



Does development mitigate violence? The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the Baloch insurgency

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, development practice has returned to large-scale infrastructure as a pathway to peace – especially in conflict-affected regions. This article examines one such effort, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) – a flagship Belt and Road Initiative – on the long-running separatist insurgency in Balochistan. Despite hopes for peace through development, the insurgency has intensified in parallel with CPEC's implementation. To explain this dynamic, we differentiate varieties of development, specifying Centralised, Infrastructure-Led Development (CILD): a top-down model that emphasises large-scale infrastructure and economic integration. While CILD is widely applied across development contexts, our findings suggest that when introduced into regions with histories of ethnonational grievance, it can exacerbate tensions rather than alleviate them. Using a mixed-methods analysis of violent incident data and ethnopolitical representation metrics, we show how CPEC has fuelled rather than mitigated the Baloch insurgency. These findings suggest the importance of what we call Collaborative Governance Arrangements (CGA), which embed community agency into development planning as a response to the limitations of both liberal peace (focused on political inclusion) and developmental peace (focused on economic growth). These mechanisms enhance legitimacy and conflict sensitivity without requiring wholesale reform – offering a more adaptive framework for infrastructure-led development in conflict-affected states.

KEYWORDS

Separatist insurgency;
Pakistan; CPEC; BRI;
infrastructure development;
collaborative governance

Introduction

As the international development sector cycles through shifting paradigms and priorities, it has recently turned back towards material and large-scale infrastructure projects – particularly with the rise of Southern development actors such as China. Large-scale infrastructure investments have emerged as a central tool of statecraft, particularly in fragile or conflict-affected regions. The strategy has been used both domestically in frontier regions as well as abroad, in the belief that growth, connectivity, and integration can pacify contested territories. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with its emphasis on ports, transport corridors, and energy infrastructure, represents the most ambitious embodiment of this approach. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a \$60 billion network of roads, ports, and energy projects, is its flagship. Pakistani and Chinese

leaders alike have hailed CPEC as a ‘game-changer’ and ‘road for peace’ – a transformative development agenda that would resolve underdevelopment and marginalisation in Pakistan’s frontier provinces, particularly Balochistan.

Yet, the current reality in Balochistan poses a sharp challenge to this vision. Despite major investment and state attention, the province continues to experience a protracted separatist insurgency, marked by rising violence, especially against state actors and Chinese projects. This escalation has occurred after the launch of CPEC, rather than being mitigated by it. The case thus presents a paradox: why has intensified development coincided with increased conflict?

This paper begins with this question as its starting point, and suggests that the answer lies not in the presence of development itself, but in the particular model of development being promoted, and the absence of certain ingredients within this model. We argue that CPEC is emblematic of a broader model of Centralised, Infrastructure-Led Development (CILD), a top-down developmental strategy usually involving large-scale, centrally negotiated infrastructure bundles. Using the introduction of CPEC into Balochistan as a natural experiment, we show how this form of development, when layered on pre-existing grievances in ethnically marginalised contexts, can depress state legitimacy and fuel insurgency. Our findings suggest the need for incorporating capacity building, community co-production, and hybrid governance mechanisms, even in the absence of liberal institutions or formal political reform.

To situate this argument, we map the theoretical terrain along three key axes: political economy, security studies, and development theory. First, from a political economy perspective, we situate CILD within longer trajectories of state consolidation and elite dominance. Following Wimmer and Cederman et al., we understand many post-colonial states as operating through ethnically stratified political orders, in which central governments consolidate resources and authority to the exclusion of peripheral groups.¹ In the Balochistan case, our analysis of bureaucratic representation, economic distribution, and federal project governance illustrates this structural consolidation. When applied in this context, infrastructure-led development is not neutral – it becomes a tool for consolidation and continued extraction. When development initiatives are introduced that echo long-established patterns of exclusion, existing inequalities are replicated and amplified.

Second, from a security studies lens, we build on theories of grievance-based insurgency and legitimacy deficits. Scholars such as Gurr and Cederman et al. have shown how political exclusion and ethnic discrimination increase the likelihood of civil conflict.² Others, including Kalyvas and Mampilly, emphasise that insurgent groups mobilise not only in response to grievances, but also when state behaviour visibly undermines local legitimacy.³ In this regard, infrastructure projects are double-edged: their visibility can generate resentment if benefits are not equitably shared or if they are seen as symbolic of external domination. In Balochistan, CPEC and its attendant securitisation has become precisely such a symbol, with violent consequences. Using disaggregated data on 717 violent attacks from 2004 to 2023, we show that violence has intensified in CPEC districts following project announcements, suggesting that development without legitimacy can backfire.

Third, we engage development theory and peacebuilding scholarship to interrogate assumptions underlying both liberal and developmental peace paradigms. The liberal peace model, dominant in post-Cold War interventions, holds that sustainable peace

requires democratisation, political inclusion and institutional reform.⁴ In contrast, the developmental peace model, favoured by China and reflected in the BRI, assumes that sustained economic growth and state-led development can deliver political stability, even without political liberalisation (Tsinghua University and UNDP 2016).⁵ While much recent literature critiques the liberal peace for being technocratic and externally imposed, the developmental peace model is often uncritically embraced as a context-sensitive alternative. Yet both models, we suggest, are flawed: neither attends to the basic capacity of communities to access knowledge, think, and act along their own path of development.

Our findings suggest the need for a third path, indicated by recent work in participatory development, hybrid governance, and collaborative planning. Experience has identified ways to incorporate community agency, co-produced legitimacy, and localised forms of engagement that do not require wholesale institutional reform or the traditional ingredients of the liberal peace paradigm. Drawing from Cornwall, Mac Ginty, and others, we introduce the concept of Collaborative Governance Arrangements (CGA) – a set of practical mechanisms through which state actors can share authority, resources, and decision-making power with community actors.⁶ These mechanisms necessitate a community capacity-building component, and may incorporate deliberative forums, local benefit-sharing agreements, co-design of infrastructure, and inclusion of customary authorities in dispute resolution. CGAs do not imply full power-sharing or veto-rights; rather, they offer a pragmatic way to embed development in local contexts, foster legitimacy, and reduce grievances.

