

**THE BOOMERANG MECHANISM IN HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY:
BALOCH LONG MARCH AGAINST CHINA-PAKISTAN ECONOMIC
CORRIDOR (CPEC)**

Ameta Novelia br Karo

Universitas Pembangunan Nasional “Veteran” Jawa Timur
Karoameta23@gmail.com

Muhammad Indrawan Jatmika

Universitas Pembangunan Nasional “Veteran” Jawa Timur
m.indrawan.hi@upnjatim.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Transnational advocacy networks (TANs) and the “boomerang” pattern of influence can bypass domestic repression and internationalise local human rights struggles, as shown by the 2023–2024 Baloch Long March. Pakistani activists led by the women's organisation Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC) marched from Gwadar to Islamabad to demand justice for enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings in Balochistan, facing censorship, arbitrary arrests, and state violence. When local channels were blocked, movement leaders allied with international NGOs (Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch) and global media to present their plight to the UN and international public. This strategy led to UN expert statements in early 2025 and international media coverage, increasing pressure on Pakistan's government. This study examines how the Long March employed external pressure to highlight human rights violations associated with the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, utilizing Keck and Sikkink's “boomerang” framework and other norm-based theories. Despite Pakistani authorities' repressive measures (information blackouts, protest bans), the international outcry raised the cost of rights abuses and internationalised the Baloch cause. This paper demonstrates how marginalized activists utilized global media and networks to advocate for domestic rights.

Keywords: boomerang pattern; transnational advocacy networks; human rights; Balochistan; CPEC

ABSTRAK

Baloch Long March 2023–2024 merupakan contoh nyata bagaimana jaringan advokasi transnasional dan pola “boomerang” digunakan untuk melewati represi domestik dan menginternasionalisasi perjuangan hak asasi. Dihadapkan pada sensor, penangkapan sewenang-wenang, dan kekerasan negara di Balochistan, aktivis Pakistan yang dipimpin Baloch Yakjehti Committee berjalan kaki dari Gwadar ke Islamabad menuntut keadilan atas penghilangan paksa dan pembunuhan di luar hukum. Ketika saluran lokal tertutup, pemimpin gerakan membangun aliansi dengan LSM internasional (mis. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch) dan media global, menyuarkan perjuangan mereka ke Perserikatan Bangsa-Bangsa dan

opini publik internasional. Strategi ini memicu pernyataan resmi (mis. pakar PBB awal 2025) dan peliputan media asing, memperbesar tekanan pada pemerintah Pakistan. Menggunakan kerangka boomerang Keck dan Sikkink dan teori normatif lainnya, studi ini menganalisis bagaimana Long March memanfaatkan tekanan eksternal untuk menyorot pelanggaran HAM terkait Koridor Ekonomi China-Pakistan (CPEC). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun otoritas Pakistan terus meningkatkan represi (pemadaman informasi, larangan demonstrasi), kecaman internasional menambah tekanan terhadap pelanggaran HAM dan menginternasionalisasi isu Baloch. Artikel ini menambah literatur advokasi HAM transnasional dengan mendemonstrasikan kasus di mana aktivis terpinggirkan memanfaatkan media global dan jaringan internasional untuk menguatkan tuntutan hak domestik.

Kata kunci: pola boomerang; jaringan advokasi transnasional; hak asasi manusia; Balochistan; CPEC

INTRODUCTION

Balochistan, which is widely acknowledged as Pakistan's largest and most resource-rich province, has persistently been subjected to significant violations of human rights, in addition to economic and military neglect. Since the establishment of Pakistan in 1947, the Baloch have been involved in sporadic uprisings (Mendez, 2020). These uprisings have been driven by a sense of historical grievance while also being motivated by a lack of self-determination. There have been allegations that various Pakistani administrations and military entities have engaged in "colonial" exploitation. This type of exploitation is characterised by the extraction of oil, gas, and minerals at the expense of local development, in addition to a harsh crackdown on dissent. There have been instances of "enforced disappearances," extrajudicial killings, and torture performed by security forces, according to reports from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and journalists (Rauf, 2025). Tens of thousands of Baloch people are believed to have been subjected to extrajudicial killings or disappearances over the last few decades, according to estimates provided by human rights organisations. Concurrently, certain armed factions of the Baloch people have directed their actions against non-Baloch residents and establishments, which has contributed to the creation of an atmosphere of apprehension. The final result is a province that is characterised by militarisation, where a Baloch population that is impoverished mainly struggles for fundamental services and rights amid a central authority that is frequently antagonistic. The fact that the human development indicators of Balochistan, which include literacy, health, and income, are among the lowest in Pakistan, is evidence of the region's persistent economic neglect.

The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), an integral part of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, has led to this province, which was previously considered of little strategic importance, gaining enormous strategic significance. China now has a more efficient and secure pathway to access Middle Eastern oil and international markets, thanks to the Gwadar port, situated on the Arabian Sea coast of Balochistan (Ahmed & Khan, 2024). Due to its proximity to the Strait of Hormuz, which is a vital route for approximately twenty percent of the world's oil transit, Gwadar is a crucial

component in China's energy strategy, given its strategic location. In principle, it is anticipated that the CPEC projects in Balochistan, which include the construction of roads, rails, and ports, will stimulate economic growth and employment opportunities in the region. Numerous local leaders and citizens have the perception that the projects primarily benefit parties external to the community. It has been observed that Chinese companies and central Pakistani authorities are responsible for managing the contracts and development of Gwadar. These entities employ workers who are not from Balochistan and allow foreigners to have access to fishing and transportation rights, resulting in the marginalization of local fishermen. A scholar notes that the locals in Gwadar perceive the development and economic activities taking place there as exploitative and extractive. This lends credence to the idea that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a colonial project in Balochistan. As a result of the situation, negatively held attitudes towards China and the state in Balochistan have become even more pronounced. There are insurgent groups that specifically target Chinese interests, such as the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), which portrays the partnership between China and Pakistan in a predatory light (Salman, 2025).

