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Critical Infrastructure and Security Dynamics: Asymmetric Threats and Gwadar Security (2018–2026)

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to analyse the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) based on the Securitization-Development Paradox in the context of the Gwadar Port by taking a cue from 2018 to 2026. Development was coupled with the rising asymmetric campaign of the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and their special force called the 'Majeed Brigade' who wanted to slow down the industrialization and Special Economic Zones (SEZs) during Phase-II. Utilizing the Critical Infrastructure Protection (CIP) methodology and process-tracing methods, the study assesses the tactical transformation in the BLA's methods from ambushes in rural areas to planned urban fedayeen attacks, attacks on foreign personnel and simultaneous interdictions of transportation systems for economic attrition. The state responded by creating a very fortified "enclave securitization" system through the Special Security Division (SSD), maritime task forces and biometric surveillance perimeters. Protection of primary port terminals limited local mobility, undermined livelihoods of artisanal fishermen and neglected the shortfalls in municipal utilities, which led to a massively mobilized civic movement against the military (Haq Do Tehreek) and dissuaded private foreign direct investment.

Keywords: *Gwadar Port, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), Critical Infrastructure Protection (CIP), Securitization–Development Paradox, Asymmetric Warfare, Enclave Securitization.*

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Introduction

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a brainchild of the Pakistani government, was seen as the flag ship project of the bilateral initiative, the Belt and Road (BRI), and it changed the geo-economics equation of South and Central Asia. Gwadar is the maritime end of this multi-billion-dollar framework which is located on the southwestern coast of Balochistan. Situated close to the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic maritime trade corridor used by about 20 to 30 percent of the world's petroleum liquids, Gwadar was envisioned as a game-changer for trade (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2023). The main strategic goal is to sharply shorten the energy import and commercial goods transport between the Arabian Sea and western China by avoiding the traditional and crowded sea lanes, especially the Strait of Malacca.

CPEC, from 2018, shifted from early phase of “infrastructure” (with mainly focus on road infrastructure, early port berths, and generation infrastructure etc.) to phase-II of “infrastructure and industrialization” (Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and private capital integration). But at the same time was a period of a changing and precarious security situation in the province of Balochistan, which was also undergoing a capitalistic developmental push. The development of the potential of Gwadar as a commercial hub has faced a complicated situation of extreme socio-economic inequalities, historical political disputes, and an unequal insurgency led by ethno-nationalist militant groups, particularly the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) (Policy, 2026).

A central feature of this dynamic is the Securitization–Development Paradox, which, based on an analytical framework, analyzes the ways in which the response of the state to asymmetric threats can have adverse effects on the achievement of developmental goals. In the traditional development theory, a peripheral area is expected to become stable and modern and to experience economic mobility when large-scale capital investments and infrastructure development occur. However, with Gwadar, the state's response to ongoing security threats has resulted in a high level of securitization of enclaves. Physical asset protection has become a priority over human security, which has further exacerbated local alienation, affected the livelihoods of indigenous

people and contributed to the very grievances targeted by insurgent networks for recruiting and operationalizing purposes.

The biggest kinetic threat to this developmental landscape is the BLA, which has a special suicide and tactical wing for urban assaults, called the Majeed Brigade. The BLA dramatically changed their strategy over the five-year period from 2018-2026, abandoning their guerrilla warfare operations in remote, rural areas for their high-profile attacks in the urban areas, aimed at high-value infrastructure, administrative nodes, and foreign nationals. High-profile incidents, including the 2019 attack on the Pearl Continental Hotel in Gwadar, a string of attacks on engineering convoys along regional transport arteries and the large-scale infiltration attempt against the Gwadar Port Authority (GPA) Complex in March 2024, are indicative of a deliberate strategy of economic sabotage and investor deterrence.

The state apparatus thus put in place comprehensive security structures to protect infrastructure, personnel and foreign direct investment, in answer to these asymmetric vectors. Therefore, the importance of asset protection cannot be overstated; the establishment and deployment of the Special Security Division (SSD) with its dedicated military and paramilitary formations and the deployment of maritime task forces like Task Force-88 in the Pakistan Navy is a clear indication of the value of asset protection. At the same time, the port of Gwadar was transformed under 'Smart Port City' defense programs by saturation of checkpoints, biometric access corridors, restricted movement areas and proposed physical perimeter fencing making it a highly fortified security enclave (Javaid, Umbreen, & Rafiq, 2024).

All of these protective measures have created a tremendous strain on the locals as far as security footprint is concerned. The economy of the local people in Gwadar is quite dependent on the artisanal fishing sector which employs 70-80 per cent of the population of the area. MARSEC regulations, restricted access areas around the port and undetermined non-local commercial trawlers have limited the traditional fishing grounds. Muslims suffer from acute potable drinking water shortages despite significant investments in infrastructure, and they are also deprived of regular electricity supply, which is dependent on electricity imports

from the Iranian grid system, as well as from ongoing bottleneck situations at regional border points for trade routes along the Makran corridor (Ahmed & Rauf, 2023).

The socio-economic marginalisation gave rise to unprecedented civic resistance, Haq Do Tehreek (Give Rights to Gwadar) movement, from 2021 to 2024. Demands for basic socio-economic needs of the local population, such as provision of basic civic utilities, freedom of access to the sea for local fishermen and the easing of intrusive checkpoint inspections, highlighted the growing disparity between the state level strategic infrastructure and the needs of the local population. The mobilization of tens of thousands of local residents demanding basic civic utilities, freedom of access to the sea for local fishermen and easing of intrusive checkpoint inspections marked the growing gap between strategic infrastructure at the state level and the socio-economic needs of the resident population. The widespread civic protests have raised doubts about the notion that top-down infrastructure brings stability to a region.

