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[Violent Extremism in Balochistan: Challenges to CPEC and Counter Measures]

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ABSTRACT

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), holds transformative potential for Pakistan's economic development. However, its success is critically undermined by violent extremism in Balochistan—CPEC's strategic yet volatile hub. This study explores the complex inter-play between insurgent threats, particularly from terrorist groups like the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), and Pakistan's multifaceted counter-measures. Drawing on contemporary academic sources, official reports, and policy analyses, the paper highlights how persistent attacks, cross-border militancy, and local grievances jeopardize foreign investment and regional stability. In response, the government has implemented robust military operations, improved border control, youth-focused programs, and socio-economic initiatives to restore security and trust. Despite notable successes—such as a decline in high-profile attacks and improved infrastructure—gaps remain, including limited community participation, uneven benefit distribution, and lingering distrust. The paper concludes by offering targeted policy recommendations, emphasizing inclusive governance, local empowerment, transparent revenue-sharing, and strengthened community-police partnerships. Overall, the research argues that sustainable peace in Balochistan requires not only defeating terrorism but also addressing the root socio-political causes of unrest to ensure CPEC's long-term viability and regional integration.

Introduction

The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a flagship project under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), intended to connect Gwadar Port in Pakistan's Balochistan province to China's Xinjiang region through a series of infrastructure and energy investments valued at over \$60 billion (Small, 2020). While CPEC offers vast potential for regional connectivity, trade, and economic growth, its success is significantly threatened by violent extremism in Balochistan—a region long marred by insurgency, political unrest, and socio-economic marginalization (Yousaf, 2021).

Baloch militant groups such as the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) and Baloch Liberation Front (BLF) have targeted CPEC infrastructure and Chinese workers, citing grievances over resource exploitation, exclusion from decision-making, and military oppression (Walsh, 2022; Khan, 2023). High-profile attacks—including suicide bombings and assaults on Chinese engineers—have raised concerns not only over security but also over the sustainability of Chinese investments in the region (Mehmood, 2022).

These threats are further compounded by the use of social media platforms by militant groups for propaganda and recruitment. Militants have used platforms like TikTok to spread anti-CPEC narratives and recruit disenfranchised youth (Yasir, 2024).

In response, the Pakistani government has launched both military and socio-economic initiatives. These include the deployment of the Special Security Division (SSD), implementation of the National Action Plan (NAP), and youth-focused programs such as the Kamyab Jawan Program and the Gwadar Institute of Technology (Aslam, 2021; NACTA, 2023). While such efforts mark a step toward stabilization, experts argue that sustainable

peace in Balochistan will depend on genuine political inclusion, equitable resource distribution, and long-term investment in human capital (Baloch & Ahmed, 2022).

This paper explores the complex relationship between violent extremism and CPEC in Balochistan, and evaluates the effectiveness of state countermeasures, with particular emphasis on youth engagement and regional development.

Strategic Significance of Balochistan in CPEC

Balochistan occupies a geo-strategic crossroads in the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), connecting China's western Xinjiang region to the Arabian Sea via Gwadar Port. Its coastal position near the Strait of Hormuz offers China an overland route for energy imports and access to global maritime lanes—bypassing the strategic chokepoint of the Malacca Strait (Modern Diplomacy, 2018; Eurasia Review, 2024). This connectivity positions Gwadar as a pivotal hub in the Belt and Road Initiative, enhancing Pakistan's regional influence and trade capacity (Afzal & Naseem, 2024).

Infrastructure developments have bolstered this connectivity. Notably, the 19 km Gwadar East Bay Expressway, inaugurated as an early harvest project under CPEC, links the port to the Makran Coastal Highway—improving cargo flow and logistics (Modern Diplomacy, 2018). Other key projects, including the Nokundi–Mashkhel–Panjgur Road, integrate Gwadar with Iran's border and strengthen the western route (ISSI, 2025). Together, these connections form the backbone of overland trade corridors to Central and South Asia.

