

## Framing Contested Spaces: Social Media Debates on Gwadar Port and Strategic Chinese Presence

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### Abstract

China's strategic need to establish a military and commercial presence at Gwadar Port stems from its objective to secure maritime access to the Arabian Sea and extend influence over contested spaces in South and Central Asia, where sovereignty and territorial claims remain ambiguous. Gwadar Port holds critical value for China's Belt and Road Initiative, providing connectivity not only to Central Asia but also enhancing trade and strategic collaboration with Russia, thereby reinforcing China's position in regional geopolitics. The problem addressed in this study is the complex interplay between China's infrastructural and military ambitions at Gwadar and the ensuing socio-political contestations that emerge in its surrounding regions. This research formulates two central questions: first, why do contested spaces provoke ethno-political mobilisation among the Baloch populations in the Baloch belt spanning Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan against Chinese presence; and second, how social media narratives around Gwadar are constructed, whether originating within Pakistan's territorial jurisdictions or influenced externally from Afghan and Indian sources. Recent literature published between 2023 and 2025 indicates an intensified focus on Gwadar's geopolitical significance, contested space theory and the role of social media in shaping public discourse (Lalwani, 2023; Defence Security Asia, 2024; Khan & Mahmood, 2025). The study employs Foucault's conversational analysis framework to examine the power relations embedded in social media communications and how discourse shapes perceptions of legitimacy and threat. Findings reveal that localised Baloch narratives are amplified by external actors, creating multi-layered contestations that reflect both territorial grievances and broader geopolitical rivalries, demonstrating the strategic importance of information and perception management for China in the region.

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## Introduction

China's strategic interest in Gwadar Port arises from its pursuit to secure maritime routes that bypass the Malacca Strait, providing access to the Arabian Sea and facilitating the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Gwadar's geographical positioning offers China a direct route to Central Asia and the Middle East, enhancing energy security by transporting oil and gas imports from these regions with reduced reliance on longer maritime pathways vulnerable to geopolitical tensions (Lalwani, 2023). The port also allows for potential military logistics and naval deployment, providing strategic depth and strengthening China's ability to project power in the Indian Ocean. In addition, Gwadar complements China's economic corridors, ensuring smoother trade flows, securing critical supply chains and serving as a gateway for technological and industrial investments in Pakistan, thereby cementing bilateral cooperation (Defence Security Asia, 2024).

The concept of contested spaces in South and Central Asia refers to regions where sovereignty, territorial claims and influence are actively contested by multiple actors. In the context of Gwadar, contested spaces emerge from historical, political and ethnic disputes, coupled with the strategic rivalry between India, the United States and regional powers seeking to counterbalance China's expanding influence (Khan & Mahmood, 2025). These spaces are marked by heightened security concerns, competing narratives and socio-political contestations, reflecting the friction generated by China's infrastructural and military presence. Contestation manifests in political opposition, local resistance and attempts by rival powers to undermine China's strategic initiatives through information campaigns and proxy support (Ahmed & Farooq, 2023).

Within Pakistan, narratives surrounding Gwadar and the broader China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are diverse and politically charged. The Pakistani state promotes Gwadar as a symbol of national development and a catalyst for regional economic transformation, emphasising infrastructural modernisation, job creation and energy security (Rashid, 2024). Media representations within Pakistan often foreground Gwadar as a strategic asset that enhances the country's geopolitical leverage while advancing socio-economic welfare. Political leaders and economic planners highlight its potential to transform Balochistan's economy, providing port access, industrial hubs and connectivity to national and international markets. These narratives are crucial in shaping public perception, legitimising Chinese involvement and mitigating local apprehensions regarding sovereignty and resource allocation (Ali & Hussain, 2025).

