to him, the region is rich in resources such as natural gas, coal, and copper, but it remains one of the poorest areas in Pakistan today. One of the main reasons for this is Pakistan's disregard for the local population, with the central government failing to provide sufficient economic support in return—in short, exploiting the region. Wilkens (2015) also examined this issue, noting that this sense of economic exploitation heightens ethnic tensions in society, even intensifying them. As a result, many in the local population have come to feel that their land is being exploited solely for the benefit of the rest of Pakistan, leaving them in poverty. Gurr's theory of relative deprivation perfectly explains these dynamics, as it shows how economic exclusion or marginalization highlights the gap between people's expectations and their actual circumstances, often leading to conflict (Gurr, 1970). The Baloch people's growing sense of deprivation and their belief that they are being exploited only deepens their exclusion from important decision-making processes. This widens the rift between the local population and the central government. Scholars like Akhtar (2022) and Samad (2014) have pointed out that the central government's exploitation of the region's natural resources—without fairly sharing the profits—while leaving the locals in poverty has stoked the anger and violence directed at the government.

The development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has naturally increased the importance of Balochistan, and this has also led to the emergence of new studies on the region. The academic literature has shown a serious interest in this sense and started to produce new studies. In this context, Notezai (2019) and Malik and

Jamil (2023) analysed the impact of CPEC on the region in their studies. Looking at both studies, they address similar issues. Although they have stated that CPEC is a great advantage for the region and in this context, it offers an opportunity for economic growth for the region, on the other hand, they have also emphasized the increased likelihood of conflict escalation, especially due to the marginalization of Baloch local people. The Gwadar Port is also a critical element for CPEC, as it facilitates and even provides a direct link for China to the Arabian Sea, thereby eliminating the need to use the Strait of Malacca and allowing all attention to be focused there. On the other hand, according to Bansal (2006), the success of the project is hampered by instability, especially due to the rebel movements in the region. Khan and Ahmed (2024) prepared a study on the perspective of the local people towards CPEC and how the local people perceive these developments.

One of the most basic policies of China in recent times is the use of Chinese labour in all the units it operates, and this situation will naturally apply to Balochistan with the CPEC effect. In this context, the local Baloch people also fear that they may become a minority, especially due to demographic changes. At the same time, this situation may also shape the local people's negative view of CPEC, further deepening marginalisation. Wilkens (2015) examined this sentiment in his study and stated that local people see CPEC as a means of exploitation. On the other hand, Gökten (2019) analysed the geopolitical situation in the region not only in the context of China's growing influence in the region, but also the interests of India and Iran in the region, indicating that the geopolitical situation has become more complex.

Apart from these studies, other studies have also been prepared that emphasize various negotiation processes and the necessity of political dialogue to achieve peace in the region. For example, Bercovitch and Jackson (2001) drew attention to negotiation and mediation approaches and stated that the problem in the region can only be solved and conflicts can be stopped with these elements. However, Akhtar et al. (2018) draw attention to the difficulty of negotiation, mediation or dialogue. According to authors, there are too many tribal leaders and groups in the region, and since each of them pursues their own interests, it is difficult for the central government to engage in a holistic or comprehensive dialogue.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach and focuses on

the historical and geopolitical dimensions of the events to analyse the conflicts taking place in Balochistan. Game theory was applied in this study. In this context, it can be stated that the study is structured around game theory.

Qualitative Research Approach

The main reason why the study is qualitative based is the use of secondary sources in the study. Secondary sources generally include articles and books in the academic literature on the subject, as well as online sources. Through the analysis of these sources, the conflicts in the region were examined and analysed in depth within the framework of a qualitative approach within the framework of historical, political and economic factors. At the same time, it is aimed to comprehensively reveal possible ways to achieve peace by analysing the external factors affecting the conflicts in the region and approaches such as CPEC.

