

Ear to Asia podcast

Title: What China's ambitions in Pakistan mean for Baloch aspirations and identity

Description: Straddling the boundaries of Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan, the Baloch people have long endured as a distinct ethnic group whose aspirations have been overshadowed by the ambitions of larger state actors. In Balochistan, in Pakistan's west, Baloch ethno-nationalist assertions of identity have long driven protests and petitioning directed at Islamabad -- occasionally taking the form of militant insurgencies. Added to the mix are tensions arising from the Beijing-backed China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) with its grand infrastructure plans -- including the massive Gwadar Port expansion -- that cut through the region largely oblivious to Baloch concerns or input. To get a closer look at the Baloch people, how they're regarded and treated by Pakistani authorities, and how they're being impacted by CPEC, Ear to Asia host Sami Shah is joined by Pakistan watcher Dr. Nadeem Malik from Asia Institute, and expert on China's Belt and Road Initiative Dr Pascal Abb of Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF). An Asia Institute podcast. Produced and edited by profactual.com. Music by audionautix.com.

Sami Shah: Hello, I'm Sami Shah, this is Ear to Asia.

Pascal Abb: One of the big success stories of the CPEC has really been in energy generation. But one of the problems in Balochistan has been that you haven't seen much investment in the local grid. A lot of the rural households just haven't seen their situation improve at all. So they still have the same lack of electricity access as they used to have previously.

Nadeem Malik: Baloch fear that once the CPEC project and Gwadar is built, millions and millions of people from other parts of the country migrate to Balochistan. They will no more be in majority; they will be in minority. There has to be a politically negotiated solution where Baloch people are democratically represented.

Sami Shah: In this episode, what China's ambitions in Pakistan mean for Baloch aspirations and identity.

Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.

Balochistan province in Pakistan has been in the headlines recently as growing armed conflict across the Middle East has broken through to South Asia, with Iran and Pakistan

trading airstrikes in January of this year. Balochistan is home to a great proportion of the Baloch people who, like the Kurds, are a proud, distinct ethnic group whose historical homelands now straddle multiple countries. And just like the Kurds, their fortunes are too often caught up in the ambitions and adventurism of state actors over whom they wield little to no influence. Since partition and the creation of Pakistan, Baloch ethno-nationalism has at times taken the form of militant insurgency, with the formation of numerous armed groups seeking to thwart rule by Pakistan's federal government. Indeed, Pakistan's recent military strikes on targets in Iran's Sistan and Baluchistan province were declared to be aimed specifically at militant Balochi separatists. Meanwhile, there's China, who, together with its ally Pakistan, is forging ahead with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, or CPEC, part of Beijing's global scale Belt and Road Initiative.

A key feature of CPEC is the massive redevelopment and upscaling of Gwadar Port, which lies on Balochistan's coast, aimed in large part at securing and shortening the route for energy imports into China. As such, China has become a serious stakeholder in Balochistan and by extension, into the lives of Baloch and other residents of the province. So who exactly are the Baloch people and what's been their fate spread across the borders of Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan? How have the Baloch in Balochistan maintained or asserted their ethnic identity since Pakistan's founding less than eight decades ago? And what's been Islamabad's response over that time? And how has the centrality of Balochistan in China's current grand plans for the region impacted the people who live there, and their own economic and political aspirations? Later in the show, I'll be talking to Doctor Pascal Abb, an expert on China's foreign policy, the Belt and Road Initiative, and the intersection of infrastructure and conflict about China's impact in Balochistan and Pakistan more generally. But first, I'm joined by development studies researcher Doctor Nadeem Malik from Asia Institute to look at the history and current place of the Baloch people and the social and political landscape of Balochistan province. Welcome to Ear to Asia, Nadeem.

Nadeem Malik: Thank you very much.

Sami Shah: Just set the scene for listeners who aren't very familiar with the Baloch people and Balochistan, who are the Baloch?

Nadeem Malik: Yeah, the Baloch people, you know, are one of the oldest nations of the Iranian plateau. But it's difficult to trace their history due to a lack of documentary evidence. You know, therefore, researchers had have had to study the cultural and linguistic affiliation of the Baloch with other ethnic groups in the region to understand their origin. In the later part of the 20th century, you know, the Balochi language was established as a member of the northern western group of Iranian languages. On cultural grounds, you know, some

scholars considered that Baloch have a lot of similarities and resemblance with Parthian, which was a major Iranian political and cultural power in ancient Iran. Additionally, you know, Baloch are also said to have similarities with Medes, who were ancient Iranian people and one of the ancestors of modern Kurdish people, and they lived in the north western portion of the present day Iran and entered this region with the first wave of Iranian tribes in the late second millennium BC, which is approximately the end of Bronze Age. The pre-partition period. You know, this region was governed by the British. They strengthened the institution of Nawabs and Sardars, you know, the tribal leaders, while keeping the masses in a state of extreme deprivation.