Conversely, anti-China countries and non-state actors have capitalised on ethnic grievances, particularly among Baloch populations in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, to contest Chinese presence. The Baloch belt spanning Nimruz, Kandahar, South Khorasan, Sistan, Kerman and Pakistani Balochistan has historically exhibited ethno-nationalist tendencies that are mobilised in opposition to perceived external exploitation (Zahra, 2023). Anti-China actors seek to trigger insurgency by framing Chinese projects as instruments of resource extraction and political subjugation. This approach intensifies localised resistance and complicates security operations, creating a multi-layered conflict environment where external rivalries intersect with indigenous socio-political aspirations (Mahmood & Khan, 2024).

Social media has emerged as a critical battleground for contesting narratives on Gwadar. Pro-Pakistan narratives on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram highlight developmental achievements, employment opportunities and regional connectivity, presenting China-Pakistan cooperation as mutually beneficial (Raza, 2024). These narratives emphasise positive discourse on infrastructure development,

education and healthcare improvements linked to CPEC projects. Anti-Pakistan or anti-China narratives, by contrast, focus on exploitation, environmental degradation and marginalisation of local communities, often amplifying Baloch nationalist sentiments. These narratives are strategically disseminated, sometimes from outside Pakistan, to shape regional and international perceptions (Shah, 2025).

Funding and external support for Baloch insurgent groups, including the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) and Jundollah, has further complicated security dynamics. Evidence suggests that certain state and non-state actors provide financial, logistical and ideological backing to these groups to undermine Chinese strategic initiatives (Lalwani, 2023). These insurgencies exploit historical grievances, socio-economic deprivation and nationalist narratives to mobilise local populations against Chinese presence, amplifying the contested nature of Gwadar and surrounding regions (Khan & Mahmood, 2025).

Despite opposition, segments of the Baloch population and students view CPEC and Chinese engagement as beneficial for Pakistan's long-term socio-economic growth. Positive perceptions stem from anticipated employment opportunities, infrastructural development and enhanced educational and technological exchanges (Ali & Hussain, 2025). These stakeholders perceive Gwadar as a gateway to national economic integration, regional trade and a platform for enhancing local living standards. Social media discussions among these groups often stress empowerment, modernisation and inclusion in broader developmental frameworks, reflecting a counter-narrative to insurgent and anti-China rhetoric (Rashid, 2024).

This study focuses on literature published between 2023 and 2025 to examine the most current debates on contested spaces, Gwadar's strategic significance and social media discourse. Recent publications highlight intensified geopolitical contestation, evolving insurgent tactics and the role of digital platforms in shaping public opinion (Defence Security Asia, 2024; Zahra, 2023; Shah, 2025). This temporal focus ensures that the study incorporates contemporary perspectives, empirical evidence and the latest methodological approaches, thereby situating the analysis within an up-to-date scholarly and strategic context. Following this introduction, the literature review examines these sources to contextualise Gwadar within the broader framework of China-Pakistan military and economic cooperation.

## Literature Review

Lalwani (2023) provides an in-depth analysis of the China-Pakistan military relationship, emphasising the strategic significance of Gwadar Port within the Belt and Road Initiative. The book highlights joint military exercises, arms transfers and technological collaborations that enhance Pakistan's defence capabilities. Lalwani details the historical evolution of the bilateral partnership, linking it to Cold War dynamics and contemporary regional rivalries. The study explores how China's naval ambitions influence South Asian geopolitics and the Indian Ocean balance of power. It also examines the socio-economic ramifications for Balochistan, including employment, infrastructure and local governance. The author incorporates interviews with military experts and policy-makers to substantiate claims regarding strategic decision-making. The book analyses regional responses, particularly India's and the United States' perspectives on Chinese expansion. It further investigates how Gwadar serves as a logistical and economic hub supporting both commercial and military objectives. While providing extensive empirical data, Lalwani does not fully address how social media narratives shape public perception of Gwadar, indicating a gap relevant to this study's research questions.

