

THE DURAND DISPATCH

Perspectives · Security Intelligence on the Afghanistan–Pakistan Region

ECONOMIC WARFARE IN BALOCHISTAN

Why Kinetic Operations & Repression Alone Won't End Balochistan's Insurgency

By Dr. Amira Jadoon, David Reas, and Anne Marie Arthington

June 26, 2026 · duranddispatch.com

The latest wave of attacks in Balochistan shows an insurgency outpacing the state's response, increasingly threatening the province's economic backbone and foreign investment. Without political space and credible redress, kinetic and repressive responses risk deepening the grievances that drive the insurgency, trapping the region in a self-perpetuating cycle of violence.

Balochistan is settling into a pattern which Pakistan's security establishment has been slow to acknowledge. Militant violence has not only persisted but is [diversifying](#), spreading across the province, and reaching deeper into its economic fabric. The violence is increasingly directed at the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and other economic and infrastructure projects which the state is counting on to integrate Balochistan into national and global supply chains. Yet the national state response to political violence remains overwhelmingly kinetic and reactive, despite legal and governance initiatives. The result is a widening gap between a fast-evolving threat and a largely static response. The events of 2025 and 2026 underscore a stark reality: force and repression alone are unlikely to resolve the Baloch insurgency, and instead risk deepening the very grievances that sustain it.

A Rising and Evolving Insurgency

Since 2021, militant [violence](#) in Pakistan's Balochistan province has risen steadily, with no signs of abating. According to [ACLED](#) data (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data), over 2,000 militant-initiated battles and attacks were recorded in Balochistan between January 2021 and June 2025, the vast majority of which were attributed to Baloch separatist groups, including the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), the Baloch Liberation Front (BLF), the Baloch Raaji Aajoi Sangar (BRAS), and the Baloch Republican Guard (BRG). The figures include events in which Baloch militants were the initiating actors across armed clashes, explosions, and attacks on security forces and civilians.

The trajectory is one of steep escalation with some sources recording over [800 terrorism-related incidents](#) in Balochistan alone, in 2025. Beyond their rising frequency, these operations have grown more coordinated and higher-impact, increasingly directed at the province's economic infrastructure and foreign investment.

In late January 2026, the BLA's [Operation Herof 2.0](#) struck security forces and critical infrastructure across twelve districts, a dramatic escalation from the group's historically remote, rural insurgency into complex urban warfare. The months that followed sustained that tempo, culminating in June, when the BLA declared an explicit "[economic blockade](#)," destroying over 36 mineral and fuel convoys and blowing up two bridges on CPEC routes. The pattern is deliberate: Baloch militants are deliberately directing their violence at the economic arteries that sustain Pakistani state power and attract foreign capital.

A Long-Running Pattern

While the pattern of economic warfare is striking, it is certainly not new. Baloch separatist groups have targeted economic infrastructure, Chinese interests, and symbols of state-backed development for years, including attacks on Chinese nationals and facilities, such as the [Chinese consulate](#) in Karachi in 2018 and the [Gwardar Port Hotel](#) in 2019 (deliberately targeting Chinese and other foreign investors). The Pakistan Stock Exchange was also attacked in 2020, a target [likely chosen](#) in part due to a Chinese consortium acquiring a 40% stake in the exchange four years prior. The BLA's multi-phase "Operation [Zir Pahazag](#)" between 2021 and 2024 also underscored the centrality of anti-China and anti-state economic targets in the group's strategy. What appears to be changing though is the attacks' scale, tempo, and coordination, as well as their integration into a broader campaign against extraction, transport, construction, and trade. This shift reflects an effort to raise the costs of state presence and external investment in Balochistan, particularly in sectors viewed by insurgent groups as symbols of resource exploitation and political exclusion.