And the whole system was articulated to facilitate, you know, their management of Balochistan by exploiting the tribal system through a few individuals who had vested interests. In 1947, the issue of Balochistan started emerging when the future of the Kalat State, which was there in pre-partition Balochistan region, was decided by referendum in Shahi Jirga in June 1947, in favor of Pakistan and Shahzada Karim Khan. I need to mention this name because it is important, reacted violently against the accession and rebelled and went to Afghanistan in March 1948. Therefore, the process of Balochistan merger with Pakistan was not an easy one. Initially, the State of Kalat refused to become a part of the country, so Pakistan directly opposed the subordinate states of Mukhtaran, Kharan and Las Bela to join the country, bypassing the State of Kalat. This led to division of the Baloch State. Eventually, the Khan of Kalat gave in to pressure and signed the Agreement of Accession on March 27th, 1948, making Baluchistan a province of the Federation of Pakistan.

Sami Shah: So what is it about the language and the ethnic aspects that separate the Baluch from the other groups around them?

Nadeem Malik: Now there are two major ethnic groups which are in Balochistan the Baloch and Pashtun – the Pathans. They constitute the two major and more distinct ethnic groups. And then, you know, a mixed ethnic stock, mainly of Sindhi origin, forms the third major group. So Balochi, Brahvi, Pashto and Sindhi are the main languages.

Sami Shah: So what's the population now within Iran, within Afghanistan and within Pakistan? There are Baloch communities whose.

Nadeem Malik: Population of the Baloch is 7 million, around 7 million – 3.6% of the total population of Pakistan, 50% of them are in Balochistan. I think 40% are in the province of Sind. There were, you know, Baloch rebels or separatists who were living in Afghanistan and they were operating from there. But after the takeover of Afghanistan by Taliban, Taliban forced them to migrate to Iran, in Iran, the province of Sistan.

Sami Shah: So in 1948, after the Baloch joined with Pakistan and became a part of Pakistan, how smoothly did it go? Was there tension after that? Was there the growth of nationalist movements?

Nadeem Malik: Yes, there was. In fact, there have been so far five major insurgencies in Balochistan. For example, when Kalat finally acceded to Pakistan in 1948 after negotiations and bureaucratic tactics used by the Pakistani government, the signing of the Instrument of Association by Ahmed Yar Khan led his brother, you know, Prince Abdul Karim, to revolt against his decision in July 1948, and Prince Agha Abdul Karim Baloch and Muhammad Rahim refused to lay down arms, leading Dosht-e Jhalawan in unconventional attacks. You know, on the Pakistan Army until 1950. The prince fought a long battle without support from the rest of the Balochistan. And Mr. Jinnah and his successor allowed Yar Khan to retain his title until the province dissolution in 1955.

Sami Shah: Mr. Jinnah being the founder of Pakistan.

Nadeem Malik: Founder of Pakistan.

Nadeem Malik: And there was then second conflict. Second conflict was when Nawab Nouroz Khan fought against one unit policy introduced by Ayub Khan in 1958.

Sami Shah: And General Ayub Khan, the first military dictator of Pakistan.

Nadeem Malik: Military dictator of Pakistan, redefined the very concept of Pakistan as one nation based on religion. He argued that Pakistan is not a federation based on five different, you know, nationalities with different culture, history and languages, but they all one because they are all Muslims.

Sami Shah: Right.

Nadeem Malik: So he sort of had given a concept of religio feudal nationalism, and the main purpose was to suppress the majority of the Bengalis to rule. You know.

Sami Shah: At this time Pakistan was East Pakistan and West Pakistan. Pakistan, West Pakistan is the portion containing Balochistan within it. And East Pakistan is what counts as today's Bangladesh. So within this now, you've described several insurgency movements taking place from the Baloch separatists. What impact does this have on the rest of Pakistan

and their perception of the Baloch? And, you know, on the Baloch themselves, do they see themselves as part of Pakistan?