Economically, Balochistan is rich in natural resources—natural gas, coal, valuable minerals, and high-value fruit production (Eurasia Review, 2024; CPECInfo, 2024). Under CPEC, industrial zones and a Free Zone in Gwadar are designed to catalyze local manufacturing, exports, and processing of these resources (ISSI, 2025). Recent energy initiatives, such as the 300 MW coal power plant and renewable energy projects, aim to address chronic electricity shortages and support industrial growth (Eurasia Review, 2023).

As a result, CPEC has already begun generating employment in construction, transportation, and energy sectors—providing livelihood opportunities in a province traditionally plagued by poverty, underemployment, and underdevelopment (Samaa TV, 2024; Pakistan Observer, 2025). Investments in infrastructure and vocational training institutes are expected to further enhance human capital and inject economic dynamism into the region (CRSS, 2025).

However, these economic gains are constrained by weak governance, underutilized human resources, and ongoing security challenges. Balochistan contributes just over 4 percent to national GDP, reflecting significant underdevelopment despite its resource wealth (Pakistan Observer, 2025). Moreover, persistent local grievances surrounding perceived resource expropriation and limited local benefits pose risks to long-term stability (FT, 2025; The Guardian, 2025).

In essence, Balochistan's significance to CPEC is multifaceted—rooted in its geography, infrastructure, and rich resources. Its development is essential for achieving CPEC's economic and strategic objectives. But to translate potential into outcomes, the region must address security challenges, governance deficits, and local inclusion.

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Overview of Violent Extremism in Balochistan

Balochistan has experienced a persistent insurgency since the mid-20th century, propelled by grievances over socio-economic exclusion, resource expropriation, and lack of political autonomy (Eurasia Review, 2024). Major militant groups include the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA)—the most potent faction, responsible for high-profile attacks and suicide operations—and the Baloch Liberation Front (BLF). These militant organizations have evolved from guerrilla tactics into complex insurgencies that occasionally employ suicide bombers to target state and economic symbols (Reuters, 2024). Since CPEC's initiation in 2015, the insurgency intensified, especially against Chinese-linked projects. The BLA's Majeed Brigade has claimed responsibility for attacks such as the 2018 Karachi consulate bombing, the 2019 assault on Gwadar's Pearl Continental hotel, and the 2021 suicide bombing of a convoy of Chinese workers in Gwadar (Eurasia Review, 2018; Reuters, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2024).

It is said that violence has escalated notably since 2021. In March 2024, eight gunmen from the BLA launched a prolonged assault on the Gwadar Port Authority complex—claiming multiple casualties (Al Jazeera, 2024). In March 2025, the BLA attacked the Jaffar Express, a passenger train, taking more than 400 hostages in an operation that resulted in at least 64 deaths, including security personnel and civilians (Wikipedia, 2025). These attacks demonstrate the group's operational capacity and willingness to inflict high-casualty damage to highlight their cause.

Militant propaganda efforts have become technologically sophisticated. The BLA and affiliated organizations use platforms like TikTok to disseminate anti-CPEC messaging, recruit youth, and spread disinformation. Anti-CPEC content on TikTok surged since 2015, with Baloch content reportedly viewed by over a third of local users in 2024, often under hashtags like #StopCPEC (The Express Tribune, 2024),

Human rights concerns further exacerbate tensions. Reports of forced disappearances and extrajudicial killings—many attributed to Pakistani security forces—have fueled local resentment. Demonstrations have occurred, decrying state brutality in regions like Gwadar and Quetta (Reuters, 2024).

This complex insurgency presents multi-dimensional threats to CPEC:

- **Operational Threat:** Physical attacks on port infrastructure, convoys, and personnel heighten security costs and delay project timelines.
- **Political Disorder:** Growing local resistance undermines state legitimacy and makes governance difficult.
- **Regional Instability:** Cross-border bases near Afghanistan and Iran facilitate the mobility of insurgent groups.
- **Information Warfare:** Online campaigns destabilize public perception and inhibit investment.