The quantitative record bears this out: economic targeting has not only persisted but claimed a steadily larger share of militant violence in the province. Of the more than 2,000 ACLED-recorded attacks by Baloch separatist groups, roughly one in eight struck economic rather than security targets (Figure 1), and the economic share has nearly doubled — from 8% in 2021 to about 14% in 2024–2025. As shown in Figure 2, the violence concentrates on the extractive and logistics economy, mining and minerals, construction contractors, and gas pipelines — with direct strikes on Chinese personnel and Gwadar comparatively rare but high-profile. The composition has shifted markedly: mining and minerals, a marginal category in 2021, became the single largest sector by 2024, accounting for roughly a third of all economic-target attacks. At the same time, the targeting has broadened across nearly every sector reflecting a campaign aimed at the full extractive and logistics economy rather than any single chokepoint.

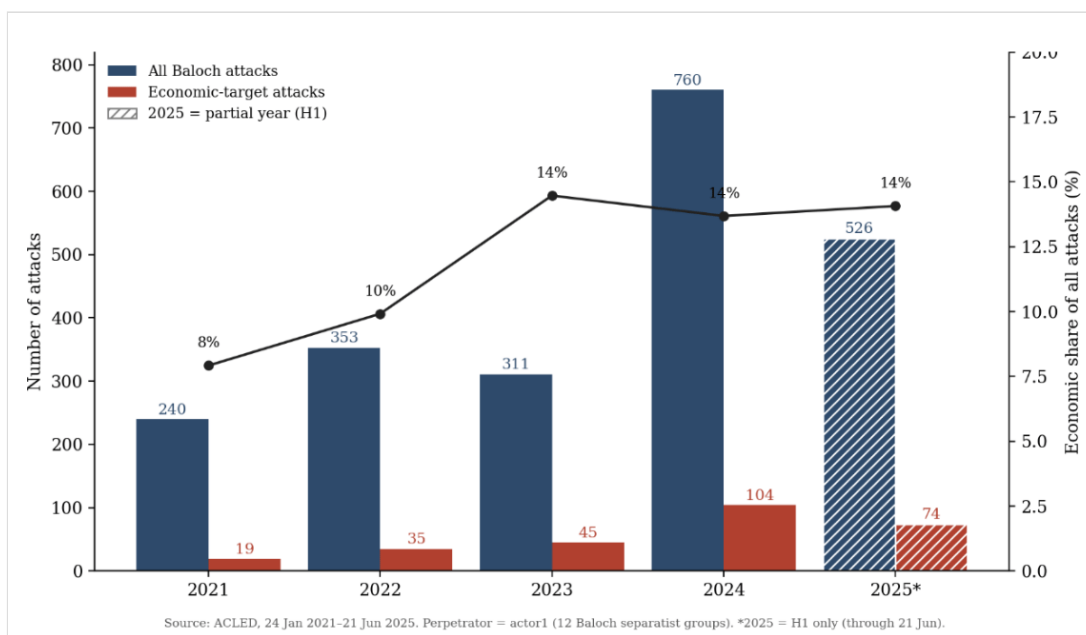


Figure 1: Baloch Militant Economic-Targets (January 2021–June 2025)

