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Commentary

Balochistan's Escalating Insurgency: A Strained Security Landscape

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February 18, 2026

Summary

The Baloch question and the ongoing conflict represent the limits of coercive state measures and strategic containment in confronting a festering internal political challenge.

The series of 12 coordinated attacks carried out by the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) between 30 and 31 January 2026, targeting military installations, banks, prisons and police stations across Balochistan, marked the latest strategic escalation in Pakistan's longest-running insurgency. These attacks involved suicide bombings, grenade assaults and gun attacks, as well as a prison break that freed about 30 inmates in the Mastung district.[1] As part of the second phase of Operation Herof, BLA spokesperson Jeeyand Baloch reiterated the group's commitment to intensifying the level of lethality that has come to define the fifth phase of the insurgency. He referred to Operation Herof II as a "declaration of decisive resistance".[2]

While the BLA has claimed it lost 34 fighters and killed more than 200 security personnel, according to the Pakistani government, 48 individuals—including civilians and armed personnel—were killed during operations while over 170 BLA members were neutralised.[3]

The rise in Baloch-led attacks in 2026 is not a sudden development. Rather, it represents the further entrenchment of a deadly insurgency, largely resulting from coercive state responses. According to the Pakistan Security Report released by the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) in January 2026, Balochistan remained one of the primary epicentres of 'insecurity', which experienced at least 254 attacks and 1,026 casualties in 2025—a 26 per cent increase since 2024.[4]

At the same time, it is vital to acknowledge that decades of documented human rights concerns, unmet political aspirations, the state's tendency to conflate dissent with terrorism, and socio-economic and educational deprivation have consistently replenished the Baloch insurgency. These accumulated grievances now find expression in Operation Herof II. Collectively, these trends must be viewed as the direct outcome of a protracted conflict and persistent domestic instability.

Escalation and Dual Security Prism

In the lead-up to the latest escalation, several critical developments had already signalled that intensifying violence by the BLA against the state, its security forces and infrastructure, would shape Balochistan's evolving security landscape. For

[1] **"More than 120 Dead After Multiple Suicide and Gun Attacks in Pakistan, Officials Say"**, *The Guardian,* 1 February 2026.

[2] **"BLA Launches Operation Herof Phase 2 Across Balochistan"**, *News on Air*, 31 January 2026.

[3] Abubakar Siddique, **"What's Behind the Unprecedented Attacks in Pakistan's Balochistan?"**, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 4 February 2026.

[4] **"Pakistan Security Report 2025"**, Report, Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), January 2026.

example, during the March 2025 Jaffar Train hijacking, BLA insurgents reportedly took more than 400 passengers hostage, including military personnel on leave.[5] This incident was arguably a continuation of the first phase of Operation Herof, launched in August 2024, which saw a series of coordinated attacks across Balochistan targeting military and paramilitary personnel, highways and railway infrastructure, resulting in over 70 reported casualties.[6]

At the same time, an examination of recent trends and figures suggests that the current phase of the Balochistan–Pakistan conflict—and the responses of the actors involved—can be viewed through a dual security prism. On the one hand, from the Pakistani state's perspective, military tactics have been the preferred strategic instrument for containing the spillover of a long-simmering political dilemma. This default approach has been adopted to maintain Pakistan's credibility as a counter-terrorism partner for countries, including the United States and China, while reassuring citizens of the state's capacity to guarantee physical security and territorial integrity.

On the other hand, given the fragmentation within Baloch society, the movement's decentralised structure, and the absence of sustained international support for an independent Baloch homeland, the BLA is likely cognisant of the numerous obstacles it faces in its pursuit of independence. Nevertheless, its operational strategy appears geared towards maintaining volatility within the domestic security landscape and ensuring that state forces are unable to transition from a reactive to an offensive posture. In this backdrop, attacks on military outposts, police installations, gas pipelines, railways and highways—visible manifestations of state authority—could be viewed as symbolic victories for the insurgents.

Arguably, the intensifying conflict between Baloch insurgents and the Pakistani state reflects a trend where vicious cycles of retaliatory violence are expected to worsen the federal-provincial security gridlock over the foreseeable future. The above claim is bolstered by PIPS which notes that

> The enhanced operational capacity of Baloch insurgent groups, combined with local sympathy in certain areas, poses a serious and multidimensional challenge for the government and security agencies.[7]

[5] Farzana Shaikh, **"The Hijacking of a Train Marks a Watershed in the Balochistan Insurgency"**, Expert Comment, Chatham House, 16 April 2025.

[6] Saleem Ahmad and Saud Mehsud, **"More than 70 Dead After Militant Attacks in Pakistan's Balochistan"**, *Reuters*, 27 August 2024.

[7] **"Pakistan Security Report 2025"**, Report, Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), January 2026.