Defence Security Asia (2024) presents a comprehensive account of Gwadar Port's development, focusing on strategic infrastructure and regional security concerns. The book discusses the technical and

operational aspects of port construction, including deep-sea capabilities and logistics networks. It highlights the economic importance of Gwadar as a node connecting China to Central Asia and the Middle East. The publication examines security challenges, including insurgency threats and contested territorial claims in Balochistan. It outlines how China and Pakistan coordinate to mitigate risks and secure Chinese investments. The study assesses the geopolitical implications of Gwadar for India, the United States and neighbouring countries. Social and environmental impacts on local communities are discussed, emphasising displacement and livelihood changes. The work analyses policy responses by Pakistan to integrate local populations into the project. Despite these insights, the book does not sufficiently explore the influence of social media on shaping local and international perceptions, leaving a gap addressed by the current study.

Khan & Mahmood (2025) focus on contested spaces and insurgency in South Asia, particularly examining the Baloch belt. The authors detail historical grievances, ethno-nationalist movements and regional power competition affecting Balochistan. They analyse how Gwadar and CPEC projects intensify local resistance and mobilise ethno-political activism. The book evaluates the role of external actors in supporting insurgent groups to challenge Chinese presence. It provides case studies of attacks on infrastructure and the responses of Pakistani security forces. Khan and Mahmood discuss the socio-economic drivers of dissent, including poverty, marginalisation and resource allocation. They also consider cross-border dynamics with Afghanistan and Iran, linking regional politics to insurgent motivations. The authors review policy measures and community engagement strategies to mitigate conflict. However, the book lacks a detailed analysis of social media's role in spreading insurgent narratives, highlighting a research gap pertinent to this study.

Ali & Hussain (2025) examine perceptions of CPEC among Baloch youth, emphasising economic prospects and socio-political implications. The book highlights positive attitudes towards employment, education and infrastructure development in Gwadar and broader Balochistan. It investigates local narratives portraying China as a partner in development, contrasting with insurgent framing of Chinese projects. The authors use survey data and interviews to assess youth engagement and perception trends. The study also considers historical distrust of central authorities and how it influences reception of CPEC initiatives. It examines gendered perspectives, highlighting differential impacts on men and women in the region. Ali and Hussain analyse policy recommendations for enhancing local inclusion in decision-making. The book links regional economic integration to stability and reduction of conflict in contested spaces. Yet, it does not critically address external social media interventions shaping these perceptions, presenting a gap for the current research.

Rashid (2024) investigates Gwadar Port and regional connectivity, focusing on Pakistani media narratives. The book reviews print, television and online coverage, assessing how media constructs Gwadar as a symbol of national progress. Rashid identifies discursive strategies used to promote economic development, regional integration and strategic importance. The study contrasts pro-development narratives with scepticism surrounding local displacement and resource distribution. It analyses political rhetoric and policy pronouncements in media discourse. Rashid explores audience reception, showing varied levels of engagement and belief in the narratives presented. The book highlights the role of media in legitimising Chinese presence and CPEC initiatives. It discusses social and economic benefits emphasised in public communications. Nevertheless, Rashid does not provide a systematic social media analysis, leaving a gap addressed in the present study.

Shah (2025) examines digital contestations and insurgency narratives on social media related to Gwadar Port. The book outlines how platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram are used to mobilise opinion, both supporting and opposing Chinese presence. Shah analyses content from local, regional and international actors, demonstrating the transnational character of narrative construction. The work discusses misinformation, propaganda and framing techniques deployed by various stakeholders. It also considers the implications of digital narratives for security and policymaking. The study highlights differences between grassroots discourses and externally influenced messages. Shah examines the effectiveness of counter-narratives by state authorities and media organisations. The book integrates qualitative content analysis with network mapping of digital interactions. Despite extensive social media analysis, Shah does not sufficiently connect these narratives to Baloch ethno-political mobilisation across Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, leaving a research gap.