The paper proceeds with a historical overview of the Baloch insurgency, situated within the broader political economy of Pakistani federalism and centre-periphery relations. We then lay out the theoretical foundations in more detail, elaborating the concepts of CILD and CGA and situating them within the literature above. The following section presents our methods and data, combining institutional analysis with disaggregated conflict data. We present our findings, showing the correlation between exclusion, infrastructure development, and insurgent activity. Together, these findings challenge the widely-held perception that state-led top-down economic development can mitigate violent conflicts and achieve developmental peace. We conclude by offering policy implications for international development actors and recommendations that can foster a process in which local agency and aspirations are incorporated into the region's development, serving to address deep-seated grievances and strengthen local capacity.

The Baloch insurgency in historical context

Balochistan, the largest province of Pakistan, has been embroiled in violent conflicts since the country's independence. Despite its vast resources, Balochistan remains the country's least developed region with a Human Development Index score of 0.463 and the Multidimensional Poverty Index of 0.354.⁷ Home to 14.89 million people or roughly 6.16 per cent of the country's overall population, Balochistan is sparsely populated and inhabited by multiple ethnicities, including Baloch, Pashtun, Hazara, Punjabi, Sindhi, and Brahvi.

At the time of independence in 1947, Balochistan primarily consisted of the princely State of Kalat and British Balochistan.⁸ Kalat in itself comprised of principalities of Kharan, Lasbela, and Makran; however, its suzerainty over Kharan and Lasbela was disputed.⁹ British Balochistan included Bolan, Chaman, Harnai, Sibi, Loaralai, Quetta, Sibi, Zhob, and areas of the Marri, Bugti and Khetran tribes.¹⁰

Unlike the other Indian princely states allied to British Raj, Kalat was under the paramountcy of the Whitehall, giving Kalat a special legal status. Therefore, after the withdrawal of the British Raj, Kalat was to be an independent state and could not be transferred to a third party.¹¹ In fact, the future first Governor General of Pakistan and then legal advisor to the Khan of Kalat, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, advocated this, which was agreed to by the British Indian government.¹²

On 4 August 1947, Kalat and Pakistan signed a Standstill Agreement, and a communique on 11 August 1947, recognised Kalat's sovereignty.¹³ However, Lasbela and Kharan desired to join Pakistan, and in October 1947, Pakistan mounted pressure on Kalat to accede.¹⁴ After Lasbela, Kharan, and Markran joined Pakistan on 18 March 1948,¹⁵ Kalat acceded to Pakistan on 27 March 1948.¹⁶ Despite its accession, Balochistan was not granted the status of a province until 1970,¹⁷ and was initially governed by the centre through a nonrepresentative advisory council.¹⁸

Waves of insurgency

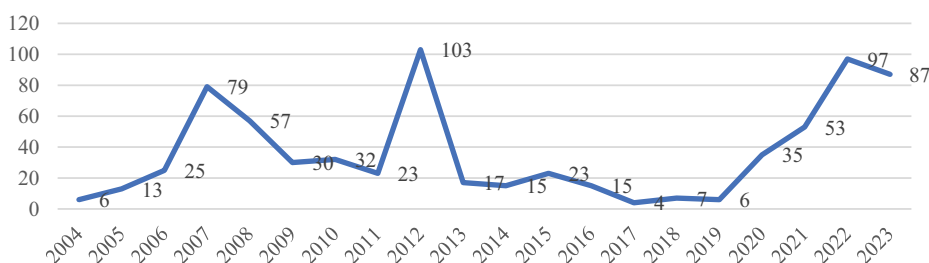
Since 1948, the province has experienced five waves of insurgency. The first wave (May 1948 to September 1948) was sparked in response to the accession of Kalat. Karim Khan, the younger brother of the Khan of Kalat, revolted against his brother's decision by launching a military struggle, which was put to an end by the Pakistan military shortly.

The second insurgency was from 1958 to 1959 in response to the controversial One Unit Scheme, which merged all provinces of Western Pakistan and denied provincial autonomy.¹⁹ Moreover, imposition of martial law in 1958 in a governance setup dominated by Punjabis and Muhajirs further intensified Baloch fears of identity denial, sparking the second wave of insurgency. The third wave lasted between 1963 and 1969 against continued centralisation.

In 1970, Balochistan was granted the status of a province and, for the first time, elections were held. However, Prime Minister Bhutto dismissed the provincial government on flimsy charges in 1973 and launched a massive military operation, mobilising 80,000 troops against 55,000 Baloch fighters. Though the operation ended in 1977, it radicalised Baloch politics and significantly deteriorated faith in the Pakistani federation.²⁰

The ongoing fifth insurgency wave (2005-present) in the backdrop of economic injustices was sparked by the alleged rape of a female medical doctor, Shazia Khalid, working in Sui by a serving military officer. Tribal leaders, primarily from the Bugti tribe, demanded a judicial trial of the officer that was denied by the government. In response, Nawab Akbar Bugti, the chief of the Bugti tribe, initiated attacks against military installations and critical gas infrastructure.²¹ In retaliation, the government launched a military operation killing Bugti in August 2006 that further aggravated the conflict.

The scale and intensity of the insurgency has grown during the last few years, particularly since 2020, as can be seen in [Graph 1](#). Apart from targeting military forces, separatists are now killing Chinese and Punjabi workers.²² Pakistani state authorities have also been allegedly involved in grave violations of human rights, including extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances in Balochistan.²³



Graph 1. Number of attacks per year since 2004 (source: Uppsala Conflict Data Program).

Existing frameworks and debates

Theoretical perspectives on the drivers of insurgency

Insurgencies – armed uprisings that challenge state authority without escalating into full-scale war – are highly varied in form and intensity, but often share key characteristics: irregular forces, political aims, and asymmetrical confrontation with state militaries.²⁴ The United States military defines low-intensity conflict as a “political-military confrontation between contending states or groups ‘below conventional war and above the routine, peaceful competition among states’.”²⁵ Such confrontations have been given different names, like small wars, revolutionary warfare, insurgencies, guerrilla warfare, and low-intensity conflict, over the years.²⁶ Regardless of the name, such conflicts are usually between a regular military force and an irregular militia.