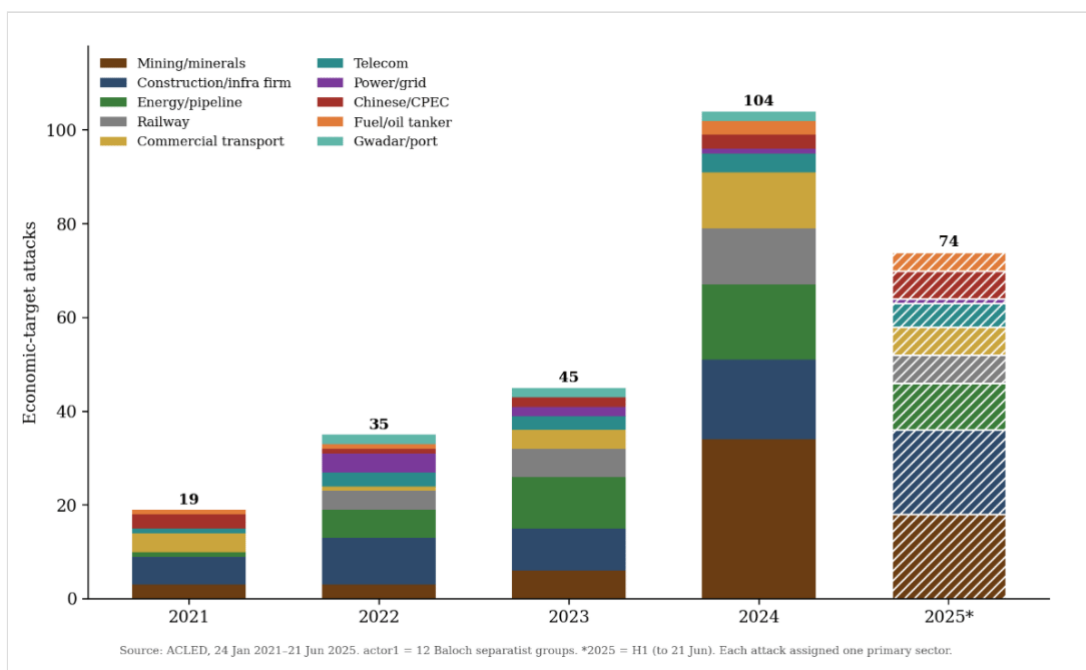


Figure 2: Baloch Militant Economic-Targets by Sector (January 2021–June 2025)

The 2026 Escalation in Focus

The months of April and May 2026 witnessed a severe escalation in the conflict over Balochistan's resources, as militant groups intensified their systematic assaults on mining operations and military outposts. On 22 April 2026, around forty armed men [stormed a copper-gold exploration site](#) operated by

National Resources Limited in the Darigwan area of Chagai district — the same district that hosts [Reko Diq](#), one of the world's largest undeveloped copper-gold deposits. Nine workers and security guards were killed. No group claimed responsibility, but the targeting fits a well-established pattern of insurgent attacks on the province's extractive economy.

Between 25 April and 3 May, the BLA claimed [at least eleven separate operations](#) across the province, including: blockades on the Panjgur-Chedgi route during which fighters reportedly disabled trailers transporting minerals; a grenade attack on construction company quarters in Dalbandin; and strikes on army convoys. On 16 May, BLA cadres killed six security personnel in a clash near Dalbandin town. A day later, three military personnel were killed in a coordinated attack on army posts in the Mand area of Kech district. And towards the end of May, militants set fire to more than [thirty commercial cargo containers](#) in the Badoo area of Nushki district, in a deliberate effort to degrade the province's logistics network.

CPEC, the flagship Chinese infrastructure investment in Pakistan, is widely condemned by Baloch militants, who accuse it of [extracting](#) the province's resources while excluding the Baloch population. The BLF has pursued a consistent strategy of targeting the Frontier Works Organization (FWO) — the Pakistan Army's engineering and construction arm and a lead contractor on the CPEC. The pattern runs from [2023](#) through the group's own [2024](#) combat report, which claimed its fighters destroyed FWO vehicles and machinery, into [2025](#).

The Logic of Economic Warfare

What was once [characterized](#) as a low-intensity ethno-nationalist movement has evolved into a more lethal, coordinated, and ideologically assertive campaign. Suicide bombings, once relatively limited in the Baloch context are now a regular feature; on 24 May 2026, the BLA's Majeed Brigade drove an explosives-laden vehicle into a shuttle train carrying security personnel and their families in Quetta, killing [dozens](#). Moreover, the insurgency's strike radius has expanded from its historic Marri and Bugti tribal heartland across roughly a dozen districts as [Operation Herof 2.0](#) demonstrated in late January 2026, striking from the Makran coast to the Iran border.

The targeting follows a clear logic: insurgent groups are deliberately going after the economic infrastructure that the state, China, and increasingly the United States are counting on to integrate Balochistan into national and global supply chains. This logic is not unique to Balochistan: recent [research](#) on global insurgent organizations finds that attacking the external powers backing groups' local adversary tends to boost a group's *recruitment, alliances, and survival*. Though developed in the context of [anti-American insurgent violence](#), the mechanism extends to other great-power patrons, helping explain why Chinese and CPEC targets have become so persistent.