This makes the operational picture of Gwadar for the period 2018-2026 a testament that kinetic deterrence and perimeter security is not enough to make critical infrastructure resilient in contested peripheral areas. Economic corridors are strategic in nature and the viability of their operation is dependent on balancing the protection of physical assets with an equitable socio-economic governance mechanism. The Gwadar development model, if it does not make a structural shift in governance and the rights to livelihood of the local people and introduce the concept of economic equity which is inclusive to the communities, the asymmetric insurgent campaigns will continue to affect the operational continuity, corporate viability and long-term security of the development model.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Security: A New Framework for Analysis which is a conceptual framework created by Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde (1998). The authors contend that security is not an objective material condition, but an intersubjective speech act – the act of speaking – through which political elites turn a public policy issue into an existential threat to justify extraordinary, emergency measures that are unlikely to go through standard democratic processes. This theory accounts for the discursive

process through which mega-projects are constructed as “existential” necessities of national economic survival when applied to infrastructure projects that are being led by the State. From this point of view, the existential framing allows the state apparatus to create specialized military divisions, to evade the systematic provincial supervision of regular parliaments, and to exclude people from the base from any consultation on strategic asset developments (Buzan, Wæver, & Wilde, 1998).

The study looks at the contradictions in operation that arise from this securitized stance via the lens of the Security–Development Nexus, a concept developed in the book “Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security” by Mark Duffield (2001). Duffield shows how, despite the fact that security and development are conceived as mutually reinforcing goals, the latter is often used as an instrument of security operations and pacification of populations, in contemporary state operations. His work reveals that development is always subject to security interests; in the case of a large-scale capital project, strategic containment is always more important than socio-economic emancipation of the peripheral communities, thus putting a constant strain on the gap between national economic modernization and peripheral community stability (Duffield, 2001).

The physical vulnerability of strategic corridors is conceptualised within the Critical Infrastructure Protection (CIP) doctrine, which was developed in the urban security book, “Cities Under Siege: The New Military Urbanism” (2010) by Stephen Graham. Graham explores contemporary transport systems, deep-sea port terminals and energy grids as all-society single points of failure, and how states try to protect such systems by implementing militarized enclave designs and comprehensive surveillance architectures. His analysis shows that in litigious geographic situations, peripheral security and physical cordoning is not enough to eliminate systemic vulnerabilities since critical infrastructure is still reliant on linear exposed transit corridors that are extremely vulnerable to disruption (Graham, 2010).

The kinetic threat environment is examined using current literature on asymmetric insurgent doctrine, which is the counter-insurgency study “The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the

Midst of a Big One” by David Kilcullen (2009). Drawing on the experience of a wide range of non-state armed groups, Kilcullen explains how they are shifting their strategy from conventional territorial defense to “calculated economic attrition warfare” in the modern era. He describes asymmetric insurgent groups as intentional threats against foreign investments, commercial transport routes and technical personnel which result in significant fiscal burdens, bring about the loss of bilateral trust between the host government and foreign government partners, and increase the static defense burden of the host government (Kilcullen, 2009).

In *Global China and Pakistan’s Federal Politics: 10 Years of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor*, Adeney and Boni (2024) examine the institutionalization of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor over the past 10 years, and their findings indicate that the governance of mega-infrastructure has strengthened central state authority while diminishing provincial autonomy. The authors examine the distribution of transport and energy resources and suggest that the decision-making mechanisms in place, including the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC), have favoured transport and energy corridors linked to the federal government rather than peripheral economic corridors. In Balochistan the centralisation of power has exacerbated the conflict between the centre and the periphery, with local developmental requirements in Gwadar ignored in favour of macro strategic planning. This process shows how top down corridor governance produces political disaffection and resource conflict in host provinces, through the institutional processes involved (Adeney & Boni, 2024).

In the wake of the change in the organizational and tactical structure of the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) from a locally based and tribal guerrilla group to a tactically sophisticated hybrid actor, Ugwu (2025) inquiries into the transformation of the BLA in “Between Insurgency and Terrorism: The Escalating Operational Sophistication of the Balochistan Liberation Army”. Through an operational sophistication index that was applied to the longitudinal attack data, the study revealed that BLA has adopted a 'dual-track' doctrine whereby it unleashes high impact attacks against hardened infrastructure, administrative nodes and foreign nationals, and

operates routine, low intensity operations on rural transit routes at high frequency. The asymmetric use of force by ethno-nationalist insurgent groups is a tactical evolution that highlights their ability to take advantage of physical vulnerabilities of fixed economic corridors and to circumvent kinetic counter-measures (Ugwu, 2025).

The International Crisis Group (2018) has conducted a detailed country-based policy evaluation of the socio-political threats that accompany the spread of CPEC in Pakistan's border areas. It states that academia has turned mega-infrastructure into an existential threat for country and has created an overbearing security apparatus in Gwadar with the installation of checkpoints, militarized exclusion cordon and the repression of local political dissent. This enclave model has not brought about organic modernization of the economy, simply alienated the indigenous population, disturbed the traditional way of life of sailors and exacerbated the long-standing grievances about the expropriation of resources. Unchecked civilian participation and civil wealth redistribution in a capital-intensive development process, therefore, actively contributes to political instability and widens the recruitment pool for anti-state militancy, the study concludes (International Crisis Group, 2018).