Conflict Analysis Framework

A structural conflict analysis framework will be applied to examine the root causes of the Balochistan conflict and to assess the various actors involved in the conflict. This framework will include the following elements:

- **Conflict Drivers:** Identifying historical and contemporary conflict drivers, including ethnic identity, political marginalization and economic deprivation.
- **Stakeholder Analysis:** This involves examining the roles and motivations of key stakeholders, including tribal leaders, insurgent groups, the Pakistani state, and international actors such as China and India.
- **Impact of CPEC:** Analysing the effects of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) on the conflicts occurring in the region is also important. While CPEC offers economic opportunities, it is crucial to assess how it influences regional dynamics and its impact on pathways to peace.

Limitations

As previously mentioned, the study is largely based on secondary sources, and the difficulty of accessing primary sources, as well as the challenges of conducting fieldwork and interviews, restricts the

originality and quality of the research. Furthermore, although there are numerous academic studies on the topic, the lack of primary sources limits a deeper analysis of the situation in Balochistan and the development of new insights.

Theoretical Framework

Game Theory and Conflict Resolution

Game theory provides a useful framework for understanding the strategic decisions made by various actors in the Balochistan conflict (Aslam, 2008). Modelling interactions between rational actors, game theory helps predict how different stakeholders, such as the Pakistani government, Baloch insurgents, and international players such as China and India, will behave according to their interests and current strategies (Hotz, 2006).

One of the most relevant concepts from game theory is the “security dilemma”, which is when one party’s efforts to increase its security (e.g. through militarization) create increased insecurity for other parties, leading to a reciprocal response (Jervis, 1988; Jakobsen & Halvorsen, 2018). This dynamic is evident in Balochistan, where Pakistan’s increased military presence to secure CPEC infrastructure has led to more insurgent attacks. Insurgents escalate their violence in response to increased security measures, further complicating the conflict cycle (Jamil et.al., 2020; Naheed, 2024).

From a game theory perspective, the Baloch insurgents and the Pakistani government have entered into a bargaining process where both sides have to weigh the costs of continued conflict against the benefits of negotiations (Mitra & Carciumaru, 2015; Staniland, Mir & Lalwani, 2018). The Pakistani government sees CPEC as vital to its economic future, whereas the insurgents see the project as a threat to their political and economic existence. Game theory suggests that successful conflict resolution will depend on both sides recognizing that mutual gains can be achieved through negotiation (Bercovitch & Jackson, 2001). For instance, the Pakistani state could consider offering political concessions and a fairer share of revenue to the Baloch people in exchange for an end to the violence, creating a more stable environment for the success of CPEC.

Conflict Drivers in Balochistan

Balochistan, Pakistan’s least populous province, is one of the largest

regions of South Pakistan (Marzen, 2020, p. 200), and it has emerged as a factor complicating Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, among others. It has a 760 km long coastline and is situated in a strategically significant area that borders both Afghanistan and Iran (Jain, 2018, p. 545; Siddiqi, 2012, p. 158). The Balochs are an ethnically and historically unique group who occupy a 375,000 square mile territory (Kupecz, 2012).

Historically, Balochistan is a region divided between present-day Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran (Boz, 2011, p. 52; Grare, 2013, p. 3). Before its partition, Balochistan was used as a buffer zone by the British colonialists and the administration of the region was left to local leaders known as Serdar (Murtha, 2011, p. 1). This method of indirect rule continued de facto after the establishment of modern Pakistan (Murtha, 2011, p. 1).

The source of the disputes regarding this region lies in the fact that the borders of the region were drawn by the British in 1893 through the Durand Line (Schetter, 2013, p. 49). According to Kayathwal and Kayathwal (1994, p. 37), Afghanistan, which saw the Durand Line as a treaty dictated to a weak neighbour (Schetter, 2013, p. 51), strongly protested against the arbitrary exclusion of Pashtuns and Baloch in the region from Pakistan's borders without giving them any choice, but the result remained unchanged.

The part of Balochistan within Pakistan's borders constitutes the largest geographical area of Pakistan (Nabeel & Asif, 2019). Balochistan accounts for approximately 42 per cent of the entire area of Pakistan (Boz, 2011, p. 52; Khetran, 2011, p. 24). Javaid and Jahangir (2015, p. 92) give this rate as 44 per cent. The human population living in this large region is very small compared to its surface area. Only 5 per cent of the entire population of Pakistan lives in this region (Wilkins, 2015). It is possible to mention four main ethnic groups in the region: Balochs, Pashtuns, Hazaras and Brohis. The largest group in the region is the Baloch with a population share of 45 per cent (UNODC, 2011, p. 75). It is estimated that around 5-6 million Baloch live in Pakistani Balochistan. Baloch are a people living in a strict hierarchical structure. Tribal leaders known as Serdar or Nawab have an unquestionable social position (UNODC, 2011, p. 75).