Analysts studying violence in Balochistan often characterise it as a low-level separatist insurgency.²⁷ Akhtar and Khan, for instance, while analysing the roots of the recent wave of insurgency in Balochistan, examine the conflict through this lens.²⁸ Others, however, argue that the recent scale and sophistication of violence challenge the ‘low-level’ designation.²⁹ Nevertheless, we treat the insurgency in Balochistan as a low-intensity conflict for two reasons. First, the insurgency does not threaten the integrity of the Pakistani state at large. Second, the insurgency remains largely defined by hit-and-run guerrilla tactics rather than sustained front-line warfare.

A number of competing theories have been advanced to explain the drivers of civil wars and separatist insurgencies. Prevalent explanations include individualist (greed theory), structuralist (grievance), and institutional perspectives (governance).

The individualist approach interprets conflict through the lens of personal incentives. Within this framework, dominant in the literature and in policymakers’ minds is greed theory – which posits that actors are motivated by economic opportunity, especially in resource-rich environments, supporting the idea that the primary drivers of civil wars are economic factors.³⁰ Collier and Hoeffler argue that actors in conflicts are driven by greed and, therefore, conflicts are likely to appear when stakeholders believe entering into a conflict will enable them to reap the benefits of economic resources. Armed conflicts in resource-rich countries like Democratic Republic of Congo and Nigeria have been mostly explained through this theoretical lens.³¹ However, greed theory has been criticised for overemphasising the role of economic factors and overlooking structural forces that compel individuals to participate in conflict.³² Furthermore, Collier and Hoeffler’s

methodology has been criticised for 'questionable use of proxy variables' to test the greed hypothesis.³³

Another established strand of research embraces a structural approach in explaining violent conflicts. Here, historical and systemic inequalities are seen as the underlying drivers. Skocpol's work, for example, challenges the individualist perspective in favour of a more structural approach, highlighting the role of class structures and state institutions in producing revolutionary outcomes.³⁴

Others take a more balanced approach between structural and individualist perspectives, identifying psychological and social grievances behind political violence, focusing on the concept of 'relative deprivation' – the perceived gap between what people believe they deserve and what they actually get.³⁵ Gurr argues that perceived disparity between expectations and reality fuels frustration, which can escalate into political violence. Cederman et al., while acknowledging that grievances are central to the cause of political violence, establish that discrimination leads to conflict which dovetails with Gurr's 'relative deprivation' concept.³⁶ However, unlike Gurr's approach which is more psychological, Cederman et al. focus more on structural inequalities between ethnic groups. They explain the origin of ethnic conflicts as a result of competing ethnonationalist claims to state 'as an institution that is captured to different degrees by representatives of particular ethnic communities'.³⁷

State capture theories situate the origin of ethnic conflicts in weak post-colonial states over the control of the state in neo-patrimonialism or clientelist networks.³⁸ Wimmer argues that given resource constraints in weak post-colonial states, bureaucracies develop favouritism to endow state resources to their own ethnic group while ignoring other ethnicities which makes neglected groups feel excluded, particularly when the resources for fuelling the economy are extracted from the region of the excluded ethnicity.³⁹

Another established perspective for understanding insurgencies is the institutional framework that focuses on state capacity and governance. In explaining the rise of insurgency in Afghanistan, Jones contends that weak state capacity and ungovernable spaces allowed insurgents to exploit anarchic conditions to their benefit.⁴⁰ Similarly, other scholars argue that cross-national evidence suggests a strong correlation between insurgency and poor governance, as well as fragile states.⁴¹ More violence-prone countries also report lower socioeconomic standards, particularly income per capita.⁴² In such countries, central governments either lack sufficient economic resources or the capability to enforce 'monopoly of violence', resulting in opportunities for insurgents to establish themselves, particularly in remote areas.⁴³

However, newer studies complicate this picture. Koren and Sarbahi, drawing on subnational evidence rather than country-wide data, find a 'positive correlation between state presence and civil war outbreaks'.⁴⁴ Conversely, Risse and Stollenwerk establish that limited state capacity does not always lead to insurgencies, with few weak states experiencing civil wars.⁴⁵ Furthermore, state-building efforts in areas with limited governance can result in political violence. Critiques of institutionalism contend that the state capacity concept in explaining armed conflicts is essentially tautological and analytically circular.⁴⁶

Together, these theories offer important insights but vary in explanatory power depending on local context. We now turn to how they have been applied in understanding the Baloch insurgency.

Explaining insurgency in Balochistan

The insurgency in Balochistan has been examined through several of the lenses described above. Some scholars have applied greed theory. For instance, Siddiqi argues that the recent insurgency wave in Balochistan can be strongly attributed to economic motives.⁴⁷ However, this framework falls short of explaining the conflict in several ways. First, greed theory has been used to explain conflicts where there are readily exploitable and marketable commodities, such as diamonds, available. Balochistan, though abundant in mineral resources, does not have readily exportable commodities. Furthermore, metal ores in Balochistan require substantial investment in technology and transport infrastructure to be sold in an export market. The absence of existing infrastructure and know-how to refine metal ores renders economic opportunism an inadequate explanation, particularly in fuelling the prolonged fifth wave of insurgency. As such, material endowments alone cannot account for the Baloch insurgency, underscoring the need for frameworks that account for how development is perceived, governed and embedded in local societies.

Institutional explanations have also been prominent. Aslam highlights several institutional factors, claiming that ‘a detailed analysis of the ongoing conflict reveals that in addition to the classic greed and grievance-based explanations, poor governance resulting from the ongoing plunder of Balochistan’s natural resources and its economic and political marginalisation has been a major cause of mounting tension between the Baloch people and the government of Pakistan’.⁴⁸ A parliamentary report on Balochistan also blames poor governance, among others, for the sorry state of affairs in the province.⁴⁹ Samad’s detailed analysis of the insurgency from various perspectives similarly points to the failure of federalism and poor management of differences as a primary cause of insurgency.⁵⁰

While this perspective rightly recognises institutional incapacity and poor governance in understanding the conflict, governance-based explanations must be treated with caution. First, the current wave of insurgency is closely tied to state consolidation efforts in the province, especially through construction of transport network and military cantonments. Second, governance indicators in Pakistan, including Balochistan, were equally poor or even worse during the 1980s, yet no major insurgency erupted at that time. Third, state fragility and weak governance exist in a reciprocal relationship; while poor governance may contribute to instability, fragility itself often produces weak institutions. Therefore, a governance perspective must be understood as a part of broader analysis and not the sole explanation.