Though the scholarly work covers most of the study domains of the security and development of Gwadar but still there are questions which are not satisfied with the previous literature. A critical gap persists regarding how the targeting of single points of failure intersects with local social and economic alienation which is caused by fortified enclave securitization. This study is to reduce the gap that void by evaluating the operational nexus between critical infrastructure protection, asymmetric conflict, and human security in Gwadar from 2018 to 2026.

Research Questions

- In 2018-2026, how did the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) change its operational doctrine and asymmetric tactics to target critical infrastructure and foreign personnel in Gwadar?
- In what ways has the state's “enclave securitization” apparatus helped reduce physical infrastructure risks into the local socio-economic grievances?

- What is the Securitization – Development Paradox and how it explains the current gap between the capital investment of CPEC Phase-II and commercial investment in Gwadar?

Historical and Political Background

The marginalisation of Balochistan as part of the Pakistani federation in March 1948 after Kalat acceded to the Pakistani state, is the beginning of the ethno-nationalist insurgency in Balochistan (1948, 1958, 1962-63, 1973-77, 2004-present) (Grare, 2013). The province has traditionally been about 44% of the total land area of Pakistan and about 6% of the population of the country and is a strategic cornerstone province, but significantly underrepresented politically (Khan, 2009). The political economy of resource extraction further exacerbated structural issues of local disenfranchisement, with the natural gas production of Sui giving industrial energy to urban centers of the Punjab and Sindh for long years, and the natural gas availability in Balochistan was less than 20% until well into the 21st century (Wani, 2021).

The current stage of the war came to a rapid pace in the mid-2000s, when the construction of Gwadar Port was initiated under General Pervez Musharraf as part of the Phase-I project in 2002. The military offensive that led to the killing of Baloch veteran leader Nawab Akbar Bugti in August of 2006 changed the nature of the skirmishing among the tribes to urbanization and ethno-nationalist insurgency led by organizations like the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF). The post-2006 period has seen a significant increase in asymmetric warfare, according to empirical conflict documentation from Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) and South Asia Terror Portal (SATP), whereby workers of non-Baloch communities, security personnel and railway tracks and gas pipelines were targeted by insurgent groups.

In April 2015, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was officially launched with a bilateral investment commitment of more than \$46 billion in monies, which was later estimated to be over \$62 billion, making Gwadar the center of the Chinese Belt and Road Investment (BRI). Concession contracts were given to China Overseas Port Holding Company (COPHC), which was state-owned, for 40 years, including a 91% stake in the port revenues, and an 85% stake in the revenue from

adjacent 2,281-acre Gwadar Free Zone, with the remaining 9% of terminal revenues reserved for the Gwadar Port Authority (GPA) (Hussain, Ejaz, & Rao, 2020). It was an institutionalized bypass of province autonomy and local resource ownership that was seen by regional political actors and local communities, and as such, was negotiated primarily on the federal and bilateral level (Sharif, 2023).

In response to the growing asymmetric threats along the corridor, the central state (CS) has implemented the National Action Plan (NAP) in 2014 and sent the Special Security Division (SSD), which is composed of two dedicated military divisions (34 Light Division and 44 Light Division) with more than 15,000 soldiers, to safeguard CPEC infrastructure and foreign nationals (Javaid, Umbreen, & Rafiq, 2024). This strong security presence, however, and the past issues of missing persons, demographic marginalization, and inadequate development of local health and education and municipal water systems, led to a divided political scene. The shift to the 2018-2026 period then established Gwadar not just as an international logistics hub, but as a hotspot between the federal geoeconomic vision and the ethno-political opposition in that area.

Changes in BLA Tactics and Capabilities (2018-2026)

The operational nature of the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) changed dramatically over the last few years, from low intensity rural guerrilla warfare to high-tech, intelligence-based urban asymmetric warfare, between 2018 and 2026. BLA doctrine was traditionally focused on hit-and-run attacks on security convoys, remote sabotage of pipelines and rocket strikes on frontier outposts in the central hinterland, but they now had to change that and set their sights on the economic and diplomatic hub of the state. It aimed to inflict on the economy the maximum possible damage, increase the cost of the security apparatus and create rifts between Islamabad and Beijing by realigning the group to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and their maritime pivot in Gwadar.

The key to this shift in tactics was the creation and activation of the BLA's own dedicated suicide and tactical urban assault unit, the Majeed Brigade. The Majeed Brigade was formed and operated with a special focus on high-risk activities, termed fedayeen (commando-style) and broke off from the

norm of Baloch nationalist insurgents who were reluctant to carry out suicide missions. Empirical threat assessments released by the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) and the South Asia Terror Portal (SATP) indicated that the deployment of this wing converted isolated skirmishes into carefully planned and targeted urban sieges for psychological impact both at home and abroad.

The first operational test of this doctrine was in November 2018 when the BLA attacked the Chinese Consulate in Karachi, a very high-value diplomatic target outside Balochistan aimed at showcasing trans-provincial capability. This was followed by the storming of the luxury Pearl Continental Hotel in Gwadar on 2nd May 2019 where the primary residence and commercial hub of foreign Engineers, port executives and investors who were involved in the CPEC Phase-II was located. These missions created a predictable template for the deployment of highly trained, heavily armed assault teams with automatic rifles, hand grenades, and suicide vests to go on standoff missions against security forces, engaging them in long-duration combat (Zahid, 2019).