Over the past few years, Baloch activism has evolved to incorporate a broader range of tactics, extending beyond armed insurgency campaigns. Youth movements, civil society organisations, and diaspora networks have actively pursued the increasing recognition of Baloch grievances. In the mid-2010s, students and activists came together to form the Baloch Yakjehti (Solidarity) Committee (BYC). Since its inception, the BYC has been involved in nonviolent demonstrations, sit-ins, and advocacy on a global scale regarding issues related to human rights and enforced disappearances. Among the many significant acts of protest that took place in 2023, the Baloch Long March stands out as a notable example. In December 2023, a large number of Baloch activists, the majority of whom were women in positions of authority, embarked on a journey spanning over 1,600 kilometres, beginning in Turbat and ending in Islamabad (Rauf, 2025). The demands that they made centred on addressing the "global silence" that surrounded the abuses that occurred in Balochistan and seeking justice for those who had gone missing. Within Pakistan's conservative framework, this significant march, which mothers and daughters of the disappeared prominently led, represents the first protest of such magnitude that women led. Even though the marchers were subjected to severe repression, which included arrests and the use of tear gas, the media's portrayal of the crackdown garnered widespread attention across the nation. In the aftermath of that period, the BYC and other associated organisations have coordinated additional sit-ins and rallies across Pakistan. This is despite the Pakistani government's designation of them as "terrorists" and its efforts to suppress their leadership. Several observers note that the emerging Baloch movement exhibits inclusivity in terms of gender. Figures such as Dr. Mahrang Baloch, a cofounder of BYC and a nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize, have taken on prominent roles in advocating for the cause, effectively mobilizing thousands of people through street protests and social media platforms.

Despite the increase in media coverage, there has been virtually no academic research conducted on Baloch activism about CPEC. Although numerous political analyses have drawn attention to geopolitical tensions and conflicts between the centre and the periphery, there is a conspicuous absence of research specifically focused on

how Baloch civil society utilizes international networks. The gendered aspect of the Long March and the role of digital platforms in the internationalisation of Baloch human rights issues are both examples of topics that have not been sufficiently investigated. Within the context of the 2023–2025 Baloch protest movement, this article examines these gaps by analyzing them through the lens of the boomerang theory of transnational advocacy.

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the various ways in which this unique campaign, led by women, has connected local issues to a global audience, thereby generating international pressure on both Pakistan and China. Our understanding of Baloch studies and international relations discussions regarding the strategies utilised by marginalised groups in authoritarian settings is improved by this approach. In particular, their utilisation of networked activism and normative appeals to promote human rights is highlighted.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The influential boomerang model of transnational advocacy, developed by Keck and Sikkink, serves as a lens through which the Baloch Long March and the accompanying activism are analyzed (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). In the typical boomerang pattern, when domestic channels are restricted, local activists reach out to citizens of another country through a transnational advocacy network. These citizens then exert pressure on their government to influence the regime responsible for the restriction. Through the engagement of international allies, activists can strategically circumvent their state. These allies then apply diplomatic and moral pressure on the state government. By demonstrating that networks comprising non-governmental organisations (NGOs), media, and supportive governments can raise global consciousness about local human rights violations, Keck and Sikkink show that these networks can effectively penetrate the information barriers established by states.

The "Dirty War" in Argentina and Pinochet's Chile are two examples of historical instances in which boomerang strategies played a significant role throughout history (Franklin, 2008). In these instances, domestic groups enlisted the assistance of human rights organizations and parliaments from the United States and Europe to exert pressure for accountability, which ultimately led to modifications in official policy. The Baloch Youth Committee (BYC) and its associated networks have effectively drawn global attention to issues of enforced disappearances and grievances related to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Therefore, the Baloch movement can be understood through a systematic analysis. Campaigns conducted online, activism within the diaspora, and appeals made to the United Nations and Western non-governmental organisations have all contributed to this success. The underlying objective is to generate international pressure, which could limit the actions of the Pakistani state. This pressure could be generated through human rights reports or by influencing public opinion in China.

In addition to the boomerang model, we incorporate pertinent theoretical perspectives concerning norms and the power of networks. According to the norm life cycle proposed by Finnemore & Sikkink (1998), once a human rights norm is established, it has the potential to spread rapidly among states, provided that favorable conditions for its spread are present. Human rights language, such as genocide and

disappearances, is used by Baloch activists to articulate their demands in order to leverage the global normative framework and engage audiences from other countries. The concept of soft power, proposed by Nye (2008), is also significant. Soft power refers to the ability to influence the preferences of other people through attraction. The Baloch resistance presents a challenge to China's investment in soft power through the Belt and Road Initiative's narrative of development. This resistance exemplifies how grassroots activism can reveal local grievances and potentially weaken efforts to exert soft power. The growing anti-Chinese sentiment in Balochistan poses a significant challenge to China's efforts to build its image in the region. It is abundantly clear that Chinese involvement is exploitative, as evidenced by the attacks on CPEC projects and the media campaigns conducted by Baloch groups.

Activism in the digital realm brings about a significant shift in the dynamics of advocacy. It has been established through documentation that members of the BYC have amassed a large number of followers on various social media platforms, specifically Twitter and Facebook, where they use these platforms to disseminate information regarding detentions and missing relatives. This interconnected reach serves two purposes: it accumulates information about abuses and it enhances the movement's ethical narrative beyond the constraints of Pakistan's censored media. Both of these purposes are accomplished through connection. Within the context of an authoritarian regime, digital platforms have the potential to effectively establish transnational public spheres that exert pressure on governments from a strategic distance (Castillo-Esparcia et al., 2023).

Furthermore, social movement theory emphasizes the significance of interconnected solidarity and the simultaneous framing of issues. The Baloch case is a prime example of the complex relationship that exists between local grievances, such as land rights and disappearances, and the larger contexts of ethnic self-determination and global human rights. BYC and its allies have established cross-border alliances with the diaspora and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which reflect key characteristics of transnational advocacy networks. This is despite Pakistan's efforts to criminalise activists by labelling them as terrorists.