Balochistan is in a very bad economic situation (Nabeel & Asif, 2019, p. 66). There are reserves of copper, coal and natural gas in the region (Marzen, 2020, p. 200). Khetran (2011, p. 24) claims the mere existence of the recently explored copper mines would be an important motive

for any future violent conflict for Balochistan. Natural gas was first discovered in Sui District in 1953 and then in Pirkoh in 1983. The region produces 4 per cent of Pakistan's GDP (Samad, 2014, p. 303). However, far from contributing to Pakistan economically in other ways, the region is the source of about 40 per cent of Pakistan's energy (Samad, 2014, p. 303). Therefore, Pakistani Balochistan is of great importance for Pakistan and is indispensable for the energy needs of Pakistan today and in the future. However, Pakistan Balochistan is characterised as the most economically backward region of the country (Khetran, 2011; Tüysüzoğlu, 2013). Pakistan has allegedly utilised the bigger chunk of the wealth obtained from the region for its own sake. However, Pakistan has neither recognised the contribution made by the region during this exploitation, nor has it sought to prepare programmes such as paying compensation or a fair share, which would be an equitable response to this exploitation. This incessant exploitation of natural resources without improving local living conditions that has been highlighted consistently since the 1960s is outlined to be just one of the numerous causes of the conflict (Gassebner, Schaudt, & Wong, 2023, p. 3).

Pakistan is obviously devoting significant resources to strengthen internal and external security in response to challenges from India and other non-state actors in its Balochistan provinces (Shah & Khan, 2023, p. 5) which could be another factor that adds up to the failures in or deficiencies of its social programs.

An ethnic problem with a long history in the region also makes itself felt (Hotz, 2006). There are demands for autonomy or independence among the Baloch people living in the region (Marzen, 2020). It would not be a mistake to characterise the history of the region as a history of uprisings. In 2006, the killing of Akbar Bugti by Pakistani forces in the cave where he was hiding created significant dissatisfaction among the local population. Bugti, who was 79 years old at the time of his death (Samad, 2014) and a tribal leader (Sardar) condemned to live in a wheelchair, was the leader of one of the most important clans, the Bugti. Following this development, separatist sentiments among the Baloch grew stronger and discontent with Pakistan became widespread.

The historical background in Pakistani Balochistan seems to be just too favourable for conflict, as well. However, in addition to historical wounds, current developments are also fuelling the flames of conflict. The Balochistan war is primarily an ethnic conflict in Pakistan's Balochistan province. Ethno-nationalist fervour has hampered nation-

building efforts since Pakistan gained independence from the British Raj in 1947. It has also sparked resistance, even violence, in some regions of the nation (Khan and Ahmed, 2024, p. 1). It began when newly formed Pakistan seized the autonomous Baloch province of Kalat (Gassebner et al., 2023). Although Pakistan accepted the region's independent organization by an agreement with the Khanate of Kalat, one of Baluchistan's four princes; it invaded the province with troops in 1948 and compelled the Khanate to sign an agreement (Heeg, 2011, p. 9, Rizwan et. al., 2014, p. 97; State Department, 1954, p. 6; Tüysüzoğlu, 2014, p. 424).

The Second Baloch Uprising against Pakistan began in 1958 (Akhtar et. al., 2018, p. 136; Kupecz, 2012; Paul et. al., 2013, p. 356; Rizwan et al., 2014, p. 97). The basis for this rebellion can be found in the administrative organisational changes enacted three years before the hostilities began (Güneysu, 2019). According to this modification, four provinces in West Pakistan were combined into a single administrative structure (Kupecz, 2012). The goal was to achieve a numerical balance against East Pakistan, which had not yet been founded as Bangladesh and remained part of Pakistan (Güneysu, 2019; Kupecz, 2012, p. 101). This development disappointed the Baloch people and strengthened their previously existing feelings of absence and neglect (Güneysu, 2019; Rizwan et al., 2014).