The BLA has shown its ability to attack critical financial infrastructure by conducting a coordinated attack on the Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX) in Karachi in June 2020, led by four members of that organization. The aim of the tactical rationale was to frighten the international markets and demonstrate the systemic weakness in Pakistan's financial hubs by means of physical violence. The group's ability to operate within the commercial hub of Sindh, to establish sheltered bases and to carry out intricate urban-centric missions indicated that an intelligence gathering and infiltration network was in place outside of the sanctuaries of the rural insurgents (Basit, 2020).

In April 2022, the BLA claimed another milestone when it bombed the Confucius Institute at the University of Karachi. The operation was carried out by an educated mother, Shari Baloch, a 31-year-old, which marked the entry of female suicide bombers in the Majeed Brigade (Basit, The Majeed Brigade: The Baluch Liberation Army's Suicide Squad, 2022). This development shook the old concept of profiling that had been followed by law enforcement agencies, as they had to adapt to the new type of insurgent who is educated, middle class, and urban, and has been radicalized through

ideology, not through traditional tribal allegiance networks. The death of three Chinese academics and their local driver forced foreign bodies to dramatically reassess personnel security at educational and development venues in urban centers.

In early 2022, the BLA demonstrated its multi-front operational capability by launching twin attacks on the two bases of FC—one in Panjgur and another in Nushki. They forced their way into hardened perimeter walls with the use of vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) in a sustained kinetic engagement that lasted more than 70 hours, before assault squads clashed room-by-room with counter-proliferation teams that had taken up residence in the building. The data collected from Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI) and after-action reports of the military revealed that these operations were based on the use of advanced night vision devices (NVDs), United States (US)-made assault rifles M4 and M16, and encrypted communication systems, indicating the spillover of such weapons into the battlefield after the withdrawal of the United States (US) troops from Afghanistan in August 2021 (Islamabad Policy Research Institute, 2023).

The group has also been continuing its attacks on critical maritime and defence installations, with coordinated attacks against the PNS Siddique Naval Airbase in Turbat and the Gwadar Port Authority (GPA) Complex in March 2024. The GPA Complex assault was well orchestrated to target the port's main administrative pulse, with federal maritime offices and foreign coordination rooms located in the complex. The attack on the core executive office blocked the assault team before they could launch an attack on the buildings, but also revealed the nation's antiquated perimeter security system in the world's most guarded port city.

The BLA showed something new in August 2024 in terms of geographic synchronization, organising a large-scale multi-district campaign which was codenamed 'Operation Herof' (Dark Storm) (Basit, Balochistan Liberation Army's Operation Herof: A Shift from Sporadic Violence to Coordinated Offensive, 2024). Over 12 simultaneous attacks by insurgent units were made on a range of strategic national transport routes, temporarily setting up blockades on the Makran Coastal Highway (N-10),

Quetta-Karachi Highway (N-25), and rail lines via the Bolan Pass over a 24-hour period (Ugwu, 2025). Some units of the insurgents targeted and killed security personnel and non-local transport laborers, while also attacking military outposts and police stations, leaving more than 70 people dead in the province. This operation was not only a confirmation of the BLA's shift from small-scale incidents to coordinated subversive activities at the provincial level, which could disrupt the commercial logistical corridors, but also an example of how the group was advancing its operations.

In 2025 and 2026, the BLA's tactical sphere of influence expanded to embrace kidnapping and hijacking of trains to the extent of taking hostages on the Bolan Pass in the strategic train hijack and interdict of the Jaffar Express in March 2025. During the counter-offensive (Operation Green Bolan), which lasted for more than four days, militants blew up track-line explosives to derail the train and forced over 400 passengers to get off, among them were civilian army personnel and security guards who were screened, isolated and executed. The event highlighted a high-level capability to carry out real-time intelligence screening, to interdict the heavy rail infrastructure and to set up a dynamic exclusion zone along key national transit chokepights (Hussain A. , 2025).

Technical modernization greatly facilitated tactical improvements throughout the 2018-2026 period, such as the use of commercial micro-unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) as weapons for pre-operational reconnaissance, target tracking and capturing battlefield video. The group had a dedicated media unit, called Hakkal Media, that creates HD, multi-lingual propaganda, suicide bomber video statements, and live kinetic engagement video within hours of an attack. A hybrid warfare capability that includes physical kinetic violence, cyber and information operations, designed to add to fear, to demoralize foreign technical personnel, to influence international perceptions of the corridor viability.

These strategies are supported by a resource nationalist and asymmetric economic exhaustion doctrine. Multi-billion dollar investments are not public investments, but external extractive investments, says the BLA, which is intended to change the population characteristics and develop

the mineral and maritime wealth of the Baloch without their knowledge. The BLA's leadership is systematically targeting the physical, human, and financial structure of CPEC to push up risk premiums to unsustainable levels, discourage foreign investment, and disrupt the state's geo-economics transition.

To sum up, the BLA has gone from being a young and inexperienced group in 2018 to a technologically skilled, lethal and modern asymmetric group in 2026. Modern-day perimeter defense has become ineffective because of the use of female suicide cadres, night vision, simultaneous multi-district attacks, precision targeting foreign high-value infrastructure, etc. Securing critical infrastructure in Gwadar and along the entire economic corridor has thus become a routine counter-insurgency, and asymmetric threat mitigation, intelligence integration and Critical Infrastructure Protection (KRITIS) is also a complex challenge.