Finally, we examine the state's repression and the pressure exerted by international actors within the broader context of a cycle of influence. A concept that Tsutsui & Smith (2018) refers to as a "sandwich effect" describes the situation in which domestic activists exert pressure from below while international nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) apply influence from above. This phenomenon occurs in autocratic environments, where repression frequently results in unintended consequences that elicit global condemnation. The actions that Pakistan took against the Long March, which included arrests in Islamabad and the targeting of female leaders, prompted responses from international organisations such as Amnesty and experts from the United Nations. The subsequent reactions from the outside world serve as tools for activists to use in asserting their legitimacy.

As a result, our framework incorporates the boomerang pattern proposed by Keck and Sikkink, along with perspectives on norm diffusion, soft power competition, and digitally networked protest. The interplay of different perspectives is readily apparent: transnational networks are responsible for initiating norm cascades as an increasing number of states and organizations become aware of them; digital media

amplifies the voices of activists; and the dynamics of soft power influence the global response. Understanding how the women-led Baloch movement of 2023–25 is overcoming the constraints imposed by authoritarianism in order to globalise its human rights campaign is made possible through the integration of these literatures, which allows for a deeper comprehension of the struggle.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case-study design to reconstruct the Baloch Long March and assess how its leaders used transnational advocacy networks to overcome domestic repression. The primary objective is descriptive rather than hypothesis-testing: to provide a chronological account of events and analyze the advocacy strategies, including the “boomerang” mechanism used by Baloch activists.

Data collection relied almost exclusively on secondary sources because security conditions precluded fieldwork. More than 60 documents published between December 2023 and April 2025 were collected through systematic searches of news databases, NGO archives, and official UN platforms. These include news stories from outlets such as Al Jazeera and Dawn; press releases and reports from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch; statements by UN special rapporteurs and working groups; and academic articles on CPEC, human-rights advocacy and transnational activism. Additional desk-based observation was conducted on the Baloch Yakjehti Committee’s social-media channels; for example, its Facebook page, which had about 377,000 followers by July 2025, was examined to observe messaging patterns and audience engagement. Primary data in the form of interviews, surveys or direct observations were not collected due to safety concerns for both participants and researchers. To mitigate the limitations of relying on secondary data, the study cross-checked information across multiple sources and prioritized reports from established media organizations and reputable NGOs.

DISCUSSION

Domestic Repression and Barriers

The Baloch Long March took place against a backdrop of harsh repression and deep-seated grievances in Pakistan’s south-western Balochistan province. Censorship, surveillance and restrictive laws made it almost impossible for activists to campaign through normal political channels. The Pakistani government imposed significant restrictions on Baloch activists, which resulted in a reduction of the number of domestic options available for seeking redress. The government of Balochistan implemented censorship on reporting related to protests and human rights concerns (Hussain, 2024). It was done in order to exercise strict control over the media coverage and communications process in the province. Protesters were effectively prevented from disseminating information about their situation as a result of the authorities’ decision to suspend mobile and internet services in Gwadar and other districts for several days during the Long March. Due to external pressures, local newspapers refrained from reporting on the march. A contemporaneous report from Voice of America noted that when the Baloch Yakjehti Committee held a large protest gathering in Gwadar in July 2024, “the event received virtually no coverage in mainstream media”. This observation underscores how reporting on the demonstrations was almost

entirely absent from Pakistan's national media outlets. A separate analysis by the Observer Research Foundation also remarked that a "state-imposed blackout" led mainstream media to neglect coverage of the protests. Together, these accounts support the assertion that coverage of the Gwadar demonstrations was effectively erased from Pakistani media by mid-2024. Due to this censorship, fundamental rights to expression and access to information were violated, making it difficult for local efforts to garner support for the march (Unrepresented Nations & Peoples Organization, 2023).

There were instances of activists being arrested and intimidated by the legal system. Restrictions imposed by Section 144 were put into place by the government to prevent gatherings and quickly apprehend individuals who expressed disapproval (Seemab, 2023). Late in 2023, a large number of Baloch civilians were arrested for participating in demonstrations. Among the significant arrests that took place were those of prominent members of the BYC. In particular, the arrests of Sammi Deen Baloch and Sabiha Baloch in Gwadar took place without any prior notification to the general public, and the locations of the women were not disclosed (Dawn, 2025). Police filed multiple First Information Reports (FIRs) against the Baloch protesters, and on December 21 at least two FIRs were registered in Islamabad, leading to the mass arrest of over 300 demonstrators, including women, children and the elderly. Amnesty International verified that *"protestors have been charged with a wide range of offences, including terrorism, sedition, and unlawful assembly,"* among other allegations. These FIRs – which initiate criminal proceedings – were lodged in various jurisdictions to target participants of the Baloch "Long March" protest camp. For example, sedition cases were even lodged in far-flung districts against the marchers; protest leader Dr. Mahrang Baloch noted that a sedition case was filed in Sindh's Khairpur district (a place she had never visited) solely to harass and intimidate the activists (Amnesty International, 2024).

A "security act" about office buildings, which included extensive anti-terrorism provisions, enabled the police to classify a large number of peaceful protesters as insurgents. The "security act" are Pakistan's Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) of 1997 and, in particular, its Fourth Schedule. The Fourth Schedule was originally created to monitor people suspected of financing or supporting militant groups like the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan or the Baloch Liberation Army. Being placed on this list makes a person a "proscribed individual," a label that triggers serious restrictions, passports are confiscated, bank accounts frozen, arms licences revoked, and employment clearances are suspended. Those listed must report regularly to a police station or Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) and cannot leave their home district without permission. These measures mean that anyone on the Fourth Schedule is effectively treated as an insurgent.

