

The Hidden Goldmine: Why Balochistan holds Pakistan's brightest prospects

Balochistan is the largest province of Pakistan by land area and has incredible potential that has never been fully utilized. It has vast reserves of minerals, a deep-sea port at Gwadar, and trade routes that connect Pakistan to Afghanistan and Iran. Despite these advantages, Balochistan remains one of the most underdeveloped regions in the country. Decades of neglect, lack of infrastructure, and security issues have held it back from becoming a major economic contributor to Pakistan. If these challenges were addressed properly, Balochistan could transform into a key driver of national progress rather than a province struggling with poverty and unrest.

The minerals in Balochistan are some of the richest in South Asia. The Reko Diq mine alone has copper and gold worth over \$100 billion, yet mining operations have barely begun. There are also large deposits of iron ore, marble, and coal, which, if extracted properly, could create thousands of jobs and generate huge revenue for the country. But the reality is that these resources remain underdeveloped, and whatever extraction does happen benefits only a small elite while local communities see no improvements in their living conditions. This leads to frustration among the people of Balochistan, who feel that their wealth is being taken away without anything given in return. If these resources were managed more fairly, Balochistan could see real progress, with new roads, schools, hospitals, and industries that provide jobs. Instead, there is a cycle of neglect, which further increases resentment towards the central government.

Gwadar Port was supposed to be a game-changer for Pakistan. Its location near the Persian Gulf makes it one of the most strategically important ports in the world. Billions of dollars have been invested into building its infrastructure, mostly through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Yet despite the promises, Gwadar has not yet become the economic hub it was meant to be. The biggest problem is that the local population has not benefited from its development. Basic facilities like clean drinking water, electricity, and healthcare are still lacking for many residents. This has caused anger among the people of Gwadar, who see a modern port being built around them while their own lives remain unchanged. There have also been protests against the fishing rights given to Chinese companies, which local fishermen believe threaten their livelihoods. If the government had focused on improving the lives of the people in Gwadar alongside developing the port, it would have been a win-win situation. Instead, the situation has created more divisions and has prevented Gwadar from reaching its full potential.

Balochistan's trade routes are another wasted opportunity. The province provides the shortest land routes for trade between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran, but these are not being fully utilized. The Chaman border crossing with Afghanistan is one of the busiest, yet infrastructure and security problems cause delays and inefficiencies. If trade were properly

managed, Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan could increase significantly, helping both economies grow. The Taftan border crossing with Iran also has potential, particularly for importing Iranian electricity to solve Balochistan's power shortages. However, trade with Iran is limited due to international sanctions and Pakistan's cautious approach. If Pakistan handled its policies better, it could turn these routes into a major source of revenue. Instead, much of the trade happening in these areas is informal or illegal, with smuggling networks making money while the government loses out on tax revenue.

Balochistan's underdevelopment has serious social and political consequences. The province covers about 40% of Pakistan's land area but receives far less in development funds compared to other provinces. This inequality has led to resentment, which in turn fuels political instability and security problems. There have been ongoing separatist movements in Balochistan for decades, with armed groups demanding greater autonomy or even independence. The government has responded with military operations, but this has not solved the problem. Instead, a better approach would be to address the root causes of discontent by investing in education, healthcare, and infrastructure. If the people of Balochistan saw real benefits from their province's resources, there would be far less unrest.

Education in Balochistan is another major issue that limits its progress. The province has one of the lowest literacy rates in Pakistan, which means that many young people do not have the skills needed to get good jobs. This creates a situation where they either remain unemployed, join illegal activities, or leave the province in search of work elsewhere. Without proper education, Balochistan will always struggle to develop, no matter how many resources it has. Investing in schools, universities, and vocational training programs would create a skilled workforce that could manage and benefit from the province's natural wealth.

If Pakistan wants to develop, it cannot afford to keep ignoring Balochistan. The province has all the ingredients needed to become an economic powerhouse, but mismanagement and neglect have kept it poor. The key to unlocking Balochistan's potential lies in fairer distribution of resources, better governance, and real investment in the people who live there. If this happens, Balochistan could become not just a resource-rich region but the backbone of Pakistan's economic future. However, if the same mistakes continue, it will remain an untapped opportunity, with its people continuing to suffer while the rest of the country moves forward.

One practical solution is to involve local communities in decision-making regarding resource extraction and trade policies. Establishing a fair revenue-sharing model, where a portion of earnings from Gwadar and mineral resources is reinvested in Balochistan's infrastructure and public services, would ensure local benefits. A similar approach has been taken in Gilgit-Baltistan, where revenue from tourism and hydroelectric projects is partially allocated for local development. Another important step is improving security through economic incentives rather than military action. The Aghaaz-e-Haqooq-e-Balochistan package, launched in 2009, aimed to address grievances through economic programs, but its execution was flawed. If such initiatives were properly implemented, with transparency and local participation, they could help bridge the gap between Balochistan and the rest of Pakistan.