Critical Infrastructure Vulnerability Analysis

In the Critical Infrastructure Protection (CIP) framework, as codified in the European Union's Critical Entities Resilience (CER) Directive and Germany's doctrine of Critical Infrastructure Protection (KRITIS), the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is found to be extremely structurally exposed. Economic corridors are macro-socio technical systems that are large in scale, with long, exposed transportation corridors, are highly concentrated in their logistics hubs, and have highly interconnected utility networks compared to localized urban facilities. This infrastructure runs through hundreds of kilometres of rough, low population density areas in Balochistan which makes physical control of the entire area impracticable, giving a tremendous edge to insurgent hit and run elements.

The main deficiency in Gwadar's maritime and administrative system is the single point focus concentration. The Gwadar Port Authority (GPA) Complex, port berths, customs clearance terminals are situated within a small hammerhead peninsula which is joined with the mainland by a narrow isthmus of only 12-km. The Gwadar Port Authority (GPA) Complex and the port berths are located in a narrow 12 km isthmus, which extends into a small hammerhead peninsula with customs clearance terminals. The coordinated infiltration on March

2024 by the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) on GPA Complex highlighted the impact of kinetic attacks on the nerve centers of administration and IT on the daily functioning of the port. Berthing facilities were structurally sound, but the administrative nodes were cut off, showing that today's deep-sea ports are not viable if their administrative management, cargo tracking and customs staff are all targeted directly by physical means (Wirsing, 2008).

The maritime end, the corridor's most vulnerable transportation vector is linear transportation. The Makran Coastal Highway (N-10) linking Gwadar to Karachi over 533 km, in addition to the N-85 highway from Gwadar to Quetta and the central CPEC alignment offer a large geographical exposure. Insurgents use blind curves, dry river beds, and isolated passes in the mountains to lay traps for remote-controlled Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs); they set up illegal dynamic checkpoints and ambush logistical convoys. The South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) and the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) have also concluded in their security assessments that linear highways are structurally unsafe against decentralized asymmetric attacks, unless they are provided with people-to-people surveillance and prompt response mechanisms (Khan, 2009).

The Makran division has infrastructure risks due to fragility of the energy and telecommunications grid. Gwadar has never been directly connected to the Pakistani national electricity transmission grid, but connected via 100 MW imports from the Iranian grid through long-distance overhead power transmission towers, along with some heavy-fuel power generation units in the area. These are the high voltage pylons that cut across hundreds of kilometres of empty wilderness that have been repeatedly the scenes of exploding sabotage by insurgent cells. When one cluster of transmission towers is damaged, there are immediate cascading failures, and the water desalination plants, cold-storage facilities for the seafood export industry and maritime signaling systems are all disabled in the port city (Yousaf, Qadir, & Masood, 2024).

An acute risk concerning personnel security is directly linked to foreign markets and the technical execution, this risk is linked to personnel security. As evidenced in incidents of targeted attacks on Chinese engineers, logistics planners, and technical

consultants during transit convoy operations and urban compound attacks, human capital is a key component of systems of critical infrastructure. Executive and technical personnel have to be mobile to enable infrastructure projects to reach commercial operationalisation as per international corporate security standards. Constant risks to foreign workers also compel and require state authorities to enforce highly armored escorts, curfews and limited movement systems, all of which result in construction timelines being considerably longer and the operational overhead considerably higher.

Last but not least, the marine routes and sea lanes have an asymmetric vulnerability. The surrounding coastline is porous while Pakistan Navy Task Force-88 is patrolling across the Demi Zirr and Padi Zirr bays as defensive task force. Insurgent cells have shown to strike close to naval and coast guard bases in other coastal areas like Jiwani and Pasni. The region is marred by thousands of local fishing dhows and speedboats that are not monitored and are also used for fishing, which poses an asymmetric maritime threat of water-borne improvised explosive devices (WBIEDs) or tactical infiltration teams without closing down the local maritime economy (Javaid, Umbreen, & Rafiq, 2024).

To sum it up, the vulnerability of critical infrastructure in Gwadar is not a mere issue of physical security of concrete docks and cranes but extends to the operational dependence of administrative complexes, long-distance transport routes, regional power lines and human resources. According to the modern CIP theory, an infrastructure network is as weak as its weakest link. Asymmetric militant groups target soft aspects like transmission pylons, transit convoys, administrative offices, and exploit vulnerability of structure single points of failure to prevent Gwadar from shifting physical construction into safe continuous commercial trade.

Case Studies

Qualitative process tracing of salient kinetic incidents from 2018 to 2026 reveals an obvious pattern of the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), which has been marked by progressive tactical thresholds, diversification of targets and calculated geo-economics sabotage. The attack of the luxurious Pearl Continental hotel in Gwadar in May

2019 was the first milestone of this path. The attack, which was led by a four-man assault team from the BLA's specialist Majeed Brigade, targeted foreign executives, logistics planners and Chinese technical staff living at the facility. Official statements released by Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) and the operational media had asserted that the Pakistan Navy's Special Services Group (SSG-N), Army commandos, and local police have secured the premises and eliminated four attackers with five casualties suffered by the hotel staff and security personnel. The strategic significance of the incident was also great: it forced the derogation of the belief that Gwadar is an isolated security zone, resulted in the instant cancellation of high-level foreign commercial delegations and forced the immediate implementation of the check point saturation and movement restrictions in Gwadar city (Zahid, Pakistan Confronts Resurgent Baluch Ethno-Separatist Militancy, 2020).