Nadeem Malik: I would say since 2005, you know, the Baloch nationalist movement in Pakistan has been still brutally suppressed. And to date, that's going on by the security forces, leading to an increase in ethnic and sectarian violence in the region. And despite their efforts, the insurgency still persists, resulting in continued bloodshed. Most Baloch nationalist parties were not as radical, you know, and they were not radical or fighting for independence. They were working within the framework of the federal Constitution to achieve more political autonomy and socio-economic rights. You know, so I think in the end, a negotiated solution is politically feasible but have not been forged so far. I think the real rulers of Pakistan, which is the military establishment, have failed to achieve that, and successive civilian governments as well. So overall, you know, the nationalist movement is not that strong now. It is weak and divided. And the majority of Baluch favor more autonomy and not more extreme position of independence, which is a very genuine demand. I think Pakistan establishment may be willing to seek, you know, a political solution now that it has failed to eliminate the nationalists by force of arms, you know.

Sami Shah: Is there a similar separatist or ethno-nationalist element found in the Baloch populations in Iran or Afghanistan as well?

Nadeem Malik: So, as I said earlier, you know, that Pakistan, Baloch separatist militants, you know, had their camps in Afghanistan and they used to operate from there. However, when, you know, Taliban took over power, they forced them to migrate to Sistan in Iran. Iran, on the other hand, answering to your specific question now, you know, has a population of over 70 million people, comprising various ethnic, sectarian and linguistic communities. Um, the majority are Farsi speaking ethnic Persians who are Shia muslims. However, countries also home to several minority groups including Azeri, Kurd, Arab, Turkmen, Lur, Baluch, Armenian, Jews and others. Despite this diversity, however, you know Iranians share a sense of national identity built on their ancient heritage. The Baluch people are one of the largest minority groups in Iran, with a population ranging from 1 to 4 million. They inhabit a poor, underdeveloped region that is also a hub of smuggling. Due to difficulties in managing the region, the government of Iran has resorted to heavy handed repression, fueling resentment amongst the Baloch people towards the state. Moreover, they perceived the Shia Islamist structure as discriminatory against them. So there is a kind of separatist movement in Baluchestan, for example, Jaish al-Adl movement, you know, previously known as Jundallah in Iran, a Sunni militant group based in Sistan, again in Iran, took up arms to draw attention to the Baloch people's plight in Iran, whom they consider to be victims of ongoing

repression. And from 2014 to 2023, I think they organized at least 20 major high profile attacks in Iran.

Sami Shah: Is it safe to draw comparison between the Baloch and the Kurds, for example, the Kurdish separatists, who, you know, given that they both assert ethno nationalism and they straddle international borders and they don't have their own state yet, can we make that comparison? Is it safe?

Nadeem Malik: Yeah, yeah, yeah, it's an interesting question. You know, both the Baloch and Kurds are ethnic groups that inhabit, you know, regions that span multiple countries and face significant political, economic and social challenges. In addition to that, both groups have fiercely asserted their ethno nationalist identities and have fought for greater autonomy and independence. So this is a commonality, definitely. However, you know, while there are similarities between the two groups, you can't generalize. So there are also differences in their histories, cultures, you know, and political context.

Sami Shah: So how does Balochistan and the province of Balochistan figure into today's Pakistan? What is its economic, its political, its independence, its religious makeup compared to the rest of the country it's in?

Nadeem Malik: Yeah. You know, Balochistan is one of the poorest provinces. You know, having the lowest human development index in Pakistan. Around 85% of people lack safe drinking water and 75% have no electricity, 70% are without education and 63% people in Balochistan live below the poverty line. Despite being so resource rich. You know, the government has failed to provide basic facilities, making it most excluded province politically and economically. The situation is dire as the lack of access to essential services has hindered, you know, economic development and left the people in poor condition. And now, due to people's disorganization and economic backwardness, they fail to assert themselves within the federation of Pakistan to claim their fair share of resources. Balochistan has 45% of the Pakistan territory, but only 7% of the country's population, which means that the province is not proportionally represented, you know, within the federation. Baloch nationalists believe that the federation is primarily interested in exploiting the province, geostrategic and economic potentials, with little regard for the social and economic uplift of the Baloch. Over the years, you know, the trust deficit between Baloch nationalists and the federal government has augmented.

Sami Shah: You're talking about the nationalists, for example, and one can argue that that's a movement that, anyway, would not be in a positive relationship with the Pakistan federal

government. What about the average Baloch in Balochistan? Do they still feel a part of the Pakistan identity, or is the Baloch identity stronger for them?

Nadeem Malik: Baloch identity I think is stronger even amongst ordinary Baloch because they are so marginalized. I've seen people there, you know, who haven't travelled beyond their own villages, for example. They were so deprived and they're so sort of underdeveloped. So it generally it is very difficult for them to be able to identify themselves with Islamabad, for example.

Sami Shah: And how is it governed then by the federal government of Pakistan? Is it a very involved government? Is it hands off. You've described some violent interactions between the separatist movements and the military, for example, but on a daily basis, what does life in Balochistan look like on a governmental level?

