**Fencing Gwadar**

BY M U H A M M A D A M I R R A N A 2020-12-13

IF fenced as planned, Gwadar will become the first `sealed` city in Pakistan on the premise of security. Apart from the pros and cons of the plan, as well as the public`s reaction and the opposition`s criticism, it reflects on the state`s approach to responding to security challenges. Usually, fencing is considered one of the last resorts to deal with trans-border security threats and vulnerabilities.

Fencing cities would, therefore, require even stronger reasons.

Gwadar certainly faces serious threats. The city is a prime target for Baloch nationalist insurgents, who during the last three years have perpetrated at least five major terrorist attacks in the district, including one in Gwadar city and others on the outskirts of Jiwani, Pasni and Ormara. As many as 20 security personnel and 20 civilians lost their lives in these attacks. The May 2019 attack on the Pearl Continental Hotel was among the deadliest attacks in the district. The Balochistan Liberation Army, which claimed the attack, badly damaged the building using explosives and rocket fire; the fourth floor was almost fully destroyed. Similarly, in October this year, militants targeted security forces that were escorting a convoy of the Oil & Gas Development Company Ltd from Gwadar to Karachi, on the Makran Coastal Highway. An alliance of Baloch insurgent groups called BRAS claimed the attack in which at least 14 people including seven Frontier Corps men lost their lives.

These terrorist attacks had raised questions about the security of the port and the safety of the Chinese workforce engaged in CPEC-related projects. However, many experts argue that fencing the city is tantamount to overplaying the threat.

The Balochistan government asserts that the option of fencing selected areas is part of the Gwadar City Master Plan. Balochistan Chief Minister Jam Kamal Khan Alyani has claimed that, due to the threat of terrorism and demand of the people to provide security, some areas were being provided extra security by laying barbed wire under the safe city project. However, local accounts in Gwadar provide a different outlook.Most people complain that, though the government has started an infrastructure rehabilitation plan for the old city, it has not yet resolved longstanding issues linked to water and electricity supply. The federal government has recently announced a Rs600 billion package for development projects in nine southern districts of Balochistan. Gwadar locals, however, are not convinced that the city will get any share out of it or that the funds will be properly spent. At the same time, the new term `south Balochistan` to describe the region historically known as Makran is making locals suspicious; they believe it could be an attempt to separate the region administratively from the rest of the province.

According to the new city plan, two entry and exit points will be established, which would provide a sense of safety to the Chinese workforce and non-Baloch residents in the city. But the larger question still remains: will it help in reducing security threats? For one, in the attack on the Pearl Continental, terrorists had used the city route for their assault.

The Baloch insurgency presents a considerable security challenge, but fencing the cities is not the answer. Baloch militant groups don`t have the operational capacity to launch massive and coordinated attacks compared to groups like Al Qaeda, the militant Islamic State group and the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan. In the worst-case scenario, if the Baloch insurgents somehow manage to launch a few largescale attacks, their ability to sustain such attacks will remain under question.

Secondly, questions are also being raised about the country`s prevention and combating strategies. Many would ask: why do security institutions opt for a defensive approach? Would it not give a sense of achievement and recognition to the insurgents? Most importantly, why is the state not willing to opt for soft and political measures of countering terrorism, including reconciliation, which are not only cost-effective but also as fundamental as hard approaches to achieving long-lasting stability inthe province? The state took a few half-hearted political initiatives, but these were never convincingly persuasive.

Economic growth requires a conducive security environment, and national harmony can create such conduciveness. However, national harmony cannot be manufactured or enforced, it requires trust among stakeholders, which can only be cultivated through dialogue and by strengthening the social contract.

It was India that first fenced its border with Pakistan. After the completion of fencing its borders with Afghanistan and Iran, Pakistan will become a fully fenced country. Perhaps Pakistan needs a comprehensive review of its national security priorities and practices.

The process of camouflaging ourselves in barbed wire, which started from the Afghanistan border and resulted in the fencing of our border with Iran, has now transformed into fencing our cities. But fencing cannot guarantee that terrorists will stop their activities. They will find alternatives, as has been happening with the fencing at the Afghan border.

Successive governments have been working to finalise the National Security Policy, which has taken too much time. National security adviser Moeed Yusuf has provided a glimmer of hope that the draf t will be ready by early 2021. So f ar, little is known about the contours of the NSP, except the promise that it will cover both traditional and nontraditional security dimensions and will especially focus on human security.

However, any exaggerated hopes cannot be linked with the upcoming NSP because it would largely be the result of a bureaucratic consultative process rather than an open discussion in parliament and public forums. Still, if it espouses a national cohesion strategy that builds upon dialogue with all stakeholders, it would be helpful in many ways. At least it could provide hope to the marginalised segments and regions of the country. The writer is a security analyst.