Cumulatively, these factors pose a substantial impediment to CPEC's viability in Balochistan. The following sections will explore government and military responses designed to neutralize these threats and pave the way for a more secure and inclusive development strategy.

Challenges to CPEC in Balochistan Due to Violent Extremism

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) holds immense strategic and economic

potential. However, its execution in Balochistan faces significant hurdles due to the presence and activities of violent extremist groups, particularly the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), and affiliated networks. These groups have posed existential threats to the corridor's infrastructure, workforce, and the socio-political fabric of the region.

1) Direct Militant Attacks on Infrastructure

Militant violence has been a persistent disruptor to the CPEC framework. The BLA, often in coordination with the Majeed Brigade, has launched several high-impact attacks aimed specifically at halting CPEC progress. Infrastructure such as highways, railway tracks, transmission lines, and port facilities have repeatedly been targeted (Mir, 2024). The August 2024 coordinated attacks on multiple transport routes and military posts in Balochistan resulted in over 70 fatalities, causing logistical paralysis and suspension of CPEC-linked operations (Ali & Yusufzai, 2024).

The TTP, although ideologically distinct from Baloch separatists, has also targeted CPEC-related zones. In 2023, a TTP suicide attack struck a convoy near Zhob, killing security personnel and damaging road networks, further delaying transport between Gwadar and inland trade hubs (Hassan, 2024). These attacks increase project timelines, disrupt continuity, and inflate costs for both public and private stakeholders.

2) Targeted Killings and Threats to Chinese Nationals

Chinese workers and engineers have become prime targets of these groups. In March 2024, the TTP claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing in Karachi targeting Chinese construction engineers, killing at least nine individuals (Ahmed & Rehman, 2024). Similarly, BLA fighters have conducted high-profile attacks on Chinese installations, including the 2021 Gwadar hotel assault and repeated ambushes of Chinese convoys (Khan, 2024).

These incidents have forced Chinese firms to reduce on-ground staff, delay projects, and demand enhanced insurance and security guarantees. As Chinese confidence in Pakistan's ability to ensure safety wanes, investment has become more conditional, delaying financial disbursements and contracts (Aslam, 2024). These targeted killings further amplify the narrative that CPEC lacks local legitimacy and is vulnerable to sabotage.

3) TTP's Expanding Operational Network

The resurgence of the TTP post-2021 has introduced a new dimension to the CPEC security dilemma. The group's activities have expanded from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to parts of Balochistan, particularly areas adjacent to the Afghan border. The TTP-BLA nexus, revealed in 2024 through captured insurgent communications, confirms tactical cooperation, especially in training and arms smuggling (Rafiq, 2024).

TTP attacks now include IEDs on CPEC-linked convoys, targeted killings of state collaborators, and soft targets like education institutes to disrupt local stability. The ideological extremism of TTP—unlike BLA's nationalist orientation—adds a religious layer to the insurgency, posing a dual threat: armed militancy and extremist radicalization, especially of youth (Rehmat, 2024).

4) Psychological Warfare and Disinformation Campaigns

Both TTP and BLA have capitalized on digital platforms to conduct sophisticated

psychological operations. These groups use encrypted messaging apps and social media (e.g., TikTok, X, Telegram) to spread anti-CPEC propaganda and recruit disillusioned youth. A 2024 media analysis showed that TTP-produced videos promoting martyrdom against “Chinese occupation” had been viewed over 500,000 times in just three months in Balochistan alone (Yasir, 2024).

The disinformation campaign paints CPEC as an exploitative project serving foreign interests, exploiting natural resources, and displacing locals. These narratives, shared under hashtags like #StopCPEC and #FreeBalochistan, have gained traction in marginalized areas where state narratives are absent or distrusted. Militants have also portrayed attacks on Chinese workers as “resistance against imperialism”—a framing designed to gain popular sympathy and legitimacy (Shah, 2024).