Grievance-based explanations have been the most influential in explaining the Baloch conflict. A report by the International Crisis Group, in explaining the recent wave of insurgency in the province, blames deep-seated grievances and poor management of conflict by President Mushrraf.⁵¹ Akhtar, while emphasising the negative role of neo-liberal policies under the Mushrraf regime, recognises the grievances as root cause of the conflict.⁵² Talbot argues that the denial of ethnic identity in post-colonial Pakistan, compounded by its inherited democratic deficit and reliance on centralising solutions to state-building amid financial constraints, serves as a key explanation for the violence.⁵³ Finally, Kakar provides a more holistic explanation of the conflict. He identifies five systemic drivers of separatism in Balochistan: authoritarianism in the Pakistani polity, centralisation of power by the federal government, Punjab-dominated majoritarian federal design, economic grievances, and a fragmented Baloch polity.⁵⁴

Although grievance-based theories appear better equipped to explain the Balochistan conflict, even these face limitations.⁵⁵ While they clearly apply to conflicts like the Tamil insurgency in Sri Lanka, which was born from extreme forms of political discriminations and neo-patrimonialism, discrimination does not automatically lead to insurgency. For instance, Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine state of Myanmar or Roma in Europe, despite facing discrimination, have not meaningfully organised for separatist militant movements. Similarly, the conflict in Balochistan cannot be solely explained through a political discrimination-based model. After all, there are other regions and ethnicities in Pakistan that have been neglected or discriminated against but have not launched separatist military struggles. What seems more likely, therefore, is that grievances interact with other factors – such as the form and governance of development interventions – in shaping conflict trajectories. This interaction between historical grievance and the form of development interventions – especially large-scale, centralised infrastructure – forms the core concern of the next section.

Theoretical framework: CILD, liberal and developmental peace, and community agency

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) represents a flagship example of developmental peace in practice. Launched in 2015 under the Belt and Road Initiative, CPEC is an umbrella of transport, energy, and port projects valued at over \$60 billion. Pakistani leaders hailed it as a ‘gamechanger’ for national development, while Chinese officials framed it as a ‘road for peace’ that could stabilise fragile regions through economic growth. This article takes CPEC as an empirical case through which to test the assumptions of Centralized Infrastructure-Led Development (CILD) and developmental peace, particularly in the context of Balochistan.

We conceptualise CILD as a top-down development modality centred on large-scale, capital-intensive infrastructure bundles – such as roads, ports, and energy networks – that are negotiated and governed centrally. While CILD is widely applied in diverse national and subnational contexts, it takes on heightened political significance when layered over existing grievances, especially in regions historically excluded from political or economic power. In such contexts, the emphasis on material growth and territorial integration – without corresponding mechanisms of inclusion or local agency – can reinforce rather than resolve existing tensions. This dynamic is particularly relevant in the context of the broader debate between the liberal peace and developmental peace.

Our framework situates CILD within the broader debate between the liberal peace and developmental peace paradigms. The liberal peace model, rooted in post – Cold War interventionism, assumes that sustainable peace depends on democratisation, rule of law, and politically inclusive institutions.⁵⁶ In the late 1990s, amid criticisms of the Western-led liberal peace, the developmental peace paradigm emerged as a response to failed liberal peacebuilding. Initially proposed by peace studies scholars and international organisations, the developmental peace model became prominent in Chinese policy discourse. Rooted in China’s own experience with economic growth and stability, developmental peace holds that peace and political stabilisation can be achieved through sustained economic growth, infrastructure provision, and enhanced state capacity, without major

political reform.⁵⁷ The BRI reflects this latter approach, particularly in its emphasis on delivering large-scale infrastructure quickly, even in conflict-affected and high-risk settings, on the premise that shared economic gains will create incentives for peace. While both models offer important insights, they suffer from blind spots: liberal peace is often critiqued as externally imposed and over-politicised; developmental peace, as overly technocratic and legitimacy-blind.

As the CPEC experience shows, when CILD – emblematic of developmental peace – is introduced into multi-ethnic polities with existing tensions, it can exacerbate grievances. While Western policy frameworks have emphasised political inclusion through liberal institutional design, this model has rarely aligned with local political realities and aspirations, and has often fallen short of its intended outcomes.

These limitations suggest the need for additional elements of development strategy, particularly in fragile or conflict-affected settings – approaches that avoid both the ideological and institutional rigidity of liberal peace and the technocratic material focus of developmental peace. One such direction is suggested in the literature on participatory development and hybrid governance, which emphasises the importance of embedding development processes within existing social institutions and allowing communities a meaningful role in shaping their own path of development.⁵⁸ When development is co-produced – designed, implemented, and modified with local actors – it is more likely to generate local legitimacy and reduce the perception that infrastructure is a tool of external control.

We refer to these arrangements as Collaborative Governance Arrangements (CGA) – a term meant to capture a range of practices in which state actors share elements of planning, oversight, or benefit-sharing with community institutions. These might include formal or informal consultative spaces, deliberative forums, co-designed mechanisms for siting infrastructure, local benefit-sharing agreements, the involvement of respected customary authorities or tribal elders as intermediaries and dispute-handlers, or incorporating traditional governance structures into ongoing project oversight. While the precise form of CGA will vary by context, any of its elements will necessitate a significant component of capacity building. This implies that the strengthening of a community's capacity to access knowledge and expertise, integrate traditional wisdom, discern and resist political and commercial manipulation, engage in deliberation and collective decision-making, and strengthen its internal structures and institutions is a central concern of CGA, and any development enterprise that mitigates conflict.