For example, In July 2024, the Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC) organised a large sit-in at the port city of Gwadar to protest enforced disappearances and other abuses. Soon after the protest, authorities in Balochistan added numerous people – including BYC supporters, students, teachers, journalists and other activists – to the Fourth Schedule. The Interior Minister admitted that the provincial governments of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan had placed at least ninety-seven individuals on the list after the ban on the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM); human-rights groups believe the real numbers are higher and include hundreds of BYC supporters. Former

Balochistan chief minister Dr Abdul Malik Baloch noted that nearly 3,000 people in the province were suddenly on the Fourth Schedule, and he criticised the move for labelling teachers, students and journalists as “anti-state”. Dr Mahrang Baloch, a prominent BYC organiser, confirmed that many members and supporters of the group were added to the list; she and fellow leader Sammi Deen Baloch were even stopped at Karachi airport and prevented from travelling abroad. Under the guise of fighting terrorism, these peaceful protesters were treated like insurgents and stripped of basic civil liberties. Human rights organisations have documented a significant number of disappearances and extrajudicial killings in the province of Balochistan. These incidents have brought to light a pervasive atmosphere of fear that the security forces have induced. Mahrang Baloch and other activists documented persistent harassment. This harassment included police roadblocks surrounding encampments, restrictions on essential supplies, and the installation of barbed wire to isolate protest locations. Baloch activists were systematically prevented from engaging in significant domestic advocacy or protecting their rights as a result of these tactics. The reason why this happened because the Fourth Schedule allows provincial police and intelligence committees to recommend anyone for inclusion based on “reports” without the need for a judicial process. Because the legal definition of terrorism under the ATA is vague, authorities can argue that almost any form of dissent is a security threat. Once a name is added, the person’s ability to challenge the decision is limited, and their listing can last for years. Balochistan has experienced separatist violence and attacks against government or Chinese projects, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). In July 2024, law-enforcement officials claimed that adding BYC supporters to the Fourth Schedule was necessary because of a deterioration in law-and-order. Critics argue that the authorities view Baloch protests as potential gateways to insurgency and therefore prefer a pre-emptive, hard-security approach. Many Baloch protests challenge enforced disappearances and the unequal distribution of wealth from CPEC. Labelling activists as “proscribed persons” prevents them from organising and restricts their travel. Human-rights officials note that counter-terrorism measures are increasingly used to muzzle media and rights activists, reframe civic activism as a security threat and deter future protests. Pervez, the first coordinator of the National Counter Terrorism Authority, called the use of anti-terrorism laws against political dissent “illegal, unjust and counter-productive”.

It was further exacerbated by the widespread economic and political grievances that were associated with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). According to the Gateway House article, locals complain that CPEC projects have largely benefited “the country’s Punjabi elite” and Chinese investors (Bhandari, 2024). The report notes that most jobs associated with Gwadar Port went to applicants from outside Balochistan, while locals were forced to relocate to villages away from the port without proper compensation. The Gwadar port and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) infrastructure projects have resulted in the relocation of communities without providing those communities with adequate compensation, have imposed restrictions on local fishermen and farmers, and have been managed primarily by military authorities (Mahadevan, 2021). Reports according to PIDE (Pakistan Institute of Development Economics) indicate that, contrary to assurances of economic advancement, per-capita incomes in Balochistan have decreased, while essential

services such as medicine, water, and electricity continue to be insufficiently available (PIDE, 2024). This is despite Balochistan having been promised economic advancement. These unresolved grievances served as the impetus for the development of the Long March's agenda.

On the other hand, the Pakistani government, for the most part, ignored these demands, viewing requests for equitable distribution of CPEC benefits as legitimate challenges to its authority. As a result of economic marginalization, local groups were unable to achieve domestic redress through established policy channels, creating conditions conducive to a boomerang strategy. This served as a structural impediment to Baloch activism.

Transnational Advocacy and Network Building

Baloch activists, who were confronted with blocked pathways within their own country, strategically established transnational connections in order to navigate and combat repression. Baloch women leading the Long March understood that, on their own, they had little chance of forcing the Pakistani state to change course. By working with organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (HRW) they sought to “throw a boomerang” to move their struggle from a domestic arena, where state institutions were either hostile or blocked, to a transnational human-rights network that could amplify their voices and increase pressure on Islamabad. Through both formal and informal means, the leaders of the Long March established connections with international organisations that work to protect human rights. To document abuses methodically and disseminate this information on a global scale, their efforts included collaboration with Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. In Pakistan, families of the disappeared often face intimidation when they try to register cases. HRW's long-form report on enforced disappearances in Balochistan shows that victims' relatives are routinely rebuffed; security officials told one detained activist that even “if the president or chief justice tells us to release you, we won't”. Because of this climate, Baloch activists worked with Amnesty and HRW to systematically gather evidence. Amnesty's press release on 24 January 2024, for example, chronicled how the authorities harassed Baloch Long-March protesters by blocking supplies, cutting electricity and subjecting women and children to arbitrary arrests. This outside validation strengthened the activists' claims and created a record that could be used in future legal and advocacy efforts.

Amnesty International issued a press statement on January 24, 2024, detailing the harassment that protesters participating in the Long March were subjected to in Islamabad (Amnesty International, 2024). The statement also made it abundantly clear that Pakistan's actions that violated the rights to peaceful assembly and expression were strongly condemned. Through Amnesty International programme “Footprints”, virtual museum on enforced disappearance, Amnesty joined more than twenty regional human-rights groups to create an online memorial for South Asian disappeared persons. The site includes testimonies from families in Pakistan, one of them was Balochistan, This platform to share stories and unite in their demand for justice; to raise global awareness of enforced disappearance; and to pressure governments—including Pakistan—to ratify the UN Convention on Enforced Disappearances and investigate cases. For Baloch activists, “Footprints” offered a way

to present their grievances to an international audience and to memorialise victims like Balaach Mola Bakhsh (Amnesty International, 2021).