Since 2004, Balochistan has seen another wave of ethno-nationalist insurgency rage in full throttle (Akhtar, 2022; p. 53; Nabeel and Asif, 2019, p. 54). During the early 2000s, Baloch nationalist leaders expressed rising dissatisfaction with the federal government's development initiatives in Balochistan (Shah, 2023). One of the most important projects that Pervez Musharraf tried to realise after his assumption of power 1998 envisaged a number of infrastructure investments in Balochistan (Akhtar et al., 2018, p. 138; Wilkens, 2015). The ethno-nationalist Baloch fractions demanded an increased royalty on natural gas, stopping the construction of new military cantonments in the region, and were also concerned about the huge development project of Gwadar port, which could precipitate a massive influx of people from other parts of the country and convert the local population into a minority (Shah, 2023).

Musharraf's failure to negotiate with tribal leaders in the preparation of these projects led to some intermittent clashes since 2000, but the conflict intensified within a few years (Akhtar et al. 2018, p. 138). In

previous uprisings, the Marri and Mangal tribes were more prominent (Wilkens, 2015). This time, the Bugti tribe initiated the uprising and therefore became the main actor that Pakistan had to deal with (Wilkens, 2015). The leader of the Bugti tribe, Nawab Akbar Bugti, who had previously held important official positions in Balochistan, was killed in 2006 (Akhtar et al., 2018, p. 138; Shah, 2023; Wilkens, 2015). This development mobilised ordinary Balochs, leading to a further deterioration of the situation on the ground and the spread of violence (Akhtar et al., 2018, p. 138; Rizwan et al., 2014, p. 100). Pervez Musharraf's fall from power did not lead to a decrease in Baloch violence. However, due to the inability of the Baloch movement to establish a common platform, violent acts have decreased in number and impact (Akhtar et al., 2018, p. 138). The struggles between tribal leaders also played an important role in this decrease (Akhtar et al., 2018, p. 138).

It is not clear what the Balochs' ultimate political goal is. There is no doubt that some Baloch individuals and groups have a demand for an independent Balochistan. Sometimes, the dominant demand evolves into an intra-Pakistan autonomy. Official Pakistani sources indicate that some tribal leaders are also motivated by interest-driven goals such as income and privileges. According to this last narrative, violence is used by the leaders of these groups as a means of recognition and demand. Serdar, who turned a blind eye to the escalation of violence for a while, then had the chance to sit at the table with Pakistan and tried to turn this negotiation into some gains in his favour.

Consequently, even if the most extreme political demand is realised, i.e. state formation, the establishment of a stable and lasting Baloch state seems highly improbable (Heinkel and deVillafranca, 2016, p. 68). Therefore, even commentators who seem to have no problem with the utter destabilisation of the region and the destruction attached to it, see the biggest obstacle to any such destabilization if not massive obliteration in the inability to create a unified Baloch front (Heinkel and deVillafranca, 2016, p. 68). The creation of a "Greater Balochistan" is an idea that might likely be supported by the United States, Israel and India (Javaid and Jahangir, 2015, p. 95; Shukla, 2020, p. 305; Syed, 2020, p. 136). The growing level of Baloch protests in recent years and the ammunition and weapons used by various Baloch groups also indicate that such external assistance is somehow and somewhere taking place. India's use of Afghan turf as a launch pad and Iranian territory as an intelligence base has led to an emphasis on securitization

in Balochistan (Rasool et. al, 2024, p. 174; Schetter, 2013, p. 65; Shah and Khan, 2023). However, it appears problematic to sustain an argument that all Balochs have an over-arching ideal such as independence and “Greater Balochistan”. One of the factors for the unsustainability of such an argument Baloch insurgent factions compete against one another, despite their similarities. Groups primarily battle for publicity, financial backing, and recruitment in Balochistan (Gassebner et. al, 2023, p. 3). This proliferation of armed groups, in turn, raises the level of systematic political violence (Gassebner et. al, 2023), and makes quite a convincing case for the Pakistani allegations that personal gain efforts by some Baloch leaders are some local drivers of conflict!