And the damage is already evident. In early 2026, mineral trucks were torched on the CPEC route near Kalag Cross in Kharan, part of a sustained [anti-transport campaign](#) intended to choke provincial mineral exports. The pressure soon reached the province's foreign investment projects: in late March 2026, [Barrick Mining slowed development](#) of the Reko Diq copper-gold project and pushed its security review out twelve months to mid-2027, citing a deteriorating security environment in Pakistan and the wider region. Barrick reaffirmed its long-term commitment, but the delay shows insurgent pressure, compounded by the Iran war, is already reshaping the state's calculus. By May 2026, the Balochistan Goods Truck Owners Association had suspended mineral transport [province-wide](#), citing repeated attacks and extortion.

Such attacks also undermine investor confidence and strain China–Pakistan economic cooperation. By late 2024, Beijing was openly warning that the security threat to its nationals was impeding its investments in Pakistan, a rare public expression of dissatisfaction that analysts read as China [running short of patience](#) with CPEC's security record.

A Professionalizing Insurgency: Recruitment, Tactics, and Reach

Alongside the Baloch militancy's economic warfare, the tactical evolution is equally notable, as militant groups continue to refine their recruitment and operational strategies. Both the BLF and the BLA have moved toward systematic [recruitment](#) of women, including for suicide operations. The [November 2025 Nokundi attack](#) on a Frontier Corps (FC) base, allegedly [carried out](#) by a female BLF operative, is part of an accelerating pattern; during Operation Herof 2.0, the BLA's Majeed Brigade [incorporated female operatives](#) and released propaganda casting women as [symbols](#) of resistance. This mobilization increasingly reaches downward to minors: in December 2025, authorities foiled a plot to send a [teenage schoolgirl](#), radicalized over social media content glorifying past female bombers, as a suicide bomber in Karachi. Across Pakistan, militant organizations with very different ideologies appear to be converging on the same conclusion: [women are strategic assets](#) that gender-blind counterterrorism frameworks routinely miss.

These groups are also making concerted efforts to appeal to college-educated youth: Shari Baloch, the BLA suicide bomber behind the 2022 Karachi University attack that [killed three Chinese teachers](#), held a Master's degree and tribute posters now routinely feature fighters schooled at universities outside Balochistan. As evidenced in its propaganda materials, BLF has also begun to [institutionalize](#) this pipeline, pairing ideological indoctrination with military instruction to produce disciplined cadres. Additionally, it targets younger populations [through](#) the aesthetics of digital culture: for example, BLF propaganda has mimicked first-person-shooter games to glamorize combat.

Operationally, there has been a shift from [traditional](#) “hit-and-run attacks” toward attempted territorial control. Across 2025 the BLA briefly [seized a string of towns](#) running snap checkpoints, burning administrative buildings, and [looting banks](#), all to project an alternative administration and expose the state's inability to hold the periphery. That reach has been aided by infiltration: in an unprecedented

admission, the BLA claimed [facilitators](#) within the security forces, hailing a slain levies-affiliated operative as one of its own. Taken together—educated cadres, structured training, gamified outreach, and creeping territorial control—these trends point to a relentless insurgency that is becoming more organized, capable, and geographically widespread.

The Limits of a Security-Led Response

Pakistan's security concerns in Balochistan are, of course, not imaginary. Separatist groups have targeted security forces, civilians, Chinese nationals, transport networks, and strategic economic infrastructure. No state facing this pattern of violence would abandon coercive tools altogether. The question is not whether Pakistan should conduct security operations, but whether a predominantly coercive approach can succeed without parallel political, legal, and economic measures that are perceived as credible to Baloch communities.

Over time, however, the balance of Pakistan's response has remained tilted toward security-led measures. [Critics](#) argue that this has reinforced a perception among many Baloch communities that the province is treated as a resource to be secured rather than a partner to be integrated into the federation. Islamabad has prioritized the protection of CPEC projects, designating it a [national priority](#). To that end, Pakistan raised a dedicated [Special Security Division](#), built around two army divisions, to safeguard the corridor, and established hundreds of checkpoints around project sites for their [protection](#). Although development spending has increased, comparatively less emphasis has gone to political grievances, accountability, and mechanisms that allow Baloch [communities](#) to shape decisions about security, resources, and local governance.