Importantly, these arrangements do not necessitate wholesale political reform or power-sharing, as liberal peace might require. Nor do they imply pervasive technocratic participatory mechanisms that are more form than substance. Rather, our findings point to the need for a systematic process of learning about the specific arrangements that strengthen community agency in development – even without institutional transformation – offering a pathway to greater legitimacy and more durable peace. As Mac Ginty and Boege et al. argue, peace is often most stable where formal authority is layered with informal legitimacy, and where development institutions can adapt to local governance norms rather than override them.⁵⁹ In this sense, the paper contributes to a growing body of work that seeks to rethink the conflict-development nexus not only in terms of resource distribution or institutional design, but also through the lens of agency, ownership, and meaning attached to development itself.

Data and methods

To investigate the drivers of the insurgency in Balochistan, we employ a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative insights with quantitative data analysis. First, the article establishes a pattern of discrimination against Balochistan, drawing on quantitative data from federal government employees census, National Finance Commission (NFC) awards, Baloch representation in executive bodies, and qualitative analysis of the Ethnic Power Relations dataset.⁶⁰ Building on this evidence of discrimination, the paper then examines the relationship between development and peace in Balochistan by analysing the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) on violent attacks by Baloch separatists between 2004–2023.⁶¹

Data on domicile-wise representation in the federal government was extracted from the government reports on federal employee censuses, the Parliament of Pakistan, the Supreme Court, and secondary resources. Although efforts were made to obtain time-series data on province-wise and ethnicity-based representation in the federal government, data only for the years 1980, 2019 and 2023 could be obtained. However, despite these limitations, the analysis provides a good indication of the overall representation of Balochistan domicile-holders in the federal government.

Financial data on economic distribution among provinces per NFC award was obtained through the State Bank of Pakistan – country's central bank. The NFC award is a constitutional mechanism for allocating economic resources among Pakistan's provinces. For this article, data from NFC awards spanning multiple decades were analysed to identify patterns of fiscal allocation to Balochistan relative to other provinces.

Further, data on Balochistan discrimination was drawn from the Ethnic Power Relations dataset developed by Cederman, Wimmer, and Min.⁶² The database documents the political status of ethnic groups globally, focusing on their access to executive power and patterns of exclusion. It divides groups based on their relative power into categories of monopoly, dominant, senior partner, junior partner, powerless, discriminated, self exclusion, and irrelevant with the last one being the most marginalised and the former most being the most powerful.

Conflict incident data is obtained through the UCDP which defines an armed conflict as a 'contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year'.⁶³ The dataset on the Balochistan conflict covers the number violent clashes and yearly battle-related deaths since 1989, with the Pakistani government, Balochistan Liberation Front, Balochistan Liberation Army, Balochistan Republican Army, Baloch Raji Ajohi Sangar, and United Baloch Army identified as the participants. However, we draw only on the data since 2004, the year of initiation of the fifth wave of insurgency in Balochistan.

Findings

Discrimination, grievances and insurgency

We find support for the grievance perspective as a driver of the ongoing conflict in Balochistan. Discrimination against Balochistan has been a defining feature of Pakistan's political and institutional order. Historically, Pakistan has been ruled by a Punjab-

dominated military-bureaucratic oligarchy with strong centralist tendencies that ignored democratic rights and adequate representation to other ethnicities and provinces in favour of a security state.⁶⁴ In the absence of democratic means to participate in public institutions, entry into civil and military service remained meaningful devices to shape public policies. However, recruitment to these institutions was determined by provincial quotas based on population, ensuring Punjab’s dominance due to its demographic weight, and, thereby, outsized role in policymaking.

Such exclusion aligns with the grievance-based explanations of conflict advanced in the literature. Cederman et al. have argued that discrimination results in political violence, and Wimmer explains the origin of ethnic conflicts in weak post-colonial states over the control of the state as a result of neo-patrimonialism or clientelist networks. The case of Balochistan reflects both dynamics: persistent underrepresentation in political and bureaucratic structures, compounded by extractive resource policies, has fostered deep grievances that underpin the province’s recurring insurgencies. Drawing on the above scholarship, the article substantiates linkage between discrimination, grievances and insurgency with detailed empirical evidence of Balochistan’s marginalisation, beginning with its underrepresentation in the federal bureaucracy.

Our analysis of Balochistan’s representation in federal bureaucracy shows that Balochistan continues to be systematically marginalised. [Tables 1 and 2](#) provide detailed information about regional representation in federal bureaucracy against regional quotas. For the purpose of analysis, statistics pertaining to only officer cadre have been included, as most decisions regarding the implementation and adoption of policies are taken at higher echelons (basic scale 20 to 22). Pakistan has a unified basic scale system in which all the grades have been divided between 1 to 22. Officers are drawn from basic scales 17 to 22, while grade scales 1 to 16 are comprised of support staff. However, [Table 1](#) includes data for scale 16 as well, as it is reproduced from a secondary source, but it still provides a good overall picture. The Federal Secretariat includes key policymaking departments like Planning and Development, Foreign Affairs, Finance, Cabinet division, and Establishment division. It can be clearly seen that in the Federal Secretariat, Balochistan, among the four provinces, has the least representation. This has seen only a slight improvement from 3.1 per cent in 1980 to 4.27 per cent in 2023.

Moreover, Balochistan is not represented equally in the officer cadre of the military establishment. Although there is a dearth of available data on regional representation in the military, a study by Stephen Cohen, a longtime political scientist on Pakistan affairs, established that almost 80 per cent of the military personnel were drawn from Punjab.⁶⁷ Recently, Talbot established that ‘approximately 75 per cent of the Army is drawn from

Table 1. Regional representation in federal Secretariat in 1980.^{65.}

Region	Regional Quota	Federal Secretariat (Basic Scale 16–22) in 1980
Punjab and Islamabad	50 per cent	5839 (55.1 per cent)
Sindh	19 per cent	2986 (28.1 per cent)
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (former NWFP)	11.5 per cent	1189 (11.2 per cent)
Balochistan	3.5 per cent	325 (3.1 per cent)
Gilgit Baltistan (former Northern Areas)	4 per cent	208 (2 per cent)
Azad Kashmir	2 per cent	58 (0.5 per cent)

Table 2. Regional representation in Federal Secretariat and attached departments in 2019 and 2023.⁶⁶