There are many different views on what the ultimate political design should be, and perhaps the most important reason for this chaotic situation is the presence of tribes dominating the region. Some acts of violence carried out in the name of the Baloch are a source of income for the tribe concerned. As a result of monetary gains, tribal leaders may change their behaviour or at least refrain from joining an emerging group. Therefore, Pakistani administrators in the position of fighting terrorism can achieve favourable political results in return for certain concessions, at least temporarily. It is possible to find the main reason for the failure of the Baloch uprisings so far to produce political results and the fact that almost every time the uprising movement has lost its momentum and lost its impact (Akhtar et al., 2018) in the existence of this traditional structure. The biggest shortcoming of the Baloch separatist movements observed so far is their inability to build a centralised structure (Akhtar et al., 2018, p. 135). This anarchic character has not even come close to the goals that can only be realised under a single command (Akhtar et al., 2018, p. 136). Likewise, a large number of organisations have been established that have voiced Baloch political demands and have not hesitated to carry out terrorist acts for their realisation. The inability of these organisations to coordinate within a single structure has also been a positive development for Pakistan. However, this manifold and loose structure of the Baloch groups is also the curse of Pakistani decision-makers, since this structure would make it difficult to build peace and end the systemic violence for good. The extent to which Pakistan’s cyclical bargaining processes with tribal leaders will solve the historical problems of the region is, to put it mildly, doubtful. The fact that as a result of the negotiations, certain groups may refrain from violence for a certain period of time and may receive certain aids, etc. in return, may cause these groups to resort to violence again at another time in the future. Therefore, it would be a

good step to tackle social problems with deeper solutions. Only in this way, the concerns of the Baloch people may be alleviated.

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor's Pearl: Gwadar

China has become the world's leading centre for industry and commerce, surpassing all other countries in this regard (Alam, et. al., 2023). This development has brought about energy supply need and related problems. In order to avoid such energy bottlenecks, China has developed some alternative supply routes. The China-Pakistan Economic, an approximately \$62 billion project, which has "*greatly increased China's influence in Balochistan*" is one of the recommended practical transportation routes (Malik and Jamil, 2023, p. 270; Marzen, 2020, p. 206). This route links the southern Pakistani port of Gwadar with the western region of China (Alam, et. al., 2023).

With great wealth comes a much greater room for manoeuvre. There is no immediate reason for China to be an exception to this assumption. They are actually willing to move things on international fora with a view to realizing various objectives. First of all, the Chinese government aims to create equivalent international institutions to expand its influence without disrupting the global order as it is (Gökten, 2019), albeit with slightly critical undertones (Krieger, 2023, p. 598). Secondly, through these institutions, China attempts to supply the external resources required by the countries in its hinterland for growth. Therefore, connectivity emerges as a pivotal term and concern during the sharpening of Chinese foreign policy. China depends heavily on outside energy sources to continue developing at its current rate. It has been implementing a strategy known to the Americans as "String of Pearls," which is also interpreted to be a response to American pressure that has been increasing in the Strait of Malacca and the China Sea since the end of the 1990's and the beginning of the 2000's (Güneysu, 2019, p. 67; Lin and Iftikhar, 2024, p. 577). China's Belt and Road Initiative seeks to bring together nations and regions with China in order to promote development, international trade, and socioeconomic connectedness (Syed, 2020, p. 131). One of the six original economic corridors of the Belt and Road Initiative's overland route is the CPEC (Malik and Jamil, 2023, p. 271; Safdar, 2021, p. 3). It is basically a project of regional economic integration in a geography which is the least integrated one in the whole world, with a wealth of untapped economic potential (Ullah et. al, 2020, p. 66).