In April 2022, the concept of tactical envelope expanded to include high-profile targets, such as the Confucius Institute in the University of Karachi, which was attacked by a suicide bomber targeting soft targets. The attack by a female suicide bomber, known as Shari Baloch, who killed three Chinese academics and their local driver. The state's initial reaction to this was a concerted bilateral diplomatic damage control mission, a national intelligence-driven sweep of urban facilitation networks, and tightened up biometric registration of all educational personnel. The strategic impact was so devastating on bilateral civil cooperation, it demonstrated the ability of the BLA to infiltrate major metropolitan cities outside Balochistan, intelligence failure in the form of threat profiling by the law enforcement agencies and the temporary repatriation of foreign instructional personnel all over Pakistan (Basit, The Majeed Brigade: The Baluch Liberation Army's Suicide Squad, 2022).

In March 2024, BLA tried its most direct attack on the infrastructure when it attacked Gwadar Port Authority (GPA) Complex with an armed attack by eight members. The attackers used to vehicle-bear breaching charges, hand grenades and automatic weapons against the administrative centre, which contains offices of maritime administration and customs processing centres, and state security liaison suites, Al Jazeera reported, citing the ISPR. Military and local security forces quickly quelled the attack from the outside, silencing all eight

militants after two hours of gunfire and killing two soldiers. Strategically, the attack failed to breach the central terminal docks or to do any harm to heavy cranes but did paralyze the administrative activities of ports in Gwadar, showed that the static defense set-up of the administrative zone of Gwadar was still vulnerable and confirmed that the administrative center of the CPEC was still a combat target.

The final stage of this operational escalation came in August 2024, when a multi-district, unprecedented campaign called 'Operation Herof' (Dark Storm) shut down provincial logistics. These coordinated insurgent groups attacked more than a dozen administrative and transit hubs in a single 24-hour span, blocking key transport routes like the Makran Coastal Highway (N-10), the Quetta-Karachi Highway (N-25), and carrying out armed off-loading of passengers, according to the field reports captured by Reuters and Centre for Research and Security Studies (CRSS). Aerial airframes, units of the Frontier Corps and army contingents were mobilised for joint clearance operations and a great toll of provincial casualties, of over 70 people, resulted. The impact of Operation Herof on the economy was more strategic, shifting the nature of attacks from hit and run to economic interdiction of wide area, as it was able to create a significant impact on the continuity of the supply chain along the national highways and thus on investor confidence on the overland transportation routes of the CPEC Phase-II (Basit, Balochistan Liberation Army's Operation Herof: A Shift from Sporadic Violence to Coordinated Offensive, 2024).

The wide area transit disruption principle was rolled out on the national heavy rail logistics in March 2025 as the coordinated hijacking of the Jaffar Express in strategic Bolan Pass. In a mountain section, insurgent groups set off track-line explosives to block the movement of the train, killing more than 400 passengers and particularly screening, isolating, and executing off-duty military personnel. In response, the armed forces launched a 48-hour multi-domain rescue mission, Operation Green Bolan, which included special forces, helicopter gunships, and drone assets, to clear the area, extract 354 hostages and kill 33 militants. Strategically, the hijacking illustrated that the BLA had gained the skill to engage in protracted hostage standoffs and cut off single points of failure in the transportation sector, compelling the state to invest

huge kinetic forces in the protection of daily transportation and highlighting the fact that peripheral infrastructure cannot be protected without constant combat escort (Hussain A. , 2025).

State and Chinese Reactions

Due to the growing asymmetric threats to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the Pakistani state machinery has put in place a special multi-layered security mechanism to protect the critical infrastructure and foreign staff. The institutional core of this defense architecture was the operationalization of the Special Security Division (SSD) consisting of two military divisions, the 34 Light Infantry Division and the 44 Light Infantry Division, which had a combined strength of more than 15,000 to 20,000 military and paramilitary personnel with a focus on the eastern and western corridor alignments. In addition to this terrestrial umbrella, the Pakistan Navy has also set up a seaward defense network called Task Force-88 (TF-88) comprising fast attack craft, maritime patrol aircraft and coastal radar stations to secure Gwadar Port and its approach channels in the Arabian Sea against seaward attacks (Javaid, Umbreen, & Rafiq, 2024).

The federal government officially gave approval to Operation Azm-e-Istehkam (Resolve for Stability) to combat the renewed insurgent offensive in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province in June 2024. This strategic plan is a re-energized and whole-of-nation counter-terrorism effort, built on the principles of the 2014 National Action Plan (NAP). In contrast with the previous kinetic operations based on territorial sweep, Azm-e-Istehkam has championed intelligence based operations (IBOs) and modernization of law enforcement agencies (LEAs), as well as dynamic inter-agencies coordination to disrupt non-state armed groups (NSAGs) facilitation networks and safe havens, particularly the urban logistics corridors of the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and associated factions (Sevea, 2024).

The state took a tough stance on the urbanism of enclaves of security at the municipal and structural level in Gwadar in the framework of the Gwadar Smart Port City Master Plan. A key component of this strategy was the deployment of the Gwadar Safe City Project, with a combination of hundreds of high-definition (HD) surveillance cameras, automated facial recognition systems, and

centralized command and control communication centers. At the same time, physical perimeter fencing was being implemented to the 24 square kilometre core port peninsula with checkpoints placed at various points to control entry by having dedicated biometric scanning and vehicle screening equipment. The measures were intended to create a tight security bubble, both tangible and intangible, for foreign personnel and installations in the port, while isolating it from the indigenous population (Shakeel, 2020).