Region	Regional Quota	2019		2023	
		Federal Secretariat (Basic Scale 17–22)	Attached Departments (Basic Scale 17–22)	Federal Secretariat (Basic Scale 17–22)	Attached Department (Basic Scale 17–22)
Islamabad	50 per cent	83 (3.17 per cent)	719 (2.96 per cent)	87 (3.57 per cent)	1005 (4 per cent)
Punjab		1506 (57.84 per cent)	13884 (57.14 per cent)	1327 (54.39 per cent)	13717 (54.54 per cent)
Sindh	19 per cent	373 (14.24 per cent)	3902 (16.06 per cent)	396 (16.23 per cent)	3808 (15.14 per cent)
Balochistan	6 per cent	129 (4.92 per cent)	981 (4.04 per cent)	105 (4.3 per cent)	1074 (4.27 per cent)
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	14.5 per cent	440 (16.79 per cent)	4115 (16.94 per cent)	446 (18.28 per cent)	4183 (16.63 per cent)
Azad Kashmir	2 per cent	70 (2.67 per cent)	437 (1.8 per cent)	52 (2.13 per cent)	1076 (4.28 per cent)
Gilgit Baltistan	1 per cent	19 (0.73 per cent)	259 (1.07 per cent)	27 (1.11 per cent)	289 (1.15 per cent)

just three Punjab districts. Balochistan and Sindh together only makeup about 5 per cent of Army personnel’.⁶⁸

Even during democratic periods, Balochistan has faced systemic discrimination in key constitutional offices, highlighting that its marginalisation extends beyond the military and bureaucratic spheres. For instance, Table 3 shows all the key constitutional public offices ever occupied by an individual from Balochistan. In the parliamentary democratic system in Pakistan, only one prime minister has ever been elected from Balochistan, and that too during a military regime. Recently, a senator from Balochistan was appointed as a caretaker prime minister for a few months as well. In the relatively powerful lower house of the parliament, National Assembly, not a single leader from Balochistan has been appointed speaker. Likewise, Baloch representation in other constitutional offices is either non-existent or exceptionally low.

It is important to note that the above analysis is based on the provincial domicile breakdown, not the ethnic composition within each province. Since the federal government does not report data by ethnicity, it is reasonable to assume that the representation of ethnic Baloch people from Balochistan may be even lower since Baloch and Brahvi speakers together constitute about only 53 per cent of the province’s population.

Such extreme underrepresentation of Balochistan in key decisionmaking bodies not only underscores its exclusion from power corridors but also limited the provincial capacity to safeguard and promote its interests at the national policy level.⁶⁹ Domination over key decision-making bodies coupled with the exclusion of Balochistan allowed the military-bureaucratic oligarchy to formulate a resource allocation policy – the NFC award – that benefitted their own ethnic region.

Table 3. Number of key public office holders from Balochistan.

Position	Total	From Balochistan
President	14	0
Prime Minister (excluding caretaker)	23	1
Chief Justice	29	2 (democratically appointed)
National Assembly Speaker	21	0
Senate Chairperson	9	1
Leader of Opposition	19	0

Historically, NFC has allocated economic resources on the basis of population weightage which principally benefitted Punjab, the most populous province. This pattern of resource distribution reinforces the structural marginalisation of Balochistan and aligns with Wimmer’s argument that, in weak post-colonial states with constrained resources, bureaucracies tend to favour their own ethnic group when allocating state resources, leaving other groups excluded. As can be seen in the Table 4, prior to the adoption of the 7th NFC award in 2009, resource allocation to Balochistan had been meagre, disregarding both the economic contributions and developmental needs of the smaller provinces, thereby reinforcing grievances linked to discrimination and exclusion.

Furthermore, the historical exclusion of Balochistan from benefits of its own mineral resources remains at the heart of the insurgency. Baloch insurgents believe that these resources are being plundered by Pakistan and denied to the Baloch people. For instance, natural gas was discovered in 1952 in Balochistan, but it was piped to districts of Balochistan only in the 1980s when the gas had already been supplied to the other provinces of the country. Furthermore, despite contributing to 50 per cent of gas production of the country in 1980 (which fell to 25 per cent in the 2000s),⁷¹ Balochistan receives a meagre 12.5 per cent royalty on the value of the wellhead price. Khan highlighted scathing discrimination by highlighting that ‘estimated US\$275 million in foreign exchange per year, but the royalty that the province received for the gas was as trivial as \$1.2 million’.⁷² Similarly, the revenue-sharing arrangements for Gwadar port, under the Concession Agreement with the China Overseas Port Holding Company, further exacerbate these grievances – Balochistan is excluded from the port’s revenue, with 91 per cent going to the port operator and just 9 per cent to the federal government.⁷³ Additionally, the agreement grants the operator a 20-year exemption from both federal and provincial taxes, deepening the sense of economic injustice in the region.

Lastly, the Ethnic Power Relations dataset 2021 in Table 5 which categorises power relations among different ethnic and religious groups in Pakistan since the inception of the country demonstrates that among all the major ethnic groups, Baloch have been the most consistently powerless and discriminated against. Unlike other ethnic groups who have been co-opted from time to time by Punjabi bureaucratic-military elite, Baloch have always remained on the periphery. Therefore, their grievances run deeper than other groups.

Taken together, these patterns of political exclusion, bureaucratic underrepresentation, and economic exploitation illustrate the structural foundations of Balochistan’s grievances. The persistence of these injustices has deepened perceptions of exploitation and fuelled a sense of alienation that sustains the insurgency.

Table 4. Resource distribution under various NFC Awards.⁷⁰

NFC Award	Year	Federation: provinces distribution	Distribution within provinces			
			Punjab	Sindh	KPK (formerly NWFP)	Balochistan
1 st	1974	20:80	60.25	22.5	13.39	3.86
2 nd	1979	20:80	57.97	23.34	13.39	5.30
3 rd	1985		Interim Award			
4 th	1990	20:80	57.87	23.29	13.54	5.30
5 th	1996	62.5:37.5	57.88	23.38	13.54	5.30
6 th	2000		Interim Award			
	2006	55:45	57.36	23.71	13.82	5.11
7 th	2009	44:56	51.74	24.55	14.62	9.09

Table 5. Ethnic power Relations dataset 2021 for Pakistan.