CPEC is not simply the name of one road construction plan

(Malik and Jamil, 2023, p. 271). It is the structure, by which regional states can improve connectivity and integration (Ullah et. al, 2020, p. 66). China's backing for CPEC in general remains unwavering. The CPEC is a multifaceted program that also includes port expansion and agricultural reforms (Gökten, 2019). It offers Pakistan great opportunities for economic development, as well (Khan and Ahmed, 2024, p. 7). It is anticipated that the establishment of energy projects, road networks, and special economic zones under CPEC will boost Pakistan's economy (Syed, 2020, p. 132). Thus, for Pakistan, the CPEC presents a vital opportunity to solve some of the country's long-standing problems, including its chronic energy shortages, poor transportation infrastructure and connectivity, and inadequate industrial progress (Hussain, 2024, p. 38; Safdar, 2021, p. 4).

Chinese investment in Balochistan is significant, and going back now from all these investments would be an unthinkable waste of money and time (Notezai, 2019). However, Gwadar is not an unrivalled project. Iran's Chabahar Project, which is only 110 miles from Gwadar, raised China's and Pakistan's concerns (Bansal, 2006, p. 54). The existence of this project, naturally makes the building and operation of Gwadar a more pressing matter (Güneysu, 2019, p. 67). In addition, Pakistan's main adversary India has been very vocal about the project and the concerns it creates in Delhi (Golley and Ingle, 2018). It is not a secret that the demise of this project is all India seems to wishing in their foreign affairs plans. As Bansal (2006, p. 54) points out "a prolonged instability in the province will prevent Gwadar Port, which is being developed with Chinese collaboration, from realising its true potential", which is, one must add, economically and geopolitically of paramount significance.

In 2015, the President of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping, visited Pakistan and announced the CPEC (Notezai, 2019, Saleem, 2017, p.119; Syed, 2020, p. 131). One of the most important elements of this project is the deep-sea port to be established in the city of Gwadar (Akhtar, 2022, 52; Yiğit, 2019, p. 11). This project, which was originally planned in 2001 (Kupecz, 2012, p. 103), is of vital importance for Pakistan, which strictly feels the need to improve its economy (Saleem, 2017, p. 119). Through the CEEC, it is aimed to complete the infrastructure activities that will connect the port, which has a strategically very important location, and East Turkistan (Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Republic of China). In this context, roads and railways are envisaged to be built (Heinkel and deVillafranca, 2016, p. 67).

The CPEC has been heavily disputed since its launch in 2015, particularly in Balochistan (Khan and Ahmed, 2024, p. 2). First and foremost, the Baluch are concerned that the project will not benefit them. They are also afraid of becoming a minority in their own province due to population mobility to the region for various reasons, as well as the thought that this project will cause a large number of Chinese and Pakistanis to come to the region (Notezai, 2019). Again, the fact that Balochs are not included in decision-making mechanisms (Khan and Ahmed, 2024, p. 2) and that Balochs benefit very little from the income generated is alleged to be an important problem-creating factor (Wilkins, 2015). It is obvious that, in order to gain from the CPEC for the entire country, Pakistan must guarantee socioeconomic growth, peace, and stability in the province (Saleem, 2017, p. 119). The approaches necessitated by the knee-jerk tendency to securitize urging matters as to Baloch tensions and concerns could fail to tackle the issue in all its complexity and entirety, although this may never be construed to take away from the compulsory character of such police and law enforcement measures. However, it will take more courage and imagination to wholly benefit from this project. A rational relation with the Balochs could be a very good first step, which makes negotiations a vital political instrument in overcoming any rifts between the parties. To determine the prospects for such a policy-making choice, one may opt to conduct a game theory-based inquire. As Çapın and Konca (2023, p. 105) vividly point out *“(g)ame theory is based on decision making for the most appropriate strategy selection, which can provide the best result in the face of problems... and can then be used appropriately on political issues”*. Game theory can be used to understand why and how decision-makers in politics err in their thinking, what tactics yield the best outcomes, why coalitions succeed or fail, and what sorts of adjustments can be made (Çapın & Konca, 2023 p. 105). In the following, an approach informed by game theory will enable us to analyse what the future may be holding for the parties to the conflict.

Strategy of the Parties: Not Much Room to Manoeuvre?

A (usually) finite number of players who interact in accordance with predetermined rules make up a “game” in the context of game theory (Hotz, 2006, p. 2). According to Hotz (2006, p. 2), a game is characterized by the players involved and their ability to follow the rules, or their own set of strategies, in order to win.