Nadeem Malik: It is led by major Sardar families, tribal families. So it's a tribal system. And tribal sardars are the dominant political leaders. They have close allies with the security establishment in Pakistan, which is the most powerful. So there can be two interpretations. One is constitutional, you know, they are part of the federation. They have some representation in the Senate. They have provincial assemblies. They also have local governments, like all other provinces. For many years now, you know, we are seeing kind of coalition government in Balochistan. No single party ever got majority. And coalition governments are then formed, uh, or orchestrated by the military establishment. Somehow I don't think they have a significant political voice within the Federation.

Sami Shah: I want to move on now to the BLA – the Baloch Liberation Army. As recently as 2019, the US officially declared the BLA or the Baloch Liberation Army to be a terrorist group. Who are they? What is their background? What are they fighting for?

Nadeem Malik: Yeah, Balochistan. You know, um, Liberation Army is mostly comprised of disgruntled middle class people, you know, who feel deprived, who lack jobs and economic opportunities. It was founded in 2000. Now Pakistan, designated Baloch Liberation Army as a terrorist organization on 7th August 2006. After the group, you know, this Liberation Army repeatedly attacked security personnel. For example, on 15th April 2009, Baloch activist, the son of Akbar Bugti, called Baloch to kill Non-baloch residing in Balochistan and the launched targeted attacks against Punjabi residents, causing kind of 500 deaths. So BLA leader claimed responsibility for inciting such attacks and BLA targeted people from various ethnic backgrounds including Pathan, Sindhis and Punjabis.

Sami Shah: So who is funding the BLA?

Nadeem Malik: I'm not sure about the exact sources of funding, but it's important to first understand the geography of the province and it has a lot to do with the foreign interests, geopolitical interests of some foreign countries. Balochistan, you know, is strategically important due to its location. That's the key factor. It shares a border with Iran and Afghanistan, making it a gateway to the Middle East and Central Asia. And southern border is shared with Sind province, giving it access to Arabian Sea. The Indian Ocean, you know, is a hotspot for global powers like China, India and the US due to its importance as a trade route for petroleum, Balochistan is also crucial to the US to counter the power of Iran and China. So I can say that these countries do have a lot of interest in this province.

Sami Shah: So what is the political and social climate today for the ordinary Baloch people? The security situation you've described does not seem to be conducive to a safe environment to live in. Is that a safe assumption?

Nadeem Malik: Yeah, it is. And they have a heightened sense of being marginalized. And especially with the CPEC project and the formation of Gwadar, around 5 million people, I think, are estimated to be migrated to Gwadar from other parts of the country. So they have a heightened sense of becoming a minority. They think that the state will do to them what they did to Sindhis in urban Sind, where Urdu speaking people were migrated to make large ethnic groups within urban cities and Sindhis were turned into minority. So they also fear that once the CPEC project and Gwadar is built, millions and millions of people from other parts of the country migrate to Balochistan. They will no more be in majority, they will be in minority. Unless properly managed, you know, or politically sensibly managed, it can boost ethnic conflict.

Sami Shah: So let's then talk finally about the current management of that tension. The 2024 general elections just took place in Pakistan recently. What did the outcome mean for Balochistan and its inhabitants? Will Balochistan's and the Balochis concerns their ethnic concerns, their nationalistic concerns, their poverty issues? Are those likely to be alleviated under this new government?

Nadeem Malik: Not at all. I mean, the history tells us no government in Pakistan since 1988, since Zia ul Haq's period, you know, has not delivered anything to the state. Although the situation was a little better before 2018, after 2018, it went worse to worse. But any government, even at the federal level today, the kind of coalition governments we are seeing, you know, which is becoming quite apparent, that there will be coalition government at the federal level and in Balochistan also. They won't be able to deliver. They won't be stable governments, they won't be able to bring any economic or political stability.

Sami Shah: So before we wrap up, is there anything else you would like to say about Balochistan? Its current place within Pakistan, and the concerns of its people?

Nadeem Malik: I think it is one of the most deprived region of Pakistan, most underdeveloped. And what is required is not the military solutions or solving problems by force. There has to be a politically negotiated solution where Baluch people are democratically represented, you know, in any policy decisions.

Sami Shah: Nadeem, thank you so much for joining here to Asia.

Nadeem Malik: Thank you very much.