Through its documentation of the Pakistani crackdown, Human Rights Watch has brought attention to the assassination of protester Balaach Mola Bakhsh as well as the arrests of activists who participated in previous Baloch sit-ins. A report called “We Can Torture, Kill, or Keep You for Years”, where HRW interviewed more than 100 victims, relatives and witnesses and documented 45 detailed cases of enforced disappearance in Balochistan. The report highlighted testimonies of officials boasting that they could “torture you, or kill you, or keep you for years at our will” and described how victims were abducted in daylight, then tortured or found dead. The purpose it to expose the scale and modus operandi of enforced disappearances in Balochistan; to call on Pakistan to investigate these crimes, prosecute security officials and reform laws; and to provide credible evidence for international actors. The report laid the groundwork for later advocacy: by showing that disappearances are a “continuing offence” under international law, HRW armed Baloch activists with legal arguments that they used in their Long-March campaigns (Human Rights Watch, 2011).

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) contributed to the enhancement of the narrative of the Long March by highlighting that the protesters' demands for an end to enforced disappearances and impunity were based on internationally recognised human rights.

To circumvent the censorship measures in place in the local area, the initiative intensified its efforts to engage with international media organisations. By way of invitation, the BYC extended invitations to journalists from The Guardian and Al Jazeera to report directly on the conditions prevailing in Balochistan. A feature article published in August 2024 by The Guardian highlighted the role Mahrang Baloch played in leading peaceful protests. The article also included an analysis of the harsh response that the government had given, which addressed issues related to complaints regarding CPEC (Ebrahim, 2024b). Similarly, video evidence of tear gas and arrests, which was initially ignored by Pakistani media, was eventually shared on social media and reported by international news agencies, thereby revealing the march to an audience that was composed of people from all over the world. A significant amount of traction was gained through social media campaigns that utilized hashtags such as #StopBalochGenocide. These campaigns were successful in mobilising support from the diaspora and engaging transnational activists. Through the use of digital platforms, the Baloch movement was able to establish direct communication with international human rights communities, resulting in the expansion of its advocacy network across international borders.

From an institutional perspective, Baloch groups actively participated in the United Nations' mechanisms responsible for human rights. On behalf of the United Nations Committee on Enforced Disappearances, the Baloch Human Rights Council (BHRC), a non-governmental organisation (NGO) operating in exile, has compiled shadow reports and engaged in lobbying efforts with the United Nations Special Rapporteurs. According to ANI (2024) Baloch activists organised demonstrations in front of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva during the latter part of 2024 and the beginning of 2025. The demonstrations demanded that a fact-finding mission be sent to investigate disappearances and that those responsible for them be

brought to justice in international courts. These initiatives indicated to international organisations that all domestic avenues for resolution had been pursued, even though specific assertions, such as a submission made in January 2024 to the United Nations Working Group on Enforced Disappearances, have not yet been proven to be true. A formal communication was sent by the Baloch Human Rights Commission (BHRC) to the Secretary-General of the United Nations in December 2024, requesting immediate action to secure the release of detained Baloch activists. Keck and Sikkink's idea of connecting local activists with influential external entities through networks, such as those of NGOs, global media, and international institutions, in order to exert pressure on their state is exemplified by the Long March, which serves as a clear illustration of this concept.

International Attention and Pressure

International media attention became a crucial source of external pressure on Pakistan's government because domestic outlets were either constrained or complicit in silence. During the Long March and subsequent protests, Pakistani authorities used censorship and intimidation to keep the issue out of the national press. Domestic journalists later admitted that there were "standing instructions to newsrooms not to cover it," and prominent editor Mohammad Hanif noted that mainstream outlets showed a clear bias against Baloch issues. Media-diversity researchers observed that Baloch women who were beaten and arrested during protests in Karachi received almost no coverage from Pakistan's main channels and that the media often misrepresented or ignored enforced-disappearance cases. Because of this blackout, Baloch activists turned to social media and to international news organisations to tell their stories.

Due to external advocacy, several responses were initiated on a global scale. By the beginning of 2025, numerous governments and United Nations organisations had voiced significant concerns. Specifically, issues such as forced disappearances, torture, extrajudicial killings, and stringent limitations on assembly and expression were brought to light in a statement issued by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on April 29, 2025. The statement expressed "serious concern" regarding the situation in Balochistan. Experts from the United Nations have described enforced disappearance as a serious breach of human rights and a crime that is committed on a global scale. They have urged Pakistan to conduct comprehensive investigations into these offenses and to protect the rights of those suspected of committing them (UNHR, 2025). They urged Pakistan to ratify the United Nations Convention on Enforced Disappearances and to reform its counterterrorism laws. They brought attention to the fact that ambiguous definitions have led to the blocklisting of hundreds of activists or their placement on "exit control" lists. Although it is not legally binding, the statement issued by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) serves as a significant form of public accountability, increasing the visibility of activists' assertions on a global platform.

Voice of America reported that the long march from southern Balochistan to Islamabad was "largely unreported by the mainstream media," yet videos posted on X (formerly Twitter) and other platforms showed thousands of ethnic Baloch lining the roads to support the march. New Lines Magazine described how footage of police

dragging women protesters into buses circulated widely online, “outraging people across Pakistan and focusing national attention” at a time when state-aligned television channels avoided the story. This digital documentation not only mobilised domestic sympathy but also furnished evidence for international reporters and NGOs (Zaman, 2023).

The BBC ran a detailed report on the march in early February 2024, noting that at least 200 people were arrested and that police used tear gas and water-cannon on peaceful demonstrators. Such coverage framed the protesters’ demands—ending enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings—as legitimate human-rights issues rather than local law-and-order problems. Global magazines such as *New Lines* and *Time* profiled Dr Mahrang Baloch; *Time* even named her to its “Time100 Next” list, while the BBC included her among its “100 Women” for 2024, bringing unprecedented visibility. An Inter Press Service article quotes Mahrang saying that international recognition “gives her hope” because it amplifies their voices despite a domestic media blackout (Ng, 2024).