In parallel with the physical strengthening, state infrastructure related to Anti Counter Terrorism Financing (Anti-CFT) and regulatory mechanisms were also bolstered, both under the umbrella of the National Counter-Terrorism Authority (NACTA) and provincial Counter-Terrorism Departments (CTDs). International compliance standards set by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) were adopted, with a stepped-up surveillance of illegal Hawala/Hundi networks and currency transfers across borders for buying arms for insurgents. In addition, the state authorities also enhanced co-operation between them and the neighbours in the region for the interdiction of transboundary arms smuggling and transit of militants along the porous Makran border.

In the diplomatic and strategic sphere, the consistent attacks on Chinese engineers, company executives and academic personnel caused Beijing to shift its risk paradigm more than ever before. After mass-casualty attacks, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the State Council went from private assurances to concrete, public demands for “iron-clad” security assurances and in-depth, transparent investigations (Small, 2025). Beijing linked more capital funding for CPEC Phase-II industrialization and development of Special Economic Zone (SEZ) to tangible improvements in physical security, forcing Islamabad to provide substantial financial compensation packages to the families of foreign personnel killed in the line of duty and regularly submit joint security audits.

This sense of insecurity coupled with robust discussions on strategic matters on direct engagement of Chinese security apparatus on the soil of Pakistan, led to a situation that was becoming increasingly tense. Chinese officials and state-owned enterprises looked at proposals that would involve the involvement of Chinese Private

Security Companies (PSCs) or joint security units to ensure security at key project corridors and security compounds of companies. Islamabad had always denied permission to introduce foreign armed security personnel into the country to maintain sovereign defense and territorial policing prerogatives while the two states set up CPEC Joint Working Group (JWG) on Safety and Security and joint intelligence-sharing committees for real-time threat assessment and coordination of VIP protection protocols.

On the allied side, the Pakistan Armed Forces and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) continued bilateral military cooperation, including specialized training in counter-terrorism and providing equipment. The militaries instituted joint counter-terrorism exercises like the 'Warrior' series on anti-hijacking, hostage rescue and protection of critical assets. Furthermore, Beijing accelerated the delivery of sophisticated defence equipment to the Pakistani police and military forces deployed in Balochistan, such as the heavily-armed personnel carriers (APCs), counter-UAV electronic warfare systems and integrated perimeter-monitoring sensor arrays.

The overall reaction of the Pakistan government and the Chinese government has established one of the best fortified security structures around any global economic corridor. But this stance exposes a structural problem: the primary admin complexes have been able to be physically overrun by the enemy, albeit with difficulty, due to heavy militarisation, elite task forces and high tech surveillance grids, which, however, have raised the overheads of their operations. These measures have tried to address the asymmetric nature of conflict symptoms by focusing on kinetic containment and enclave defence rather than more localised civic integration, thus allowing for the resolution of the more visible elements of this conflict without tackling the underlying socio-economic issues.

Local and Regional Implications

Such an unequal threat environment and the ensuing militarization of Gwadar pose serious operational and geo-economics consequences for the execution of CPEC Phase-II. The first period was dedicated to basic hardware and energy production; the second towards industrial cooperation, manufacturing relocation and Special Economic Zones (SEZs) demands a mobility of civilians, free trade and

minimal barriers to the movement of goods. Rather, the dominant security arrangement brought about a severe narrowing of access to commerce. The result, instead, has been a sharp bottleneck in commerce. Chronic operational delays have been a major issue in the 2,281-acre Gwadar Free Zone and its surrounding industrial estates, which remain an attractive place for international and domestic private investors to invest long-term capital in an active conflict region where physical access to the country's trade arteries is often blocked by insurgents (Hussain, Ejaz, & Rao, 2020).

The security situation has created a huge financial hurdle in the international shipping and logistics sector. In today's supply-chain risk model, deep sea transshipment hubs depend on competitive port turnaround time, smooth customs clearance between ports and a predictable maritime access. But the continued attacks by the insurgents, including the recent successful raid on the Gwadar Port Authority (GPA) Complex, and high-profile kidnappings that have occurred on linear transit highways have made war-risk insurance premiums high for international merchant boats sailing close to the Makran coast. As a result, most of the commercial shipping lines are reluctant to invest in Gwadar's state-of-the-art deep-sea berths, which are handling fewer than expected volumes of goods. So, established and integrated ports like Karachi port and Port Qasim are getting preference from global commercial shipping lines due to less cargo handling at the state-of-the-art deep-sea berths in Gwadar.

A further fiscal cost from the use of dedicated security architectures adds to the economic stresses of the corridor. Sustained budgetary allocations are needed for the Special Security Division (SSD), Task Force-88, surveillance blimps, integrated safe city command centers, heavily armored transit escorts, and other functions. The net economic benefit of bilateral loans and infrastructure investments are reduced by such high protection costs. The state is, in fact, compelled to spend a lot of money on geographical defence and kinetic containment, to the detriment of local municipal development, health service and education, thus increasing the local discontent with the lack of development in the region (Javaid, Umbreen, & Rafiq, 2024).

In addition to the commercial indicators, the

security landscape poses significant compliance challenges under the constantly changing international corporate governance framework. The legal obligations for European and Western investors in highly securitised contexts are very demanding, such as under the statutory due diligence requirements under the German Supply Chain Due Diligence Act (Lieferkettensorgfaltspflichtengesetz - LkSG) and the EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (EU CSDDD). However, it is virtually impossible to undertake transparent Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) audits and human rights impact assessments in a city with biometric movement restrictions, civic curfews, and opposition movements, such as Haq Do Tehreek. This means that Gwadar will effectively become shut out of Western private investment, thus reinforcing a “one source, one supplier” reliance on state-backed Chinese funding.