Ahmed & Farooq (2023) provide a geopolitical analysis of contested infrastructure and strategic spaces, with a focus on Gwadar and South Asia. The book details the intersection of infrastructure projects, regional rivalries and security dynamics. It discusses the role of Gwadar in energy transport, trade facilitation and military logistics. Ahmed and Farooq examine the reactions of regional powers to Chinese presence, highlighting strategic countermeasures. They assess local opposition, socio-political grievances and insurgent activity in surrounding areas. The book considers policy frameworks for managing contested spaces and enhancing local cooperation. It reviews the historical evolution of territorial disputes and regional power alignments. The authors argue that information and perception management is central to mitigating contestation. However, the study does not integrate social media discourse as a critical lens for understanding public perceptions, highlighting a gap for this research.

Zahra (2023) explores contested geographies in Balochistan, emphasising strategic competition and ethno-political dynamics. The book investigates territorial disputes, resource allocation and insurgent mobilisation across Baloch-populated regions in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran. It examines how Gwadar and related projects trigger local resistance and political activism. Zahra evaluates external influences, including state and non-state actors, on Baloch nationalism. The study addresses the socio-economic dimensions of contestation, including employment, infrastructure and education. It considers historical marginalisation as a driver of contemporary mobilisation. Zahra analyses policy interventions aimed at reducing conflict and promoting inclusion. The book provides case studies of insurgent strategies and government responses. Nonetheless, it does not explicitly consider the role of digital platforms in shaping local and regional narratives, presenting a gap addressed in this research.

Raza (2024) investigates social media as a tool for shaping public perception in Pakistan, with case studies including CPEC projects. The book assesses pro- and anti-state narratives circulating online, focusing on framing, amplification and audience reception. Raza analyses how digital discourse influences opinions on Gwadar, economic corridors and Chinese investments. The study explores platform-specific strategies used to mobilise support or resistance. It also considers the intersection of media literacy, digital exposure and perception formation among local populations. Raza integrates surveys, content analysis and network mapping to assess impact. The book discusses policy implications for managing narratives and mitigating misinformation. It highlights the potential of social media to amplify both local grievances and external interventions. However, the work does not fully examine Baloch ethno-political mobilisation linked to contested spaces, leaving a research gap relevant to this study.

Mahmood & Khan (2024) focus on ethno-political mobilisation in the Baloch belt, analysing insurgency dynamics and regional power competition. The book details historical grievances, resource conflicts and socio-economic marginalisation influencing Baloch resistance. It explores how external actors exploit ethnic and territorial disputes to challenge Chinese strategic presence. The study examines insurgent strategies, recruitment methods and transnational connections across Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. Mahmood and Khan also assess government counter-insurgency measures and policy interventions. The work evaluates social, political and economic consequences of sustained contestation in the region. It considers the role of media and narrative construction in shaping perceptions of legitimacy and threat. The authors highlight gaps in local participation and inclusion in decision-making processes. Yet, the book does not integrate social media discourse and digital narrative analysis system.

### **Contested Spaces and Ethno-Political Mobilisation among Baloch Populations**

The Baloch belt, spanning parts of Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan, has historically been a contested space due to its strategic location, natural resources and ethnolinguistic distinctiveness. The introduction of Chinese infrastructure projects, particularly Gwadar Port and CPEC-linked developments, has heightened local sensitivities as communities perceive these interventions as external encroachments on their socio-political autonomy (Khan & Mahmood, 2025). From a Foucauldian conversational analysis perspective, discourse shapes power relations and social reality; in this context, narratives of marginalisation and historical neglect by central governments are amplified to legitimise resistance against Chinese presence (Foucault, 1972). The perception that Chinese projects primarily benefit external actors and local elites triggers mobilisation among Baloch populations, reflecting a struggle over resource control, political recognition and territorial sovereignty (Zahra, 2023).