At the same time, the state's response has not been purely coercive, and some recent initiatives indicate at least a formal recognition of the need for legal, developmental, and governance reforms. On 20 January, 2026, Balochistan Chief Minister Sarfraz Bugti [announced](#) what he described as a new legal framework to address the alleged disappearances of multiple Baloch citizens. According to reports, the framework would give law enforcement agencies a formal mechanism to investigate suspects, allow families to meet suspects during interrogations, and move some detention practices into a more regulated legal structure. These measures, if implemented transparently and independently monitored, could represent a meaningful attempt to address one of the province's most politically charged grievances. Their credibility, however, will depend less on official announcements than on whether families receive timely information, and relevant entities are held accountable for violations.

There have also been development and governance initiatives that complicate a purely repression-focused reading of the state's approach. For fiscal year 2025–26, Balochistan's [Public Sector Development Program](#) (PSDP) listed thousands of ongoing and new schemes across public infrastructure, water supply, agriculture, health, education, skills development, fisheries, women's development, social protection, and

district-level service delivery. These investments do not resolve the underlying political grievances surrounding resource extraction, but they do show that the state has attempted to pair security measures with development spending.

The Reko Diq project [offers](#) a more mixed picture than earlier extractive arrangements. Under the current structure, Barrick owns 50 percent of the project, Pakistani federal state-owned enterprises hold 25 percent, and the Government of Balochistan holds 25 percent. These features provide a formal provincial stake that was often absent from earlier resource projects. As of the end of March 2025, the project website [reports](#) that 77 percent of permanent Reko Diq Mining Company employees were from Balochistan, including 65 percent from Chagai district, and that more than 14 percent were women. These figures suggest that the project has a stronger formal provincial stake and more visible local employment component than many earlier extractive arrangements.

The provincial government has also announced governance reforms aimed at reducing patronage in public-sector recruitment. On 12 January 2026, Bugti announced that [recruitment](#) for Finance Department posts would be conducted through an online, paperless, merit-based process, which he framed as an effort to curb corruption, nepotism, and job-selling. The cabinet also indicated that digital recruitment could be extended to other provincial departments. This is a relevant reform because perceptions of exclusion, corruption, and unequal access to state employment are part of the province's wider alienation. Education-sector measures are also worth noting. In January 2026, the Balochistan government [announced](#) plans to recruit 4,000 ad hoc teachers under the province's Academic Excellence Program, with a focus on shortages in English, mathematics, and science.

Overall, these steps are not insignificant. For these measures to matter politically, however, they must be accompanied by a sustained reopened civic space, credible accountability for abuses, and meaningful local participation in decisions about Balochistan's economic future.

A Self-Perpetuating Cycle

A recurring criticism is that the state's response has not always distinguished clearly between armed insurgents and peaceful activists. Baloch activists have at times been characterized as [separatists](#), a pattern the [UN's own human rights experts](#) described in 2025 as conflating legitimate advocacy with terrorism. Rights groups contend that civilians often bear the consequences, pointing to enforced disappearances and alleged extrajudicial killings. The Human Rights Council of Balochistan, a Baloch rights monitor, [counted](#) 530 enforced disappearances and 268 alleged extrajudicial killings between January and April 2026, attributing most cases to the FC and Counter Terrorism Department (CTD). These figures come from an advocacy organization, have not been independently verified, and are not acknowledged by the state.

By the government's own count, Pakistani security forces killed over 216 militants during the late January–February 2026 wave of attacks alone. Operations have continued through the spring. And yet the attacks have not stopped. The reason, in part, is structural. One driver is economic: the current phase of the Baloch insurgency has been transformed by the politics of CPEC and great-power competition. Mega-development projects launched without adequate local stakes have amplified, not alleviated, the perception of resource extraction, what critics describe as “contemporary colonialism and exploitation.” Rather than bringing the promised economic development, projects such as the deep-water port in Gwadar have displaced residents without compensation while drawing in specialized workers from China and elsewhere in Pakistan. The remaining residents, most of whom rely on fishing, must compete with Chinese fishing trawlers for depleted fish stocks. Gwadar, sold as Pakistan's Dubai, remains without reliable water or electricity for its existing population. Reko Diq, despite a more favorable formal ownership structure for Balochistan than earlier arrangements, remains vulnerable to being seen as a symbol of what is being taken rather than what is being delivered.