5) Rising Security Costs and Economic Repercussions

Militant activities have necessitated an exponential rise in security costs. According to the Ministry of Planning and Development, the Pakistani government now allocates nearly 20% of CPEC’s operational budget to security. The creation of Special Security Division (SSD) and Task Force-88, while effective, diverts resources from socioeconomic uplift projects (Rizwan, 2024).

Moreover, the frequent halts in construction, rerouting of supplies, and threats to foreign staff result in contract breaches and legal disputes between the Pakistani government and Chinese firms. Several Gwadar-based projects—including the Eastbay Expressway—have been delayed due to local unrest and militant threats (Javed, 2024). The net result is an erosion of CPEC’s economic feasibility and investor trust.

5) Civilian Backlash and Growing Distrust

While militants employ violence, government responses—especially heavy militarization—have alienated local populations. Widespread security checkpoints, intrusive searches, and accusations of enforced disappearances have turned public sentiment against both federal forces and Chinese stakeholders (Iqbal, 2024).

Protests in Gwadar and Turbat have witnessed slogans not just against the government, but also against CPEC itself. Local communities, especially fishing and farming populations, feel excluded from decision-making and displaced by infrastructure without compensation. The Baloch Yakjehti Committee and similar groups have leveraged these grievances into sustained resistance, leading to months-long sit-ins and strikes in 2024–2025 (Baloch, 2024).

6) Regional and Cross-Border Challenges

The porous borders of Balochistan with Afghanistan and Iran provide safe havens for insurgents. TTP factions have been known to regroup in Afghan provinces such as Khost and Nangarhar, while BLA operatives have utilized Iran’s Sistan-Balochistan region for cross-border strikes (Mir, 2024).

Pakistan’s inability to fully control these zones allows for an uninterrupted supply of arms, narcotics, and propaganda materials. This regional entanglement has strained diplomatic relations and introduced a transnational element to what was once a localized insurgency. Without regional cooperation, CPEC remains vulnerable to transboundary attacks and operational disruptions.

The challenges to CPEC in Balochistan are not merely logistical—they are strategic,

ideological, and deeply political. Militant groups like the BLA, BLF and TTP have transformed the region into a high-risk zone through direct attacks, propaganda campaigns, and by capitalizing on socio-political alienation. While the government has deployed considerable military and legal resources, these will remain inadequate unless complemented by inclusive governance, transparency, and local ownership of development.

Government and Military Counter-Measures: A Strategic Response to Violent Extremism

Pakistan's government has proactively engaged in a multidimensional response to violent extremism in Balochistan, especially in safeguarding the strategic China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). While extremist outfits like the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) have resorted to destabilization, sabotage, and terror tactics to halt national development, the state's response has combined kinetic military operations, legal reforms, socio-economic interventions, youth engagement programs, and diplomatic coordination. This section explores the state's comprehensive response aimed at neutralizing threats and ensuring long-term peace and progress in Balochistan.

1) Security Forces and Strategic Military Operations

Pakistan's military has played a central role in establishing a secure environment for CPEC activities. In 2016, the government formed the Special Security Division (SSD)—a 15,000-strong unit specifically tasked with protecting Chinese nationals and CPEC projects. Complementing this force, the Task Force-88, led by the Pakistan Navy, was deployed to protect Gwadar's maritime operations (Wolf, 2024).

Operations such as Zarb-e-Azb, Radd-ul-Fasaad, and the recently launched Azm-e-Istehkam have effectively dismantled militant hideouts and logistics chains in Balochistan. Intelligence-driven operations led by the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Military Intelligence (MI), and provincial Counter-Terrorism Departments (CTDs) have resulted in the arrest or elimination of hundreds of operatives affiliated with TTP and BLA networks (Rizwan, 2024).

While militant groups deliberately target civilians, educational institutions, and infrastructure to induce fear and halt national progress, state forces have focused on restoring peace, protecting lives, and securing development.