Additionally, the coverage that was provided by international media served as an additional source of pressure. Coverage of the Long March and the events associated with it was provided by international media organizations such as *The Guardian*, *Al Jazeera*, the BBC, and AFP. These organisations presented the events through the lens of human rights concerns. According to *Al Jazeera*, the protests led by the BYC centred on allegations of abuse and neglect related to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

The surge of international coverage and NGO statements made it harder for Islamabad to dismiss the protesters as insurgents. After videos of the crackdown went viral and rights groups issued urgent appeals, the Islamabad High Court ordered police to allow marchers to reach the National Press Club; some detainees were quietly released and charges dropped in subsequent months. The UN special rapporteur on human-rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, publicly urged Pakistan to release the women leaders of the march, citing international reports and social-media footage. The cumulative pressure compelled government officials to meet some delegations and to promise investigations into specific cases, even if broader reforms remained elusive (Hafeez, 2024).

Foreign coverage shifted the discourse from “security” to “human rights.” By highlighting enforced disappearances and quoting grieving families, outlets like the BBC and *New Lines* countered the government’s portrayal of protesters as insurgents. The *Global Issues* article notes that international media “amplified their voices and brought visibility” to a struggle that national outlets ignored. This reframing encouraged foreign governments and international bodies to question Pakistan’s counter-terrorism narrative and to view the Baloch issue through the lens of rights violations (Ebrahim, 2024).

The knowledge that the world was watching emboldened Baloch activists. Social-media virality and international recognition helped attract volunteers and donations to sustain sit-ins and marches. Diaspora organisations used foreign media stories to lobby Western parliaments, and several British and European MPs raised questions about enforced disappearances in Balochistan. Even though the Pakistani state continued its repression, the combination of digital and international media

ensured that abuses could no longer occur in total darkness. As Genocide Watch argued, international media coverage disrupts Pakistan's "information blockade" and makes it more difficult for authorities to commit abuses without scrutiny (Baluch, 2025).

Importantly, the involvement of transnational elites and IGOs provided moral and diplomatic leverage. Statements by the US, EU, and UN triggered discussions within Pakistan's civil society and abroad, increasing the reputational cost of continued abuses. The synergy of NGO reports, news coverage, and UN engagement exemplifies how advocacy networks can "frame" issues for sympathetic international audiences. In the boomerang model, these external pressures are intended to "echo" demands back into the domestic arena. Although Pakistan's government largely brushed off international admonitions, the visibility created by this pressure forced at least some dialogue. For instance, after the march, Pakistan's military spokesperson publicly denied abuses but announced investigations into some cases – a rare concession in Baloch affairs.

Domestic Response and the Boomerang Effect

Following the return of the Pakistani government to its homeland, the state's response consisted of a combination of increased repression and strategic public relations initiatives. On the domestic front, the authorities did not yield to the demands of the demonstrators; instead, they intensified the control measures they were taking. Law enforcement officers used tear gas and baton charges to disperse Baloch solidarity sit-ins in Islamabad and Punjab. According to reports, women and children were among those who sustained injuries as a result of these actions. In addition to restricting access to food and fuel for demonstrators, law enforcement has announced that they have initiated charges related to terrorism against activists. Amnesty International reported this information (Amnesty International, 2025). Under the ambiguous anti-terror law, which critics argue is used to label peaceful protesters as criminals, Baloch activists have repeatedly been arrested. This has been a persistent problem for them. The enforcement of Section 144 has continued for weeks in several Baloch districts, resulting in the prohibition of even peaceful gatherings. Based on the actions taken, it appears that the government's initial response to the boomerang pressure was not to implement reforms, but rather to intensify the suppression of dissent.

At the same time, Pakistani authorities launched a campaign to undermine the movement. This campaign was a domestic counter-strategy. Representatives from the military and the government have referred to the leaders of the BYC as "extremists" or "separatist elements," and they have asserted that they are acting as agents of foreign governments. The Diplomat has reported that Islamabad carried out a "digital disinformation campaign" to associate BYC with militant activity. This highlights the anticipated consequences for terrorist organisations (TANs) (Baluch, 2025b). The march was portrayed in a predominantly negative manner by state media and social media accounts, which raised questions about the march's authenticity and framed it as a potential threat to the nation's security. Through the use of this framing, the intention was to counteract the shame that resulted from international exposure. Keck and Sikkink observe that the utilisation of the boomerang strategy carries the

possibility of allegations of interference from foreign entities (Den Hond & A De Bakker, 2012). The government of Pakistan maintained that the arrival of activists was the result of actions taken by independent parties.

In transnational-activism theory, the “boomerang effect” describes a pattern in which domestic groups that cannot get their own government to address abuses seek help from allies abroad; those allies then apply pressure back onto the offending state (Keck & Sikkink, 2017). There are 3 elements, first was domestic blockage and repression, where peaceful Baloch protesters found their avenues at home closed. Authorities broke up sit-ins with tear gas and baton charges, restricted access to food and fuel, and even filed terrorism charges under vague anti-terror laws. Section 144 was enforced for weeks to ban gatherings, illustrating that the state was unwilling to hear grievances. This blockade is the first sign in the boomerang pattern: local activists cannot achieve change through domestic institutions. Second was appeal to transnational actors and international media. Facing domestic repression, activists “threw a boomerang” by connecting with Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and sympathetic media outlets abroad. Amnesty and HRW documented the protests and condemned Pakistan’s excessive force, calling for the release of detainees. International media and diaspora groups amplified these reports; for example, New Lines Magazine noted that videos of police dragging women protesters circulated on social media and provoked outrage when mainstream Pakistani outlets remained silent (Hafeez, 2024). Global recognition of Mahrang Baloch by the BBC and Time elevated the issue further. These connections represent the “string” of the boomerang, carrying activists’ grievances outside the country. The last was to return pressure and domestic reverberations. After the issue gained international visibility, some domestic actors started to respond. Pakistan’s authorities launched a PR campaign to discredit the Baloch Yakjehti Committee, portraying it as extremist and alleging foreign sponsorship. However, segments of Pakistani society and media began to acknowledge enforced disappearances, and human-rights lawyers filed cases in court. Opposition politicians cited international reports to challenge the government’s narrative. This domestic reverberation—sparked by international scrutiny is the “return” of the boomerang; even without meeting protesters’ demands, the government had to reckon with reputational costs, altering its behaviour and prompting cautious reforms.