Baloch insurgent groups, including the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), have strategically harnessed these narratives, framing Gwadar as an emblem of exploitation and a threat to cultural identity, thereby consolidating ethno-political solidarity (Mahmood & Khan, 2024). Cross-border dynamics intensify mobilisation, as shared ethnic ties across Afghanistan and Iran facilitate coordination, ideological reinforcement and mobilisation of collective grievances (Ahmed & Farooq, 2023). Historical episodes, such as the 1970s and 2000s uprisings in Pakistani Balochistan, illustrate patterns where contested economic and political interventions provoked armed resistance, providing empirical support for the current dynamics around Chinese presence (Khan & Mahmood, 2025). Local narratives frequently frame Chinese initiatives as a continuation of external domination, linking contemporary infrastructural projects to colonial legacies and reinforcing ethno-political consciousness (Ali & Hussain, 2025). Moreover, social media platforms have become arenas where these narratives are constructed and disseminated, enabling both intra-community dialogue and external influence, consistent with Foucauldian notions of discourse as a tool for shaping perception and power (Shah, 2025).

Hence, contested spaces provoke Baloch ethno-political mobilisation because infrastructural projects like Gwadar are interpreted through historical, cultural and socio-economic lenses that question legitimacy, resource control and community inclusion, creating a discourse-driven resistance against external presence.

### **Social Media Narratives around Gwadar: Domestic and External Influences**

Social media has emerged as a powerful arena for shaping public perceptions of strategic projects like Gwadar Port, functioning as both a platform for local discourse and a vector for external influence (Raza,

2024). Within Pakistan's territorial jurisdictions, pro-Pakistan narratives emphasise economic development, job creation, infrastructure improvements and enhanced regional connectivity under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Ali & Hussain, 2025). These narratives often portray Chinese presence as a stabilising force, reinforcing state legitimacy and fostering national pride. Conversely, anti-Pakistan or anti-Chinese narratives circulate online, framing Gwadar projects as exploitative, marginalising local communities and undermining Baloch identity (Shah, 2025). Foucauldian conversational analysis provides a framework for understanding how power relations are embedded in these digital discourses, shaping perceptions of legitimacy, threat and authority (Foucault, 1972).

External actors, particularly from Afghanistan and India, are alleged to manipulate social media platforms to amplify dissenting voices, including content supporting insurgent ideologies or questioning state policies (Mahmood & Khan, 2024). Hashtags, memes and visual narratives have been used to construct a shared understanding of injustice and mobilise both domestic and transnational audiences. Digital networks allow narratives to transcend physical boundaries, creating an interconnected information ecosystem where local grievances are intertwined with broader geopolitical messaging (Zahra, 2023). Case studies indicate that narrative strategies differ depending on origin; domestic messages are framed around development and governance, while external interventions exploit ethno-political and territorial sensitivities to weaken Chinese-Pakistan collaboration (Khan & Mahmood, 2025). In conclusion, social media narratives around Gwadar are constructed through a complex interplay of domestic advocacy, local grievances and external manipulation, highlighting the role of discourse in shaping perceptions and potentially influencing ethno-political mobilisation.

## Findings

The study finds that the presence of China at Gwadar Port has significantly reshaped local perceptions of development and security in Balochistan. The majority of Baloch youth perceive the port and related infrastructure as offering employment opportunities, access to education and regional connectivity (Ali & Hussain, 2025). Nevertheless, historical grievances, including marginalisation by central governments and resource extraction, continue to fuel ethno-political resistance. Foucauldian conversational analysis reveals that discourse on social media both reflects and shapes these perceptions, creating a feedback loop where local narratives gain amplification and legitimacy (Foucault, 1972). External actors exploit these narratives to advance strategic objectives, demonstrating the intersection of local grievances with broader geopolitical rivalries (Mahmood & Khan, 2024). Insurgent groups frame Chinese presence as symbolic of exploitation and encroachment, utilising digital media to mobilise support across the Baloch belt in Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan. Data indicates that narratives originating within Pakistan tend to emphasise development and integration, while those with external influence highlight sovereignty concerns and potential cultural erosion. The study observes that Gwadar's economic benefits are unevenly distributed, further complicating local acceptance. Visual, textual and symbolic content on social media have been instrumental in constructing perceptions of legitimacy and threat. These findings suggest that power relations embedded in discourse play a critical role in shaping ethno-political mobilisation.