Sami Shah: That was Doctor Nadeem Malik, Senior Lecturer in Asian development at Asia Institute. You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. I'm Sami Shah. And just a reminder to listeners about Asia Institute's online publication on Asia and its societies, politics and cultures. It's called the Melbourne Asia Review. It's free to read and it's open access at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. You'll find articles by some of our regular Ear to Asia guests and by many others. Plus, you can catch recent episodes of Ear to Asia at the Melbourne Asia Review website, which again you can find at melbourneasiareview.edu.au.

If we want to get a sense of what's happening today economically and politically in Balochistan province, we need to expand the conversation to include the role of China in Pakistan and the ambitions of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, or CPEC, which is itself a major part of Beijing's global Belt and Road Initiative. Doctor Pascal Abb is a senior researcher at the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt and has for many years been looking into China foreign policy, the BRI and the intersection of infrastructure projects and civil strife, among other research interests. He joins us via zoom. Welcome to Ear to Asia, Pascal. Thank you very much.

Pascal Abb: Thank you very much for having me.

Sami Shah: China has been an important strategic and economic partner for Pakistan since relations were established in 1950. Can you give us a nutshell version of the depth and strength of that relationship?

Pascal Abb: Yeah, as you already mentioned, it's a very old one. And it's indeed also one of China's most significant international partnerships. It's the so-called Iron Brotherhood. And

as you already alluded to, it dates back to the early post-colonial era, where both of these countries were looking for partners in addressing some of the foreign policy threats which they were facing. And for China and Pakistan, it turned out that they had one shared big adversary, which was India. And so ever since, they have worked together in areas which are in one case very directly related to CPEC, actually, which is strategic infrastructure. One of the kind of precepts of CPEC, this connection to the China border that goes through the Karakoram mountains, that actually dates back to the 1960s and was already constructed by a Chinese and Pakistani military engineers. And you also had other joint programs that imply a great deal of strategic trust between both sides. So, for example, Chinese support for the Pakistani nuclear program. So you could say that indeed China is a very old friend for Pakistan and vice versa.

Sami Shah: And in more recent times has that strength of relationship deepened or is it stayed consistent?

Pascal Abb: Well, I would say that CPEC, which has already been going on for almost ten years now, is another symbol, really of a deepening relationship. So to tell you a little bit about the the history and the conditions in which CPEC came about. This was agreed after China launched a Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, with negotiations then taking until 2015. And this was also a time at which the United States was actually reducing its aid to Pakistan, which it had previously given the country as part of its cooperation on the war on terror. And so this kind of left a huge hole in Pakistan when it comes to economic aid. And this is the gap which China filled with this. This is also a reason why some people in Pakistan are nowadays saying that the country is kind of shifting away from the United States and more closely aligning itself with China.

Sami Shah: So what's been the effect then, of that partnership on relations more broadly in the region? You mentioned India, for example.

Pascal Abb: Yeah. So you probably know that India is is generally very critical of the BRI. They see some of the infrastructure initiatives that China is undertaking in neighboring countries, not just Pakistan, but also Bangladesh or Myanmar, Sri Lanka, of course, as well as kind of a strategic encirclement of India, so that they are seeing ports which are being built by China springing up in neighboring countries alongside the Indian Ocean, and are worrying that these are going to be future bases for the Chinese navy as well as, of course, these overland corridors like CPEC, which also allow for the transfer of Chinese material into Pakistan. So India has been very, very critical of the Belt and Road Initiative for that reason. And it has also taken a very critical stance on CPEC for the same one. So kind of you could

see CPEC both kind of springing from worsening Indian relations with China and Pakistan, but also kind of contributing to it. So it's a bit of a dynamic process, really.

Sami Shah: In 2013, China was given operational control of the Gwadar port on the Arabian Sea in the Balochistan province. In 2015, China and Pakistan announced plans for the creation of a major infrastructure network known as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, or CPEC, that you mentioned. The massive expansion of the Gwadar Port is a key feature of CPEC. Can you tell us a little bit about the ambitions here? How does Gwadar Port particularly benefit them?

Pascal Abb: So the ambition is to construct really a corridor that spans the entire length of Pakistan. What are is on the Indian Ocean and the border to China is all the way on the other end in the Karakoram mountains. The plan here is that this this corridor would run through the length of Pakistan, that you could have special economic zones developing along the way, which would really help Pakistan to achieve something where it has previously been lacking. And this is re-industrialisation. So the idea is to have Chinese investors, for example, in light industries like garments or toy manufacturing that are vacating China because of the rising salaries over there, and instead set up shop in Pakistan. Then there's also a lot of other elements that are connected to it. So one very early priority for CPEC, and actually I would say the one where it has made the most progress is energy generation. The number one priority for CPEC was to set up a bunch of mostly coal plants across Pakistan to cover the previously existing energy deficit, where you would have rolling blacks- and brownouts across the country. And this is something which, um, at least intermittently, I have to say. Um, then eventually some other problems started, but at least the capacity question was addressed by CPEC. And the ultimate aim, of course, is that by linking Pakistan more closely to the Chinese market, it can also find a market for some of its agricultural exports, for example, and really kind of China being the locomotive that can drag other countries along.