Layered on top of this is the interaction of governance gaps, security operations, and civic mobilization that drives recurrent unrest. Islamabad's crackdowns on peaceful Baloch protests — most visibly the detention of activist Mahrang Baloch, and her subsequent life sentencing for organizing a protest during which a paramilitary soldier was killed and the broader pressure on the Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC) — have narrowed the space for non-violent political expression at exactly the moment when alternatives to militancy are most needed. The Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances has recorded close to 3,000 cases in Balochistan since 2011 — part of more than ten thousand nationwide. In the first four months of 2026 alone, data from the Human Rights Council of Balochistan recorded over a hundred disappeared students, along with another hundred individuals from working-class backgrounds. Enforced disappearances have become a leading insurgent grievance, while Islamabad has granted the CTD and FC greater authority in detaining suspected insurgents. The result is a closed loop: the state criminalizes peaceful dissent, dissenters lose adherents to armed groups, those groups mount increasingly sophisticated attacks, and the state answers with more force — which deepens the grievances that drive the cycle anew.

What Comes Next

Pakistan's current approach risks entrenching instability rather than resolving it. Three correctives are overdue.

First, the state must distinguish between militant networks and peaceful political expression.

Repression of the social movements, restrictions on protest and political dissent, and convictions of prominent social movement leaders, alongside other repressive measures do not weaken the insurgency, they exacerbate the conditions for it. Reopening political space is not a concession; it is an essential counterinsurgency strategy.

Second, foreign investment in the province must come with credible local stakes. Mega-projects without meaningful Baloch participation, equitable revenue-sharing, or guarantees against demographic displacement will continue to be read as extraction. The scale of accommodation required is, moreover, modest. Balochistan accounts for roughly 6 percent of Pakistan’s population yet spans more than 40 percent of its territory and holds much of its mineral and energy wealth — an asymmetry that makes the political cost of accommodating its people small against the value of what the state is trying to secure. Continued refusal reflects political will, not fiscal limits. Both Islamabad and its Chinese, American, and Gulf partners have a self-interest in changing this calculus, since their investments are now physically in the line of fire.

Third, accountability mechanisms matter. The grievances driving Baloch alienation are not abstract. They are specific: missing persons, extrajudicial killings, the lack of accountability and transparent justice. A substantial body of research finds that such abuses are associated with higher, not lower, levels of political violence, because state repression of physical-integrity rights erodes the cooperation and intelligence that counterterrorism depends on. Without credible institutional pathways to address them, the population the state needs to win over will remain estranged from it.

Kinetic operations against organized militant networks have their place. But their limits are clear: even amid intensified operations, the insurgency has not only persisted but grown more capable — drawing in educated recruits, fielding female operatives, and seizing towns outright. Force can degrade networks; it cannot dissolve the grievances that replenish and professionalize them, and repression only lends credibility to the militants’ claim that the state offers Baloch communities no path but armed struggle. Unless political space is reopened, grievances are addressed through credible institutions rather than denied through force, and Balochistan’s economic future is built with its people rather than imposed on them, the insurgency is likely to keep outpacing the state’s response.

Dr. Amira Jadoon is the founding editor of the *Durand Dispatch* and a professor of political science. **David Reas** and **Anne Marie Arthington** are researchers at the American University Repository for Open-Source Research & Analysis (AURORA). Reas, a graduate of AU’s School of Public Affairs with an MS in Terrorism and Homeland Security Policy, focuses on terrorism and insurgent warfare for the Africa Division. Arthington, a graduate student at AU’s School of International Service with a bachelor’s in Chinese Studies, analyzes transnational threats in the South and Central Asia Division.

Originally published at duranddispatch.com · June 26, 2026