Period	Bengali	Punjabi	Sindhi	Baloch	Muhajir	Pashtun	Hindus	Christians	Ahmadis
1947-71	Discriminated	Senior Partner	Powerless	Powerless	Senior Partner	Junior Partner	Discriminated	Discriminated	Junior Partner
1972-73	Bangladesh became an independent country	Senior Partner	Junior Partner	Powerless	Powerless	Powerless	Discriminated	Discriminated	Junior Partner
1974-77		Senior Partner	Junior Partner	Discriminated	Powerless	Powerless	Discriminated	Discriminated	Discriminated
1978-83		Senior Partner	Powerless	Powerless	Junior Partner	Junior Partner	Discriminated	Discriminated	Discriminated
1984-88		Senior Partner	Powerless	Powerless	Junior Partner	Junior Partner	Discriminated	Discriminated	Discriminated
1989-99		Senior Partner	Junior Partner	Powerless	Powerless	Powerless	Discriminated	Discriminated	Discriminated
2000-2008		Senior Partner	Powerless	Discriminated	Junior Partner	Junior Partner	Discriminated	Discriminated	Discriminated
2009-2013		Senior Partner	Junior Partner	Discriminated	Powerless	Junior Partner	Discriminated	Discriminated	Discriminated
2014-18		Senior Partner	Junior Partner	Discriminated	Powerless	Powerless	Discriminated	Discriminated	Discriminated
2019-21		Senior Partner	Junior Partner	Discriminated	Powerless	Junior Partner	Discriminated	Discriminated	Discriminated

CPEC in Balochistan and deepening insurgency

Our findings suggest that the separatist insurgency is driven, in part, by a model of development we term Community-Led Infrastructure Development (CILD) – a top-down approach centred on large-scale infrastructure bundles that prioritise economic integration and territorial consolidation. While CILD is applied in a wide range of national contexts, it takes on heightened political significance when implemented in resource-rich, marginalised, or frontier regions, often with the stated aims of addressing economic marginalisation, inequality and integrating these regions into the national economy.⁷⁴ These programs, historically facilitated by multinational corporations and multilateral organisations, have more recently been championed by rising international development actors such as China, with state-owned enterprises executing projects and China-led multilateral banks financing them.⁷⁵

In East Africa, such projects have exacerbated existing grievances by introducing significant socio-economic and political disruptions.⁷⁶ These projects attract a large influx of migrants seeking employment; however, local communities and marginalised populations perceive the presence and employment of ‘others’, or migrants, in these projects as yet another attempt to exclude them. Additionally, the visible disparities between local populations and project benefits amplify feelings of inequality and injustice, particularly in regions with historical grievances. This dynamic is further complicated by the militarised response of the state and project operators, which often fuels resentment, escalates unrest, and in some cases, leads to violence.⁷⁷

This dynamic is also evident in Balochistan, where CILD projects like Gwadar port and CPEC, rather than alleviating tensions, have exacerbated existing conflict.⁷⁸ While inaugurating Gwadar port, President Musharraf emphasised the economic significance of the new port in Balochistan’s development and its latent effect on peace and security.⁷⁹ President Xi Jinping also described BRI as a ‘road for peace’, with Chinese policymakers emphasising that BRI developmental projects could help mitigate conflicts in fragile states, particularly in contexts where traditional multilateral institutions are reluctant to provide funding.⁸⁰

To substantiate that CILD projects, in particular the CPEC, are actually worsening the current situation in Balochistan, we study the Baloch narrative on Gwadar and CPEC and analyse the UCDP’s data on 717 violent attacks perpetrated by Baloch insurgents between 2004 and 2023.

Since its inception, CPEC has been a controversial project in Balochistan, where both nationalists and separatists have criticised the initiative. While nationalist leaders complain about unequal distribution of benefits and exclusion from the policymaking process, separatists view the project as yet another attempt to colonise and extract resources. For instance, Akhtar Mengal, a Baloch nationalist and former parliamentarian, has on multiple occasions raised concerns about Gwadar and CPEC, highlighting exclusion from its decision-making process and uneven distribution of benefits.⁸¹

Similarly, separatists have attacked CPEC, calling it an ‘imperialistic scheme’ designed to plunder Baloch resources and alter the demographics of Balochistan by the influx of migrant workers from other provinces.⁸² Furthermore, local people, particularly from Gwadar, express grave concerns against resource extraction, over-securitisation of the project, and a sense of loss of their homeland.⁸³ Importantly, the Balochistan government

had also serious reservations about the CPEC implementation and design process. Indeed, as early as May 2015, the provincial government shared its concerns about exclusion from the consultation process and a shift in the federal government's priority regarding western route construction in the province.⁸⁴

Despite hopes and intentions for peace and economic integration, CPEC, rather than uniting the country, has further highlighted the fractures within the federal structure and deepened Baloch mistrust in the centre, worsening ethnic tensions.⁸⁵ Provincial and local stakeholders were excluded from CPEC planning at inter-provincial forums like the Council of Common Interest, and provinces were initially excluded from the Joint Coordination Committee--the body responsible for overall CPEC planning.⁸⁶ This reflected a trend towards reversal of devolution under the 18th Amendment and recentralisation of economic planning, mirroring the characteristics of CILD, where large-scale infrastructure projects are pursued in a top-down fashion.

In addition, we analyse the program's data on 717 violent attacks perpetrated by Baloch insurgents between 2004 and 2023. For analysis, we separate the number of attacks before and after the announcement of CPEC in April 2015. We find that since the announcement of CPEC in March 2015 the average yearly number of violent incidents has actually increased by 1.17 incidents between March 2015 and 2023 compared to the period between 2004 and March 2015. Of 717 attacks, 401 took place before the announcement of CPEC, while 316 occurred afterwards. Moreover, data establishes that target cities are mainly the ones that are part of CPEC project, as shown in the Table 6 below. We define Balochistan CPEC districts as those cities in which at least one CPEC-related project is planned, whereas non-CPEC districts do not have any such projects. Out of 32 districts of Balochistan, 21 are CPEC districts.

The introduction of CPEC in April 2015 also creates conditions approximating a natural experiment which allows us to study the impact of the introduction of CPEC projects on violent incidents.⁸⁷ The above analysis suggests that when Pakistani state, dominated by ethnic groups involved in discrimination against Balochs, initiates CILD projects, these are perceived by separatists as efforts to colonise Balochistan.