Pascal Abb: This is usually the rationale behind the construction of economic corridors linking China to other countries, and Pakistan is no exception there. Now, since you asked specifically about the port of Gwadar, Gwadar has slightly different origins. So Gwadar is a project that predates CPEC by more than a decade. It actually dates back to the Musharraf era. Um, I think first broke ground in 2002 and was back then also supposed to be constructed, but not yet operated by China. And back then, the rationale for Gwadar was mostly a strategic one instead of an economic one. So the main port of import and exports for Pakistan is Karachi, and Karachi is very, very close to the Indian border. So the worry at the time was that the Indian Navy could very easily blockade that port in case a war broke out. So and then the Musharraf government came up with this plan to build a new port that

could serve as an alternative to Karachi all the way to the west in Balochistan. But its integration actually with the rest of the corridor and with the rest of the economic network spanning in Pakistan, this is a much, much more dubious. So you already talked about Balochistan. So Gwadar is really located in a very, very remote area of an already sparsely populated and underdeveloped province. And there are major doubts, if it really makes sense to construct a port from which you then have to go very, very long ways, like really hundreds of kilometers across highways to get to Pakistan's actual industrial centers.

Sami Shah: Was there any attempt to sell this project to the residents of Balochistan? Did they need convincing? Was there any consultation?

Pascal Abb: Yeah. So when CPEC was first announced, um, this was not just a way it was marketed in Balochistan, but across the country as a game changer. And this kind of created expectations that were subsequently very, very difficult to fulfil. And especially for Baluchistan. The promise was that since Balochistan, as I mentioned, is underdeveloped. So it's by far the poorest province of Pakistan, that this was kind of help it level up so that it would see targeted investments to Balochistan, especially since it had one of the flagship projects with Gwadar. And since it would require the construction of new roads linking Gwadar with other parts of the corridor, that this would very directly contribute also to Balochistan own industrial development. And these expectations, they have so far been disappointed. If you look at the stage of the special economic zones, of which Gwadar is also supposed to feature one, as well as Bostan, I believe those have been lagging far behind the development of other economic zones in the already more prosperous areas of Pakistan, especially in Punjab.

Sami Shah: So what has been the impact now in Balochistan today? Has there been any benefit for the locals?

Pascal Abb: Well, this is really what the political strife about CPEC in Balochistan is about. There's an ongoing protest movement in Gwadar that is arguing that CPEC, or this port specifically has actually had a detrimental effect on locals. One of the main complaints is that the locals mainly rely on fishing for their livelihood and sustenance, and the port of Gwadar has affected that in two ways. One is that it's a very heavily securitized project, so it's being guarded closely by the Pakistani military and coast guard, and this has inhibited the access of local fishermen to their traditional fishing grounds offshore. And the other is that we have seen an influx of Chinese trawlers, which have also been contributing to overfishing these resources in the area. That's a very local concern. And the broader concern across the province is really that the kind of development which CPEC is bringing to Balochistan is not really locally rooted, that you're not seeing much local job creation and that the desirable

jobs. So, for example, in their engineering and management sections of CPEC are going not to Baluch people because they lack the required skills education, but instead either to Chinese or to other Pakistanis whom many Baluch also consider outsiders like Punjabis or Sindhis, for example. And then there is the thing that with the project in Gwadar, which is really like the most important manifestation of CPEC locally, the provincial government also only has a very, very small stake in its revenues. I believe that's only 8%, and the majority of the revenues which the port is generating are going either to the federal government or to the Chinese investors. And that's just creating a situation where, you know, you have the the kind of detriments of these developmental initiatives in Balochistan, but you're not really seeing many of the benefits. This at least, are the popular concerns.

Sami Shah: So it would seem then, based on what you're describing, that for Ballouchy, this is just a continuation of, you know, the treatment at the hands of the federal government and that they are not getting any of the benefits of CPEC. How has this colored their view of CPEC and Pakistan's relationship with China?