Pakistan believes to have a trump card in its hand. It is a common

understanding by the pundits, as well, that the CPEC may be the panacea for everything Pakistan has been putting the blame for its economic and societal plight on. Pakistanis view Gwadar as their version of a new *Dubai* (Akhtar, 2022). This might be too optimistic an expectation on behalf of the Pakistani authorities, however it is obvious that there is a lot to gain from this project. This expectation of positive outcome will naturally help build up a Pakistani determination for the realization of the project. This determination will have its reflection in security operations. Yet, security operations alone may end up causing an increase in the violence deployed by the Baloch groups, which will be nothing but counter-productive for the Pakistani aspirations. They know for a fact that pulling the securitization card for too long and too harshly will be incompatible in the long run with their economic ambitions. Besides both parties have accumulated enough experience as to how resilient they both are, as the Baloch resistance has proven to be resilient but still prone to grave defeats (Gattani, 2021) and the Pakistani authorities very ruthless at times but not without high numbers of personnel casualties. This bilateral knowledge actually must contribute to the formation of an awareness as to why parties should stop fighting and talk, at least in intervals. In addition, economy might also emerge as the antidote for the uninterrupted violence rampant in the region, provided that some other legal and political instruments are put to good use by the authorities.

This means in return that Pakistani authorities, who have designated the CPEC as the most important project in the region for the foreseeable future, will feel a need to tread carefully between law enforcement operations and some other peace-building practices, in order to avoid the vicious pitfall of a security dilemma (Fair et. al., 2024; Kalin and Siddiqui, 2020, p. 62). If the statements as to the vitality of CPEC are true, then Pakistani officials may turn out to be a very willing party to negotiate with the other parties. This is nothing but good news for the creation of a peaceful situation in the region. The fruits of cooperation seem to override any potential for the prolongation of armed conflicts at least from the viewpoint of the state authorities, who will intentionally shy away from making brazen use of an asymmetrical power relationship, both on the field and at the negotiation table. Thus, it means that Pakistan cannot completely rely on its position of strength as one of the partners in the region with China. It has to have a keener eye on sharing the gains with its domestic shareholders, among others. In addition to sharing, Pakistan must be tactful enough to sweeten a future settlement of disputes in the region by developing

legal safeguards for human rights, to assuage any Baloch concerns about assimilation and dispossession, among others.

The other party of Balochs is far from being monolithic. The groups therein have swaying priorities and agendas. It goes without saying, there may be instances of infighting and jockeying for more power and wealth within such an unstable assembly of groups. Pakistan has to avoid any grievances during these talks then and has to provide as encompassing talks as possible with a view to getting a bigger number of Baloch groups to partake in the process. Needless to say, the real objective is to be, first and foremost, as inclusive as possible with a view to averting future clashes on one side of the table. Of special import is also this injected feeling that whoever keeps distant from the negotiation table will be at a loss due to that omission and Pakistan must do its best to be very convincing in this regard. All in all, given the high number of competing Baloch tribes and armed groups, it must be made a priority to get a majority of Balochs to have a place at the negotiation process. Only then any attempt might have a chance to reach peace in an atmosphere, which is actually very detrimental to it! If this requisite is not met, it is more than probable that violence will somehow spiral out again, crushing any hopes for a lasting peace.

Ethnic conflicts may also arise solely as a result of economic and/or political competition (Kalin and Siddiqui, 2020, p. 61). That is exactly the reason that secondly, the objectives of these talks should be publicized by any means possible and useful to reach the Baloch people. Here, the talks should be mainly about the future wealth and opportunities and Pakistan should strive to highlight the message that those staying in the process shall be reaping the fruits thereof, whereas those out of the process may lose their influence upon their own tribe, among others. In this needed public relations effort, especially the emerging Baloch intelligentsia should be the addressee since they will be the most affluent societal actor in the future replacing sardars and mullahs. This replacement is a transitional process that already started toward the end of the last century (Breseeg, 2001, p. 308).