In this context, development is further fuelling resentment and violence instead of bringing peace and prosperity to the region. Development activities without political legitimacy have not delivered promised results, as the underlying causes of the conflict are not economic but political. In fact, the fifth wave of insurgency has emerged in response to CILD projects in Balochistan. The implementation of CILD through projects like CPEC has reinforced perceptions of exclusion and exploitation. The insurgents believe that China and Pakistan are exploiting Balochistan's resources for their own benefit by colonising their land.⁸⁸ Recently, they have not only attacked critical infrastructure and Pakistani security forces in a coordinated manner but also unleashed fierce attacks against Chinese workers.⁸⁹ These findings have broader implications for national

Table 6. Number of attacks before and after CPEC in CPEC and non-CPEC districts in Balochistan.

	Pre-CPEC	Post-CPEC
CPEC district	241	270
Non-CPEC district	153	36

and international development efforts, highlighting the risks of pursuing infrastructure-led peace without adequate measures to address grievances through attention to community capacity and agency.

Conclusion

In Balochistan, Centralised, Infrastructure-Led Development (CILD) implemented in line with the developmental peace model layered onto long-standing political and ethnonational grievances has functioned less as a unifying ‘road for peace’ than as a catalyst for renewed insurgent mobilisation. Drawing on disaggregated data from the UCDP, we show that violent attacks by Baloch separatists increased in districts hosting CPEC projects after the initiative’s launch in 2015, while remaining comparatively lower in non-CPEC districts.

These patterns align with our analysis of ethno-political underrepresentation and economic exclusion, which illustrates the roots of historical grievances in the province. While intended to bridge the divide, the fusion of Chinese-style centralised project delivery with Pakistan’s longstanding security-state governance has deepened pre-existing centre – periphery cleavages and further undermined legitimacy in the province. Mistrust has deepened, fuelling targeted violence against infrastructure and personnel. Possibly in response to these outcomes, Chinese policymakers have more recently emphasised a shift from grand megaprojects towards what some describe as ‘small is beautiful’ initiatives – smaller, greener and more locally embedded projects in its overseas engagement.⁹⁰ Elaborating on this emphasis, the core insight from our study is not that infrastructure investment is inherently destabilising, but that when large-scale development bypasses community agency, it can sharpen existing fault lines. Conversely, comparative evidence suggests that when development is accompanied by mechanisms for local participation, benefit-sharing, and dispute resolution, its conflict-exacerbating effects can be mitigated. In short, the grand narrative of the BRI matters less than what model of development flows along it.

This outcome is not inevitable. Comparative evidence from other BRI and non-BRI contexts shows that when large-scale infrastructure in conflict-affected regions is governed through more participatory and adaptive arrangements – those that embed local input, share benefits transparently, and build institutional capacity – they can offset legitimacy deficits and contribute to stability. The security impact of development initiatives like the BRI may thus hinge not simply on the volume or visibility of investment, but on whether its execution follows a top-down imposition of development models or opens channels for co-production and local agency. It is important to note that CPEC embodies real potential for Pakistan’s connectivity and economic growth. If implemented with attention to local aspirations, it could serve not only as a development corridor but also as a platform for regional cooperation and long-term stability.

Our analysis shows that the escalation in violent incidents since the announcement of CPEC underscores the limitations of prevailing development models when they are introduced into contexts marked by deep-rooted grievance and legitimacy deficits. Addressing such conflicts requires more than economic incentives; it requires a process in which local agency and aspirations are incorporated into the region’s development. One aspect of this process may be formal representation and improved inclusion in national institutions and

political structures. But another, perhaps more critical, dimension lies in building the capacity of local communities to draw on traditional knowledge and governance structures, access outside expertise, articulate their priorities, deliberate collectively, engage with policymakers, and participate meaningfully in shaping development trajectories.⁹¹

Historical experience shows that insurgencies rooted in grievance and exclusion are difficult to suppress through coercion or investment alone. In some cases, resolution has been addressed through the reconfiguration of formal political arrangements, as with the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland.⁹² However, in Balochistan, the conflict has evolved beyond demands for provincial autonomy. Positions have hardened, with Baloch insurgents now pursuing separatist aims, while the Pakistani state remains firm in preserving national unity, unable to allow another dismemberment of the country. This retrenchment makes a negotiated resolution particularly challenging. What is clear, however, is that infrastructure-led development in its current form will not be sufficient to 'buy out' opposition or reverse the loss of trust.

Still, the field remains open for innovation. Pakistani federal authorities, Balochistan's bureaucratic institutions, and Chinese regulators, financiers, and state-owned enterprises involved in CPEC projects all retain an opportunity to innovate the governance of development. Lessons – both positive and cautionary – can be drawn from decades of Western-backed infrastructure-led growth initiatives in Africa, Latin America, and South and Southeast Asia, and from within China itself. In this respect, channels for knowledge-sharing between communities across Global South borders, often mediated by social organisations and international NGOs, can prove invaluable.⁹³ Deepening people-to-people ties, as highlighted in the BRI documents and called for by several keen observers of CPEC can also contribute to productive knowledge flows and exchange of experience, as well as community engagement and deeper trust and legitimacy.⁹⁴ In particular, there is growing international interest in efforts that blend large-scale infrastructure investment with participatory mechanisms and community engagement. These include community-led infrastructure development, deliberative and traditional consultative structures, and collaborative community governance mechanisms which empower populations to leverage knowledge to navigate a collective development path in concert with state authorities and global development actors.

While this paper does not prescribe institutional reform or offer a fully developed model, our findings point towards the potential value of innovation in infrastructure led-development. Combined with a broader shift away from militarised responses to civil unrest, such innovation may help development better fulfill its promise, not just as a tool of economic growth, but as a foundation for lasting peace and prosperity.

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Annex

Region wise distribution of National Assembly Seats (Source: National Assembly of Pakistan)

Province	General	Women	Non-Muslims	Total
Balochistan	16	4		20
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	45	10		55
Punjab	141	32		173
Sindh	61	14		75
Federal Capital	3			3
			10	10
Total	266	60	10	336