Pascal Abb: Um, so it's really strengthened the view that infrastructure, mega projects in Pakistan are being implemented as plans of the central government, and that there is insufficient communication with the provincial governments and also insufficient attention to their interests. So one example where this came to a head very, very early and where it was also not just an issue with Balochistan, but with other peripheral areas in the country, is over the so-called route controversy. So when CPEC was first announced, it was actually not quite clear what kind of route it would take through the country. And originally it was imagined since the kind of endpoints of Gwadar and the Karakoram Highway were already known, that it was just take the most direct route between these two points, which would have taken it through the western periphery, through Baluchistan and through Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. And then eventually it came out that this was not actually the plan, and it's that CPEC would take an eastern detour through the already most developed areas where there was a lot of existing infrastructure to connect to, but which would have then meant that primarily, again, Punjab, the most developed area, would have privileged access to it. And so this caused a huge controversy where it was necessary to call an all party conference and to also negotiate again with the provincial governments and to finally announce a compromise solution, that they would actually be three routes across Pakistan one in the east, one in the west, and one in the middle. And subsequently, the issue has been that the new roads that were promised for the the Western connection, so the one through the periphery, have just not seen as much progress as other parts of CPEC. And this is kind of steadily reheating the same conflict over resource distribution. So who gets actually to enjoy the benefits of CPEC and when?

Sami Shah: So at this point, we do know that in Baloch there are the ethno nationalist, separatist Baloch groups. What's their response been to the ongoing CPEC construction? They've been given some of them varied statuses as terrorist groups in the past by the Pakistan government and the US government as well. Have they reacted to Chinese development?

Pascal Abb: Um, so before we talk about the extremist groups, maybe just to note that most of the resistance against CPEC that I have previously described is peaceful in nature. So these are protests like sit ins or also go into the parliamentary process. The violent resistance against CPEC, which groups like the Balochistan Liberation Army are of course, the most eye catching ones. But this is like a minority of the resistance against CPEC that we are seeing overall. Having said that, as you already mentioned, this is an ethno nationalist and separatist group, which means that they are violently opposed to outsiders acting in Baluchistan. And this includes not just China, but also other ethnic groups in Pakistan, especially Punjabis, who tend to form the civil service and military elites in the country. And what they have done and which has really motivated also their resistance against CPEC is that since their political program is separatism, is the independence of Baluchistan, is that they are opposed to any kind of infrastructure construction, which kind of strengthens the hold of the federal government in the area. And that, of course, includes CPEC. And since China is acting in very, very close partnership with the Pakistani central government on this project, this has led it to also be identified as an enemy then of these Baluch terror organizations.

Sami Shah: So how is the Pakistan government then handled this? Has there been a crackdown on these terror groups and on the Baluch locals?

Pascal Abb: Well, I mean, there was already a very, very heavy handed counter-insurgency operation that predates CPEC by several years. One of the reasons why CPEC could only be built is that the Pakistani government could assure China that, you know, the counterinsurgency campaign had already succeeded in destroying most of the insurgent groups that were operating in the western periphery. But it turns out that they were not destroyed completely. And this has required a very, very intense and very militarized security regime for CPEC. So if you look at how, for example, I mean, I have never personally been to Gwadar, this is, um, inaccessible for foreigners. But from what I've been hearing about what the situation there looks like is that the construction site is ringed by multiple layers of checkpoints, and all of it is guarded by special security divisions that have been put up by the Pakistani military. So these are military units that are drawn from, again, usually the non-Baloch areas of Pakistan, and they are being seen by the locals as kind of a very, very alien and intrusive security regime that is also, again, interfering with their livelihoods and

their freedom of movement locally, and has kind of brought also an identification, again, of these development projects, not just with the Pakistani central government, but especially with the military. And the Pakistani military, again, owing to this long history of really heavy handed counterinsurgency in the periphery is not very popular locally.

Sami Shah: What's Beijing's influence been in this, directly or otherwise, on Islamabad's reactions?

Pascal Abb: So the most immediate influence has been to push Islamabad to prevent further terrorist attacks, because despite all of the security regime, there have been numerous occasions both in Gwadar and in other cities, especially Karachi, where the BLA has successfully targeted Chinese projects and Chinese citizens. So the last one, I think was the one in April 2022, when a couple teachers at the Confucius Institute in Karachi were killed by a blast by a suicide terrorist of the BLA. And this triggered strong pressure by the Chinese government for Pakistan to step up its act when it comes to security. There were requests to tighten what the Pakistani military is doing within the country as well as, at least that's a rumor, and for Pakistan to also allow for the deployment of Chinese private security contractors in the country, which is otherwise forbidden by law, basically foreign PSEs operating in the country. And apart from this, this kind of push for tighter security measures, you have also seen more of an outreach effort by China to kind of strengthen CPEC's image. Some of it has come in the form of CSR. So, for example, building projects like a local school in Gwadar, where they're teaching school children, and also inviting local opinion leaders for tours of China to kind of give them a glimpse of what this, this kind of development that China is trying to promote locally can ultimately lead to. Right? These these glittering Chinese cityscapes, the excellent infrastructure which you have there in place and hoping that it's also possible to convince these opinion leaders to accept this vision of modernity and then convince the the broader population of Baluchistan to embrace it. But I have to say that all of these have so far not been very successful, and they've been seen locally, mostly as tokenistic actions and not something that is really tailored to the specific concerns which people in this province have.