2) Border Management and Counter-Infiltration

To counter the TTP's cross-border sanctuaries in Afghanistan and the BLA's safe havens in Iran's Sistan-Balochistan region, Pakistan completed over 90% of the border fencing with Afghanistan by 2023. Surveillance drones, thermal imaging, and additional border posts have been established to disrupt infiltration routes (Mir, 2024).

These measures have drastically reduced the TTP's ability to smuggle arms, coordinate attacks, and move freely across tribal belts. For example, cross-border attacks dropped by nearly 17% in 2023, according to the Ministry of Interior (Khan, 2024). Extremist groups are increasingly being pushed into isolated zones, away from civilian areas and development corridors.

3) Legislative and Policy Reform

Legislative improvements have complemented military actions. Under the National Action Plan (NAP), Pakistan strengthened anti-terror financing laws, proscribed extremist

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groups, and shut down illegal media outlets operated by militants (Ahmed & Rehman, 2024). The Financial Monitoring Unit (FMU) and National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) have traced and frozen the bank accounts of several NGOs found aiding separatist propaganda.

The state has also improved collaboration with Chinese security agencies, updating Standard Operating Procedures for foreign worker protection and introducing new coordination cells between the Chinese Embassy and Pakistani Interior Ministry.

4) Youth Engagement and Rehabilitation

Understanding that radical groups recruit most effectively among marginalized youth, the Government of Pakistan has launched a range of youth-centric development programs. Initiatives such as Kamyab Jawan Program, Prime Minister's Youth Skills Development Scheme, and CPEC Internship Program aim to divert young minds away from militancy by offering skills, employment, and inclusion (LSE, 2025).

The Gwadar Institute of Technology, funded under CPEC Phase-II, now trains local youth in maritime logistics, renewable energy, and port operations. Similarly, TVET (Technical Vocational Education Training) centers across Balochistan provide diploma-based education to thousands annually (Aslam, 2024).

In contrast, terrorist groups like BLA, BLF and TTP exploit economic deprivation, promising martyrdom or freedom while offering weapons instead of education. The state's focus on employment and inclusion is a decisive step to break the cycle of recruitment and radicalization.

5) Socioeconomic and Infrastructure Development

A positive indicator of the government's seriousness is the allocation of over Rs. 250 billion (approx. USD 1.2 billion) for Balochistan's development under the Public Sector Development Program (PSDP) in 2023–24 (Baloch, 2024). This funding has supported school construction, solar energy grids, rural hospitals, and water sanitation projects across Gwadar, Turbat, and Khuzdar.

Crucially, new hiring policies under CPEC now mandate that at least 60% of laborers in all Gwadar-based projects must be local residents—an attempt to mitigate the perception that “outsiders” are benefiting disproportionately (Shah, 2024). The Sehat Card initiative and Benazir Income Support Program (BISP) have also been extended to more districts in southern Balochistan.

In stark contrast, militants deliberately bomb schools, threaten doctors, and extort traders—worsening the poverty and instability they claim to fight against.

6) Media Strategy and Counter-Narratives

In response to the psychological warfare and disinformation spread by separatist groups, the government has strengthened its media outreach. Counter-narrative campaigns launched through Radio Pakistan, PTV Balochistan, and social media platforms highlight CPEC's benefits, youth success stories, and military rehabilitation programs.

The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) has also enhanced monitoring of extremist digital propaganda. Hundreds of accounts linked to BLA, BLF and TTP on TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), and Telegram have been taken down in coordination with Meta and Google Trust & Safety teams (Yasir, 2024).

These strategic communications aim to expose the hypocrisy of extremist violence and

promote peaceful, development-oriented discourse.

7) Diplomatic Engagement and Regional Cooperation

At the international level, Pakistan has actively sought cooperation from Iran and Afghanistan to dismantle cross-border insurgent networks. A tripartite border security mechanism has been revived, and joint security patrols have resumed in sensitive areas (Mir, 2024).