Analysis of insurgent messaging indicates a strategic alignment with external narratives, particularly from India and Afghanistan, to undermine Chinese-Pakistan cooperation. Hashtags, memes and visual representations are used to frame Chinese investments as neo-colonial exploitation (Shah, 2025). The study identifies patterns where insurgent messaging aligns temporally with political events, such as

protests or military actions, indicating deliberate narrative coordination. Pro-Pakistan narratives utilise discourse centred on national pride, regional development and socio-economic benefits to counteract insurgent messaging. Baloch communities within urban centres often express ambivalence, recognising potential economic advantages while fearing political marginalisation. Social media allows for rapid dissemination of competing narratives, creating a complex information ecosystem where perception management is central. Foucault's framework highlights how these narratives produce knowledge that enforces or challenges authority structures (Foucault, 1972). External manipulation of local narratives demonstrates the porous nature of contested spaces, where control over information is as significant as control over territory. Evidence suggests that community leaders play a pivotal role in mediating these narratives to influence public opinion. The findings underscore the importance of strategic communication alongside infrastructural development in conflict-prone regions.

This research highlights that ethno-political mobilisation is deeply intertwined with historical, cultural and economic grievances. Baloch narratives often invoke historical memory, including previous insurgencies and perceived injustices by central authorities (Zahra, 2023). Social media has accelerated the dissemination of these narratives beyond local confines, allowing Baloch populations in Afghanistan and Iran to engage with shared grievances. Digital conversations are not uniform; they vary by platform, audience and content type, influencing mobilisation strategies. Foucauldian analysis emphasises that power relations embedded in discourse govern the production of truth, framing Chinese presence as either beneficial or exploitative. The study finds that insurgent groups deliberately construct narratives that appeal to historical injustices to legitimise resistance. Local pro-development actors counter these narratives by highlighting tangible economic outcomes, including employment statistics, infrastructure growth and regional connectivity. Cross-border ethnic solidarity enhances mobilisation capacity, demonstrating the transnational dimension of contested spaces. Narrative construction is dynamic, reflecting ongoing negotiation between local perceptions, state communication and external influence. These findings illustrate the multidimensional drivers of Baloch mobilisation in response to Gwadar and Chinese engagement.

Data indicates that social media is both a battleground and a conduit for information shaping perceptions of legitimacy. Analysis of Twitter, Facebook and Instagram content reveals distinct patterns of pro- and anti-Chinese discourse (Raza, 2024). Pro-Pakistan narratives highlight state-led development initiatives, economic opportunities and strategic alignment with China. Conversely, anti-Chinese narratives emphasise marginalisation, environmental degradation and cultural threats. Foucauldian analysis demonstrates that these narratives produce knowledge that structures power, influencing behaviour and opinion (Foucault, 1972). External actors exploit digital platforms to amplify anti-Chinese messages, often synchronising with political events or insurgent activities. Content analysis shows that visual and symbolic messaging is particularly effective in creating emotional resonance and mobilisation. Narrative competition has become an integral component of conflict management in contested spaces. Local media outlets participate in this digital ecosystem, sometimes reinforcing pro-development messaging. Findings confirm that social media functions as both a tool of empowerment and a vector for manipulation in the Gwadar context.

This study finds that insurgent groups such as the BLA and Jundollah utilise digital narratives to extend influence beyond territorial borders. Messaging strategies often employ historical framing, highlighting past injustices and linking them to contemporary Chinese investments (Mahmood & Khan, 2024). Social media enables rapid mobilization and coordination across Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan, increasing

operational reach. Foucauldian conversational analysis indicates that these digital discourses construct knowledge that legitimises insurgent action and challenges state authority (Foucault, 1972). Evidence suggests that insurgent narratives often leverage grievances related to employment, displacement and environmental degradation. Pro-Pakistan narratives seek to counteract these frames by emphasising economic inclusivity and development outcomes. Insurgent messaging is strategically adapted to exploit periods of heightened political tension or local unrest. The study notes that external influence, particularly from regional competitors, amplifies insurgent digital content. Analysis confirms that controlling narrative construction is as important as managing physical security in contested spaces. Findings highlight the centrality of discourse in both insurgent strategy and state counter-strategy.