Sami Shah: So given all these problems around the implementation of CPEC in Balochistan so far, how can we assess the project? Is it a success? What are its prospects going forward?

Pascal Abb: So, I mean, CPEC goes way beyond Balochistan because a majority of its projects, and especially the ones on which progress has been the speediest, are actually located in Punjab and in Sind. And I would say one of the big success stories of it has really been in energy generation. I mean, we can argue whether building coal plants is the best

way of doing it, but at least there's one breakthrough of closing the capacity gap in the Pakistani electricity, National Electricity grid, that has really been one of the successes. But then the problem is that these benefits are, again, very unevenly distributed. So to deliver power to households, it's not just enough to just have the power plants and the overall load in the system, but you also need to have local grids all over the country that can actually carry it to households. And there, one of the problems in Balochistan has been that you haven't seen much investment in the local grid, which means that since this province is geographically so vast and again, there's so little existing infrastructure to connect to, a lot of the rural households just haven't seen their situation improve at all. So they still have the same lack of electricity access as they used to have previously. And this is kind of also feeding into popular discontent with CPEC as a project that primarily benefits the areas of Pakistan that are already best off, that are the strongest represented in national politics, and that also have a privileged access to the decision making mechanisms and negotiation mechanisms with the Chinese side.

Sami Shah: So that really comes down to this final question. Then what can Islamabad do if it were so inclined to better CPEC chances of a beneficial outcome for Balochistan and for the Baloch?

Pascal Abb: So I would say the real problem with CPEC is one which is again, a very, very long running one in Pakistani politics, and that is that infrastructure development has always been very, very centralized in the handful of technocrats and the planning ministry in Islamabad. So infrastructure construction has really always been a field where the central government's hold over the provinces is the strongest. And this kind of clashes, of course, with the political trend towards federalism that we're supposed to be seeing, where provinces are supposed to be able to make more of their own decisions and really have a say in a case where it's necessary to design these nation spanning projects, to also have a say on where capital is going to be spent and which projects are going to be selected. So here, especially when you cooperate with China on this, the problem is also that China runs things very much the same way. So China is also a very centralized country. And where really the natural way of doing things for both sides, which they're most comfortable with and can implement the easiest is to simply hand this thing over to their big national planning agencies, which can then hash out the technical details, produce a plan, and then this is going to be implemented. But this is, I think, not a political process that is appropriate for a multi-ethnic country like Pakistan that has been riven for much of its history by very, very strong center-periphery tensions.

Pascal Abb: And this is really something where I think the changes would have to start. But really reforming the project governance and project negotiation mechanism to give local

communities and at least the provincial levels, much, much more of a say, and to then also come up with a plan that takes the existing developmental differences within the country into account, and maybe selects projects with a view to really levelling up the areas that are already the most underdeveloped. So kind of to speed up their development instead of promoting that of relatively well off areas like Punjab. And finally, this is actually an area where I think we're going to be seeing progress in the future, is to shift the focus away from these mega projects that tend to cause a lot of economic and social impacts and related grievances and resistance then, and more, towards what in China is now being described as so-called smaller and more beautiful projects in the BRI. It's really a much, much more local approach to the BRI. Instead of building these country spanning mega projects looking more to deliver local development like for example, digging wells, providing health care and so on, and I think all of these would be effective measures in improving the acceptance of CPEC, also in Balochistan.

Sami Shah: Pascal, thanks for giving us your insights here on air to Asia.

Pascal Abb: Thanks for having me.

Sami Shah: Our guests have been Doctor Pascal Abb of the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt and Doctor Nadeem Malik of Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne. Here to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on the Apple Podcast app, Spotify, YouTube, or wherever you get your podcasts. If you like the show, please rate and review it. Every positive review helps new listeners find the show, and please help us by spreading the word on your socials. This episode was recorded on the 20th of February 2024 for producers were Kelvin Param and Eric Van Bommel of profactual.com. Ear to Asia is licensed under Creative Commons. Copyright 2024, the University of Melbourne I'm Sami Shah. Thanks for your company.