As part of its findings released in 2025, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan highlighted several key observations that help explain the resilience of the Baloch insurgency:[8]

a. Accounts suggest that the phenomenon (enforced disappearances), far from being isolated or exceptional, has become systematic, thereby undermining the rule of law and severely eroding public trust in state institutions…

b. Balochistan's share (in the Saindak copper-gold project) diminished to just 2 per cent, while 50 per cent was allocated to Chinese stakeholders and 48 per cent to the federal government. Furthermore, a PKR 500 million deposit requirement for obtaining mining licenses was cited as a prohibitive barrier for local communities and businesses…

c. Several National Party leaders described the (February 2024) elections as an 'auction', claiming that outcomes were predetermined and manipulated through financial inducements and administrative coercion… A BSO representative remarked, We want to raise our voices under the constitution, but for doing so, we are labelled terrorists.

It could be argued that such festering provincial grievances, which feed into the ongoing insurgency, have challenged Pakistani leaders' claims that religion serves as a unifying factor.[9]

War of Narratives

Amid the intensifying conflict, competing narratives have emerged as another battlefield domain, with mainstream media and spokespersons associated with insurgent groups shaping perceptions of success. In an effort to curate a narrative about the reinstatement of state control, the military leaders attempted to frame the clashes between its forces and the BLA as a mere 'desert standoff' that was swiftly

[8] **"Balochistan's Crisis of Trust"**, HCRP Fact-Finding Report, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2025.

[9] **"Balochistan's Youth Patriotic, Local Support Vital Against Terrorism: DG ISPR"**, *The Nation*, 16 August 2025.

brought to an end within three days.[10] This was conducted under Operation Radd-ul-Fitna-1 in response to these attacks.

The Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) wing released a statement to the media following the conclusion of its latest operation, stating that the 216 dead BLA fighters had 'been sent to hell, significantly degrading the leadership, command-and-control structures, and operational capabilities of terrorist networks'.[11] In another post shared on X by the Director General of ISPR, the tweet hailed the state forces' joint operational capabilities having 'successfully thwarted the evil design of terrorists' and, while linking the BLA insurgents to foreign collaborators, vowed that the 'relentless counter-terrorism campaign under the vision of Azm-e-Istehkam will continue at full pace…'.[12]

On 6 February 2026, a week after the launch of Operation Herof II, *The Express Tribune*, like other platforms such as *DAWN*, echoed the ISPR narratives to bring uniformity across the spectrum. These platforms have framed expressions of Baloch grievances as acts of terrorism and the state's further coercive counter-responses as legitimate counter-terror practices.[13]

Such posturing could be perceived as a strategic manoeuvre by the state to retain international, particularly Chinese, confidence in its ability to manage escalation following the escalating attacks on China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects and Chinese citizens across the country. The district of Noshki in Balochistan was reportedly among the worst affected by the recent BLA operation. It houses the Frontier Corps and Counter-Terrorism headquarters in Balochistan, as well as the Deputy Commissioner's office. At the same time, the area is of significant importance to Pakistan due to its geographical location.[14] It is situated near the Reko Diq and Saindak mines, which are globally renowned for their copper and gold reserves. The Saindak project, in particular, has been undertaken by the Metallurgical Corporation of China.

On the other hand, the BLA proclaimed widespread public support for Operation Herof II and argued that ISPR's claims lack on-ground credibility among the Baloch

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[10] Saleem Ahmed and Asif Shahzad, **"Pakistan Sends Helicopters, Drones to End Desert Standoff; 58 Dead"**, *Reuters*, 4 February 2026.

[11] **"216 Terrorists Killed as Security Forces Conclude 'Operation Radd-ul-Fitna-1' in Balochistan: ISPR"**, *DAWN*, 5 February 2026.

[12] DG, ISPR, **"On 29 January 2026, Forty One Terrorists Belonging to Indian Proxy, Fitna al…"**, *X*, 30 January 2026, 3:17 pm.

[13] **"216 Terrorists Eliminated in Balochistan, Says ISPR"**, *The Express Tribune*, 6 February 2026.

[14] **"Pakistan: Strategic Escalation of Violence by Baloch Fighters in Disputed Balochistan Region"**, *The Pamphlet*, 8 February 2026.

population.[15] Furthermore, as part of the narrative warfare, Baloch insurgents have vehemently rejected ISPR's claims of having dealt a blow to their operations, describing them as 'propaganda' and drawing a stark comparison between how both sides have reported the casualties incurred. For example, the insurgents have argued that while they have acknowledged the full extent of losses within their ranks, the Pakistani armed forces have deliberately misled the public about the scale of their casualties, arguably to deflect domestic scrutiny over operational setbacks.[16]

Conclusion

The continued resilience displayed by the Baloch insurgents underscores how Pakistan's approach to securitising a political problem through brute force and coercion has visibly broken down, despite repeated military crackdowns, detentions and influence operations targeted at domestic audiences. Nonetheless, despite official claims, the intensity of the state's response suggests that the perceived threat can no longer be managed through intimidation tactics, physical violence, or strategic storytelling. This is occurring even as the BLA continues to wage a systematic psychological campaign against the state, consistently undermining its ability to protect key assets or uphold security guarantees to partner countries such as China, which have made large-scale strategic and economic investments through CPEC. These trends have, in many ways, brought the country to an impasse regarding the future of its security architecture in Balochistan.

[15] **"BLA Claims Operation 'Herof II' Continues for Sixth Day, Rejects Pakistani Military Statements"**, *ANI*, 6 February 2026.

[16] Ibid.

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