Evidence suggests that Baloch youth exhibit nuanced perceptions, recognising potential benefits of Gwadar while remaining sensitive to political marginalisation. Surveys indicate that local populations often differentiate between the Chinese state, Pakistani authorities and external actors in their digital interactions (Ali & Hussain, 2025). Foucauldian analysis reveals how power and knowledge are co-constructed, shaping individual and collective perceptions of legitimacy (Foucault, 1972). Youth engagement on social media reflects concerns about employment, education and participation in decision-making. Pro-development narratives emphasise the potential for long-term socio-economic growth, framing Chinese presence as an opportunity rather than a threat. Digital platforms facilitate discussion, debate and contestation of these narratives within local communities. This study finds that youth narratives can counter insurgent messaging, although external influence complicates the information environment. Cross-border ethnic solidarity influences perceptions, with Baloch communities in Afghanistan and Iran engaging with narratives circulating in Pakistan. Analysis shows that narrative control remains critical to ensuring local buy-in and mitigating resistance. Findings underscore the importance of inclusive communication strategies alongside development initiatives.

Analysis of media coverage reveals a clear divergence between domestic and external narratives regarding Gwadar. Domestic narratives focus on national development, regional connectivity and strategic importance (Rashid, 2024). External narratives, by contrast, highlight concerns over sovereignty, cultural displacement and marginalisation of local communities. Foucauldian conversational analysis highlights how these discourses structure power relations and influence public perception (Foucault, 1972). Pro-Pakistan media attempts to legitimise Chinese presence by emphasising employment, infrastructure and economic integration. Insurgent and externally influenced media frames highlight ethno-political grievances to undermine project legitimacy. Digital amplification increases the reach of these competing narratives. Case studies indicate that content originating from Afghan and Indian sources often seeks to exploit local sensitivities. Media framing plays a critical role in influencing both local and international opinion. Findings demonstrate that understanding media and digital discourse is essential to managing contested spaces. Strategic communication emerges as a key factor in conflict mitigation and perception management.

Data reveals that Chinese investment and military presence are perceived differently across urban and rural communities in Balochistan. Urban populations tend to emphasise economic opportunities and infrastructure benefits. Rural communities express concerns regarding resource allocation, cultural disruption and political marginalisation (Zahra, 2023). Foucauldian analysis highlights how discourse produces and regulates knowledge, shaping these differential perceptions (Foucault, 1972). Social media content reflects these differences, with rural populations often more receptive to insurgent narratives. Urban populations engage more with pro-development messaging and discussions of long-term growth.

Narrative construction in both contexts is shaped by historical grievances, contemporary development and external intervention

### Conclusion

“Power is not an institution and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society”. (Foucault, 1972). This study demonstrates that Gwadar Port exemplifies a multidimensional contested space where infrastructure, geopolitics and social discourse intersect. The presence of China has generated both developmental optimism and ethno-political mobilisation among Baloch populations, reflecting historical grievances, socio-economic aspirations and cross-border ethnic solidarities. Social media serves as a crucial arena where competing narratives -- domestic pro-development and externally influenced anti-Chinese -- shape perceptions and influence mobilisation. Foucauldian conversational analysis underscores how power relations embedded in discourse construct legitimacy, threat and authority in these contested spaces. The findings reveal that insurgent and external actors strategically amplify local grievances to challenge state and Chinese presence, while pro-development narratives emphasise economic integration and regional connectivity. Youth and local communities express nuanced positions, recognising both opportunities and potential marginalisation. Cross-border influences and digital amplification render perception management as significant as physical control. Overall, the study highlights that successful engagement in Gwadar requires integrated approaches combining infrastructure, strategic communication and inclusive development policies. The research confirms that contested spaces are as much discursive as they are physical, shaping the dynamics of regional geopolitics, ethno-political mobilisation and the strategic calculus of China-Pakistan collaboration.

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