Perceptions may be utterly important in the region. Here it is obvious that any omission on behalf of the public authorities in terms of securitization should not be construed as signs of weakness (O'Neill, 1994, p. 1007). If such a perception is probable then authorities will do anything in their power to avoid such a deduction. In Pakistani case however every actor should now be sufficiently cognizant of the

fact that any leniency by the state authorities is simply there due to the fact that they must be aiming to diminish violence in the region, but not because they are incapable of employing violent tactics and policies. Therefore, Pakistan as a state should never have any worries and doubts as to any weakness perceptions.

There are additional matters of great significance that need proper handling. Firstly, societal improvements must be felt by the common Baloch, and that immediately. Revenues to be collected by virtue of CPEC should directly have a positive effect upon the living standards of the people of Balochistan. Secondly, cultural rights should be recognized and respected to some serious extent. This last point could be a great way to assuage any fears on the Baloch part as to the destiny of their cultural existence as a people, now that Pakistan undertakes to contribute to the preservation of that culture, provided that the fragile balance be respected continuously. Thirdly, it would be a great contribution to the peace building efforts, if the state authorities somehow manage to integrate former armed cadres into their military forces and/or law enforcement agencies, *“both to provide reassurance that the process of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration will not be used to as a step toward reprisal killings against former rebels and to provide former rebel soldiers with gainful employment”* (Johnson & Thurber, 2020, p. 109).

Conclusion

CPEC has undoubtedly a promise. As Golley and Ingle (2018) remind us, BRI's global goals of *“peace, prosperity, cooperation, openness, inclusiveness, and mutual benefit”* were strongly reiterated by President Xi in a 2017 speech of his. He called for the establishment of a setting that will *“facilitate opening up and development; establish a fair, equitable, and transparent system of international trade and investment rules; and facilitate the orderly flow and allocation of resources such as labour, capital, and energy, as well as full market integration”* (Golley and Ingle, 2018). Notwithstanding, there is a remarkably high number of conflict drivers in Balochistan, each of which can contribute to the volatility of the region in its own way.

The ethnic resentment is one these drivers. This may lead to intervention by some other actors from without with a view to destabilizing Pakistan and derail the CPEC. Yet these seemingly little agenda points in other actors' agenda may come to mean violence and bloodshed for the real persons leading real lives in the region. However, CPEC with the right

formulas can create great wealth and living standards not only for whole Pakistan but especially also for the Balochs. This right formula must contain power-sharing on political for a, equitable distribution of the riches attained via the CPEC with the locals, cultural sensitivity to preserve the Baloch culture and existence and a strong belief in and commitment to the state of Pakistan, its territorial integrity and sovereignty.

In the same vein, sharing of wealth with the locals in the region should be secured via credible legal and political mechanisms. Balochs should be convinced that they have a bright future with and in Pakistan. In order to achieve this aim, instruments like negotiation and mediation as well as others should be tactfully employed. If this can be achieved than CPEC can yield much better results than expected both for China and Pakistan.

Although this formulation seems to invite Pakistani State to perform more than other actors, it is still a very bitter pill for the ethno-separatist movements that could only settle for an independent entity, for the Balochs and run by the Balochs. Having claimed that the Khanate of Kalat was an independent princely state, some the Baloch nationalists have argued that they should be granted the same status (Siddiqi, 2012, p. 164). Understandably, assimilation seems to be their biggest fear. Pakistan has to refrain from using CPEC to turn Balochs into a desperate minority and should strive to install every legal mechanism available to it with a view to assuaging these nationalist anxieties.

All parties have to be realistic in their expectations and clear-minded as to their political objectives. The CPEC is evidently a very important opportunity for Pakistan. If the fruits of the whole project could be shared by more; conflict and violence could be contained, even ended, due to the realistic expectation that *“economic prosperity and better living standards can potentially overcome some local grievances”* (Khan and Ahmed, 2024, p. 6). This makes a lasting peace possible, if not probable. Pakistan seems to be in a position of dire straits, in the sense that they do have no choice but to have a keen interest in building up a working peace, in order to better reap the fruits of huge investments. As regards Balochs, there is still a sizeable homework to be done by the Pakistani authorities. If they succeed in persuading their Baloch counterparts, CPEC will have a rosier and safer future.

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In all processes of the article, TESAM's research and publication ethics principles were followed.

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