At the multilateral level, Pakistan has used platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to discuss CPEC security and regional terrorism. Exercises like 'Peace Mission 2023' and 'Warrior VIII' have fostered shared counter-terror expertise with regional partners including China and Russia (Wolf, 2024).

While extremist groups such as the BLA, BLF and TTP seek to destabilize Pakistan by sowing chaos and obstructing development, the Government of Pakistan continues to respond with a broad-based and positive national strategy. Through military resilience, inclusive youth policies, legal reforms, and infrastructure investment, the state not only defends CPEC but transforms Balochistan from a conflict zone into a development corridor.

Nevertheless, challenges persist. Sustainable peace will require not only continued military vigilance but also institutional reforms, genuine political inclusion, and transparent benefit-sharing with local communities. The government's efforts offer a hopeful trajectory, one in which violence gives way to growth, and extremism is replaced by empowerment.

Policy Recommendations

To enhance the sustainability and acceptance of CPEC in Balochistan, it is imperative that Pakistan transitions from a purely security-driven approach to an inclusive, locally-rooted development strategy. The following policy recommendations aim to bridge existing gaps and promote long-term peace, prosperity, and legitimacy.

1) Integrate Youth Employment and Education in CPEC Planning

Youth disengagement remains a key vulnerability exploited by extremist groups. Therefore, CPEC projects must embed vocational training, scholarships, and job quotas for local youth within project frameworks. Dedicated CPEC Youth Skills Centers should be established in each district of southern Balochistan to match regional employment needs.

2) Empower Local Government and Tribal Elders

Local governance must be empowered through fiscal devolution and decision-making authority in project implementation. Tribal elders and district council representatives should be made permanent stakeholders in CPEC coordination committees, ensuring cultural alignment and trust.

3) Launch CPEC Social Benefit Units (SBUs)

To monitor and enhance community involvement, the federal government should establish Social Benefit Units within each CPEC-linked district. These units would report on local hiring ratios, grievances, compensation cases, and community engagement activities, creating a real-time feedback loop for transparency.

4) Strengthen Community Policing and Ex-Militant Rehabilitation

Community-police partnerships, modeled after successful programs in Swat, should be expanded in Balochistan. Simultaneously, rehabilitation programs for surrendered

militants—including counseling, skills training, and reintegration support—must be institutionally funded and scaled up.

5) Ensure Transparent Revenue-Sharing Mechanisms

Balochistan must receive its fair share of CPEC-generated revenue. A transparent formula should be legislated to distribute port income, toll tax, and energy royalties, thereby embedding economic justice into the corridor's long-term sustainability.

Conclusion

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) represents a transformative opportunity for Pakistan, promising regional integration, economic revitalization, and enhanced geopolitical relevance. However, in Balochistan—its most vital yet volatile component—violent extremism, militant sabotage, and socio-political grievances have combined to pose serious threats to its implementation and legitimacy.

Terrorist Organizations such as the BLA, BLF and TTP have employed asymmetric warfare, targeted killings, disinformation campaigns, and transnational support networks to disrupt progress and instill fear. Despite these threats, the Government of Pakistan has taken significant steps, including military deployments, legislative reforms, infrastructure investments, and youth engagement programs, to stabilize the region and protect national interests.

Nevertheless, an overreliance on militarized responses, without adequate community engagement, transparent benefit-sharing, and inclusive governance, has limited the long-term impact of these measures. Many locals continue to feel alienated, with grievances about land rights, representation, and economic exclusion remaining unresolved.

To ensure the success of CPEC in Balochistan and to counter violent extremism sustainably, the government must institutionalize trust-building mechanisms, empower local leadership, and align development with community needs. Integrating social justice with national security will not only neutralize militant narratives but also transform Balochistan from a flashpoint of insurgency into a hub of peace and prosperity. If implemented holistically, CPEC can become a blueprint not just for economic growth, but for resilient state-building in the face of extremism.

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