On the other hand, the boomerang did have a significant impact on the domestic front. Activists have been successful in bringing Baloch issues to the forefront of the international agenda, which has resulted in specific segments of Pakistani society and the media acknowledging the marches and the phenomenon of disappearances. Concerns about the fairness of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the excessive use of military force have begun to proliferate, even within outlets controlled by the government. Human rights attorneys in Pakistan have taken a more assertive stance by initiating court cases related to the claims that were made during the Long March. In the meantime, members of the political opposition have cited international reports as a means of challenging the government's position. There has been a significant outcome as a result of the gradual pace of change, which is that the movement's ability to penetrate global forums has resulted in increased citizen awareness, a cautious approach by governments towards dissent in order to mitigate the possibility of embarrassment, and a documented history of abuses that may serve

future advocacy efforts. In conclusion, despite the Pakistani government not agreeing with the majority of the demands, the implementation of the boomerang pattern during the Long March significantly raised the stakes. It brought the issue of human rights into the international arena within the context of Pakistan's CPEC initiatives.

International Actors: Responses and Constraints

Even though Western governments and international organisations have voiced their concern over the human rights situation in Balochistan, the influence that these organisations have had on Pakistan's policy decisions has been limited until this point. In March of 2025, a group of independent experts from the United Nations issued a formal demand to Pakistan, requesting that it "immediately release" detained Baloch human rights defenders and put an end to violent crackdowns on peaceful protests (Dawn, 2025). It was indicated in the statement that there has been a concerning trend of increasing detentions and disappearances involving leaders of civil society. According to a formal request made by the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2021, Islamabad was tasked with conducting investigations into cases of enforced disappearance and extrajudicial killings that had taken place in the province of Balochistan. These criticisms are consistently characterised by the authorities of Pakistan as having originated from "selective and unverified" reports to begin with. The government's official response to the appeals made by the United Nations has been to label activists as collaborators with terrorists. This has led to the redefinition of human rights efforts as potential security risks in the government's official response. Through diplomatic channels, the European Union has also addressed the issue of Baloch rights. Pakistan can benefit from the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP+) trade status of the European Union (EU), with European officials associating the continuation of these privileges with the obligation to adhere to human rights standards. In its 2023 GSP+ report, the European Union identifies enforced disappearances as a significant ongoing issue in Pakistan. This highlights the necessity for legislative action to fulfil international obligations (Commission et al., 2023). As early as the beginning of 2024, the proposed domestic law that would criminalize enforced disappearance has encountered delays in the legislative process.

Meanwhile, the European Union continues to place a higher priority on dialogue and monitoring than it does on the imposition of sanctions. The United States has displayed a comparable amount of uncertainty. Officials from the United States have expressed strong disapproval of the media blackouts and internet shutdowns in Pakistan, urging Islamabad to restore access to social media platforms. The importance of preserving "freedom of expression and association" was placed at the forefront of their discussion. The pressure from the United States, on the other hand, has been relatively subdued when it comes to fundamental issues such as killings and disappearances. Private diplomacy has been the primary method of communication for the United States government, with counterterrorism and regional stability concerns being taken into consideration. This is in addition to the fact that abuses have been documented in reports submitted to the State Department.

In practice, international actors offer moral support and occasionally engage in diplomatic initiatives; however, they have limited tangible influence at their disposal. This pattern exemplifies the overarching limitations associated with transnational

advocacy: nations such as Pakistan, which are supported by influential allies, prioritize their sovereignty, and strategic interests often take precedence over human rights considerations. When governments have strong economic or security ties (such as those with China), they tend to block or downplay advocacy pressures. This is something that scholars have observed in other occurrences. In Balochistan, it is evident that the United Nations' resolutions and statements made by Western nations have not led to any significant changes that are visible on the ground. The attention of the international community is a crucial component in maintaining the global discourse on the matter. In the same way that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in the field of human rights persistently advocate for accountability from Pakistan, organisations such as the United Nations serve as formal platforms for Baloch activists to express their grievances beyond Pakistan's borders.

Digital Activism, Social Media, and Diaspora Mobilization

Due to the significant censorship in local media, Baloch activists have gradually shifted their focus to online platforms and the diaspora to garner support. This is an effective strategy that aims to engage allies beyond their immediate sphere of influence. In order to document what they consider to be a systematic genocide in Balochistan, activist groups such as the Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC) use Twitter and other platforms to document enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and other forms of violence (The Tribune, 2025). According to the BYC, social media has become an indispensable tool for documenting abuses in real-time, particularly in situations where the international community's attention is limited. The flow of information through digital platforms has effectively disrupted the state's ability to control the narrative. Observers attribute the rise of social media as a key factor in elevating the Balochistan issue to prominence. This is because social media platforms have made it possible for every reported kidnapping or killing to reach an audience all over the world. Simultaneously, Pakistan has occasionally implemented restrictions on internet access, particularly mobile data, in regions experiencing unrest. Comparisons have been made by academics between this method of censorship and the internet restrictions that China has implemented in Xinjiang and the measures that India has implemented in Kashmir.

At the same time, members of the Baloch diaspora are actively participating in grassroots advocacy efforts on a global scale. There are significant populations of Baloch people living in exile in countries such as the United Kingdom, Norway, and others, and they regularly participate in organizing demonstrations, conferences, and media campaigns. On the International Day of the Disappeared, observed on August 30, 2024, groups from the Baloch diaspora organized demonstrations in front of the residences of the British Prime Minister in both London and Amsterdam (The Print, 2024). The international community was urged to take a stand and express its opposition to the violations that are taking place in Balochistan by the protesters, who displayed banners and images of individuals who had gone missing because of the situation. Their speeches made it abundantly clear that there is a connection between the rights of Baloch people and international legal standards, and they implore governments and non-governmental organisations in the West to ensure accountability for Pakistan. The actions described are examples of a phenomenon in which diaspora

activists engage with members of civil society and officials from other countries to exert external pressure on the Pakistani government.