The repeated attacks on foreign nationals have added to the friction in the overall bilateral ties between Islamabad and Beijing on a strategic and diplomatic note. Attacks on engineers, corporate executives, and education officials have put bilateral talks on a course from economic cooperation to high level security talks. It is Beijing's increasing demands for direct security audits, joint risk management measures, and more active participation in personnel defense issues that are challenging the traditional sovereignty arrangement of host countries. This strategic tension makes project approvals more difficult, causes postponement of concessional financing for other important economic corridors like the Main Line-1 (ML-1) railway overhaul and reveals the structural constraints of pacifying locals for sustainable economic integration without political pacification (Boni, 2025).

The overall message of the Gwadar development model, in short, is the institutionalization of the Securitization–Development Paradox. The state's focus on physical asset hardening (KRITIS) has not yet addressed the basic human security issues and socio-economic inclusion of the host community, resulting in an unsustainable security ecosystem. The fortress enclave model works well to protect concrete infrastructure from absolute destruction but it makes the entire economic corridor fragile from the economic, social and structural perspectives, and can be attacked for a long duration

by asymmetric means.

Conclusion & Policy Recommendations

The operational trajectory of Gwadar Port and the entire China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project and the model of “enclave securitization” it represents is evident between 2018 and 2026. Although large-scale deployment of troops, checkpoints and surveillance posts have maintained the physical security of primary concrete berths they have not succeeded in preventing the corridor from being exposed to the asymmetric attrition by the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA). The main result of this study is that socio-political vacuum is no setting for mega-infrastructure resilience: When state security architectures see indigenous peoples as an intrinsic security danger, and not the main developmental actors, the socio-economic marginalisation creates an ongoing operational space, local sympathy and recruitment possibilities for insurgent networks.

This structural paradox needs to be addressed with a complete shift in the approach to security by the state from a traditional ‘fortress mentality’ towards more “Smart, Community-Integrated Policing”. The pervasive grid of intrusive physical checkpoints across the municipal area of Gwadar should be replaced by perimeter monitoring and intelligent access corridors, both of which are non-invasive and are based on digital systems and technologies. Also, local policing and civilian police-dominated law enforcement agencies (namely Balochistan Police and provincial Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD)) should be upgraded in place of contingencies for internal municipality security. A local officer who is integrated in front-line security management will help alleviate friction between civilians and security forces on a day-to-day basis, restore trust in the community and provide the high-quality human intelligence needed to prevent urban fedayeen attacks from reaching critical assets.

A durable security strategy cannot be built without having a durable human security dividend in the form of a “Legally Binding Socio-Economic Compact” in the form of tangible, local, human security dividends. A mandatory statutory quota of 50 to 60 percent should be in place for all technical, administrative and logistic jobs in the Gwadar Free Zone and port operation to be filled by local Baloch youth, which should be institutionalized through

federal government and Gwadar Port Authority. It has to be coupled with increasing the training programs for free and accredited under the Pak-China Technical and Vocational Institute. At the same time, the revenue-sharing agreements should be adjusted so that a share of the gross terminal and free zone revenue is dedicated to the municipal development funds of water supply for clean drinking water and modern desalination plants and decentralized renewable energy grids (Ahmed & Razzaq, China Pakistan Economic Corridor: Its Prospects and Implications for Gwadar and Balochistan, 2022).

Maritime livelihoods protection is the operational imperative and immediate task to suppress localized civil unrests, civic resistance groups like 'Haq Do Tehreek'. There should be a complete monitoring system to keep the deep-sea trawlers without any permission in Balochistan's 12 nautical mile territorial waters by the federal maritime authorities and Pakistan Coast Guard. By ensuring proper, unhindered movement of fishermen along the coastline, including the use of modern landing jetties, cold storage sheds, and specific fuel subsidies, it will be possible to separate legitimate socio-economic concerns from militant anti-state mobilization and bring back the economic status quo for more than 70 percent of the coastline's population (Khan & Bakhsh, 2025).

With regard to the kinetic and intelligence aspects, the state needs to modernise the Counter-Terrorism Financing (CFT) and Regional Border Interdiction. Intelligence agencies should increase their monitoring of criminal Hawala/Hundi networks and arms procurement networks which funnel arms to insurgent networks in coordination with the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA). Institutionalized border liaison offices, combined

electronic surveillance and harmonized customs checkpoints at the Makran border with the neighboring countries should be established to stop the passage of insurgents without cutting down upon the legitimate, informal border trade which makes the livelihood of the border people in the economies of the borderlands.

Last but not least, the state and its corporate partners need to implement Institutionalised Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) Auditing to tackle international investor risk in line with the statutory due diligence requirements, e.g. the EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) and the German Supply Chain Due Diligence Act (LkSG). Promoting independent, third-party oversight boards, including community land rights representatives, legal experts and human rights ombudsmen, will help ensure infrastructure development respects community land rights and local mobility. Clear, measurable standards of compliance keep international shipping lines exposed to a minimum, mitigate insurance premiums for maritime wars, and encourage a wider range of foreign direct investment in shipping than bilateral investment from governments.

To sum up, building taller walls around the Gwadar Port does not necessarily make it more strategically viable, but ensuring that national macro-economic aspirations meet local human development. The formerly mentioned securitization–development paradox can only be addressed if it is acknowledged that Critical Infrastructure Protection (KRITIS) and human security are complementary goals. Embedding asset defense in inclusive economic governance, civil liberties and local community ownership can help the state shift the Gwadar from contested military fortress to a truly resilient, commercially vibrant regional trade hub.

Conflict of Interest

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