The effectiveness varies, yet these events contribute to raising awareness beyond Pakistan's borders. Similar patterns can be observed in other conflicts; for example, the Rohingya diaspora has utilised platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and virtual networks to develop a collective identity and a resistance movement in response to Myanmar's persecution. Similar to the Rohingya, Baloch online communities are developing methods to unite scattered populations, disseminate survivor narratives, and engage with international media, despite state efforts to stifle their voices. Every tweet, livestream, or rally conducted internationally contributes to a coordinated effort aimed at challenging the narrative of the Pakistani military and ensuring that human rights violations remain a focal point in global discussions

China's Role in CPEC and Human Rights in Balochistan

The strategic investment by China in the CPEC corridor has significantly influenced Pakistani policy in Balochistan, frequently neglecting local rights issues. Observers note that the debt-financed "BRI-related contracts" grant China significant influence over Pakistan's domestic and international decisions. The implementation of CPEC projects has occurred with minimal engagement from Baloch communities, leading to protests that have been addressed with excessive military response. A report by UNPO illustrates the significant lack of community consultation and details how authorities suppressed protests related to CPEC land seizures (Unrepresented Nations & Peoples Organization, 2023). Simultaneously, China's determination to protect its economic interests has prompted Pakistan to enhance its military presence in the region. In early 2023, reports indicated that the Pakistani government deployed additional army units, purportedly in collaboration with China, to safeguard CPEC infrastructure. Human rights monitors assert that CPEC has "only intensified" Baloch grievances by associating development projects with human rights abuses. A troubling pattern of forced evictions, disappearances, and the killings of Baloch activists has accompanied the significant expansion of infrastructure and Gwadar portists. In conclusion, Pakistan's partnership with China has solidified the province's political dominance: development initiatives supported by China have been paired with increased security measures and diminished avenues for local opposition.

Comparative Insights: Tibet, Xinjiang, and the Rohingya

The intersection of state repression and transnational advocacy in Balochistan mirrors other high-profile cases. In China's Tibet and Xinjiang regions, the state similarly labels dissent as separatism or terrorism and imposes strict controls on information. Tibetan and Uyghur exiles have formed active diaspora networks and partnered with international NGOs to publicize abuses – for example, Human Rights Watch explicitly urges governments to “step up support” for Tibetan groups worldwide that document rights violations and advocate in global forums (Wang, 2025). Yet in practice, Beijing's economic and political clout often dampens these efforts. Uyghur activists based in Turkey report that although they work to inform the world about Xinjiang's internment camps, Turkish authorities (sensitive to Beijing's influence) have limited their ability to protest, illustrating how “states with strong economic ties to

China often restrict” advocacy (Al Jazeera, 2021). Pakistan’s case is comparable: its strategic partnership with China and its role in regional security tend to restrain Western pushback on Baloch abuses.

Likewise, the Rohingya example shows both the power and limits of the boomerang model. Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and beyond have created a nascent digital diaspora that fiercely advocates for recognition and justice, even initiating legal action (e.g. at the ICC) against Myanmar’s generals. Scholars note that Rohingyas use social media to craft a shared identity and engage in political mobilization, “transforming the very contours of [their] pursuit of recognition”. This online activism has kept international attention on the “world’s most persecuted minority.” Nonetheless, just as Myanmar’s military downplays genocide accusations, Pakistan likewise denies systematic violence in Balochistan. In all these cases, a powerful state’s narrative and geopolitical position pose major obstacles: Beijing, Islamabad or Naypyidaw can simply call human rights reports “misinformation” or cite counterterrorism, challenging international advocacy.

These comparisons highlight a general pattern: transnational pressure can elevate human rights issues to global forums, but translating awareness into policy change is difficult when great-power interests are involved. The Boomerang mechanism remains valuable for marginalized communities—it ensures that abuses are documented and that foreign publics and governments are informed—but it rarely forces immediate reform in the target country. For the Baloch movement, as with Tibetans, Uyghurs and Rohingyas, sustained international solidarity is needed to gradually erode impunity. Every UN report, NGO briefing or diaspora protest chips away at the silence surrounding repression. Even if tangible outcomes (like sanctions or regime change) are elusive, these cross-border advocacy networks help keep the plight of the Baloch visible and signal to Islamabad that the world is watching.

CONCLUSION

The study shows that when Baloch activists’ domestic channels were blocked by censorship, arrests and violence, they engaged international partners and media to amplify their message. By forming alliances with NGOs like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, marching women presented evidence of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings to the United Nations and the global public. This “boomerang” strategy created UN expert statements and widespread media coverage in early-2025, thereby elevating the costs of abuses for the Pakistani authorities. It demonstrates that transnational advocacy networks can bypass domestic repression and internationalise a local human-rights struggle.

The boomerang mechanism reverberated back into Pakistan. International attention meant that segments of Pakistani society and media acknowledged the marches and disappearances; concerns about the fairness of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and excessive force spread even within pro-government outlets. Human-rights lawyers filed cases based on marchers’ claims and opposition politicians cited international reports to challenge official narratives. These domestic reverberations—heightened public awareness, reputational costs for the government and a recorded history of abuses—constitute the main result of the movement. However, the government refused most demands; instead, it intensified repression.

Thus, the boomerang raised the stakes by bringing Pakistan's human-rights record into the international arena without securing substantive policy change.

A second finding concerns China's role. The study shows that CPEC projects, financed and defended by China, were implemented with little local consultation, resulting in forced evictions, disappearances and killings of Baloch activists. China's determination to protect its interests prompted Pakistan to deploy additional troops, and human-rights monitors noted that CPEC "only intensified" grievances. The paper concludes that Pakistan's partnership with China has solidified the province's political dominance: development initiatives backed by China have gone hand-in-hand with greater security measures and fewer avenues for local opposition. Overall, while transnational pressure can internationalise rights struggles and generate modest reverberations, structural change remains elusive when powerful economic interests are at stake.

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