

The Revival of Insurgency in Balochistan

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Four times since Pakistan's creation, the Baloch, who never wanted to be part of Pakistan, have rebelled, demanding autonomy or an independent state. After three decades, Balochistan is in turmoil again; the Baloch rebels have been targeting the government institutions with impunity. The insurgents appear well versed in military craft as well as appear to be flush with arms and ammunition. An insurgency of this magnitude cannot be sustained without any external assistance. This paper attempts to analyse the foreign hand in Balochistan.

Introduction

Balochistan, after a troubled peace lasting some 30 years, is once again in the midst of a full-fledged insurgency. “The forgotten Baloch nationalist has quietly emerged from the shadow of sectarian and international terrorism to stake his own claim on the spoils of a system that is threatening to fall gradually, but inevitably apart.”¹ For quite some time now, Balochistan has been the scene of violent protest in the form of bomb blasts, random killings and acts of sabotage at vital installations. Complaints relate to gas royalties, setting up of cantonments and development projects, which deprive locals of the benefits while allowing carpetbaggers to make a killing.² Baloch rebels have been hard at work – planting mines, firing rockets, exploding bombs and even ambushing military convoys. Their attacks have led to deaths of close to a hundred security personnel. The Sui airport building has been blown up, gas pipelines and electricity grids have been repeatedly hit and bomb explosions have taken place close to the official residences of the chief minister as well as the governor.³ A hitherto unknown organisation called the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) has claimed responsibility for most of these acts of violence. Four times since Pakistan's creation, the Baloch, who – like many Sindhis and Pathans (Pakhtoons) – never wanted to be part of Pakistan, have rebelled, demanding greater autonomy or even an independent state, which would reunite the five million Baloch in Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan under one flag.⁴

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The ruling elite in Pakistan, in its quest for nationalism and national unity, have always tried to suppress any spirit of genuine federalism, perceiving it as a prelude to separatism.⁵ The main challenge to Pakistan's effort to have a unitary structure can be attributed to the extreme ethnic consciousness and a sense of strong socio-cultural identity of most of the ethnic groups residing inside Pakistan. Although the Lahore Resolution had originally talked of 'constituent units' that would be 'autonomous and sovereign',⁶ such ideas have been perceived with considerable apprehension by the Urdu speaking ruling elite, who spearheaded the movement for Pakistan and used religion dichotomy to mobilise Muslims for a separate homeland. They feared that recognising such cleavages would imply national disintegration in the long-term. Thus, they abhorred encouraging sub-national identities, whether symbolically, by recognising their socio-cultural and linguistic identity, or politically, by accommodating them in the state structure on the basis of ethnicity.⁷ From the very beginning, the central government had problems in appreciating the requirements of a federal arrangement, and it assumed powers that did not rightfully belong to it to run the provincial governments.⁸

The most serious threat to Pakistan today stems from the regional aspirations of various ethnic groups and their efforts to assert their sub-national identities. With the exception of Punjabis, all other groups perceive themselves as Pakhtoons, Balochs, Sindhis or Mohajirs first and Pakistanis later. All these groups suffer from a persecution complex and feel that the Punjabi elite is discriminating against them. Contentious issues like the Kalabagh dam, distribution of Indus waters and frequent dismissal of elected state governments have fuelled this feeling of alienation and led to the creation of the Pakistan Oppressed Nations Movement (PONM) by various groups, clamouring for regional autonomy and federalism. Of all the groups, the strongest threat to Pakistan today is posed by Baloch nationalists, who are again asserting themselves after 30 years. The problem in Balochistan is potentially serious in that it seeks to generate separatist and nationalist sentiments within a culturally distinct ethno-linguistic group that has had its own autonomous history and did not change much even under British rule.⁹

Historical Background

With 147,000 sq. miles, Balochistan comprises 43 per cent of Pakistan's land mass but has only 5 per cent of its population. It also has immense natural resources and most of Pakistan's energy resources. Its location astride the oil lanes of the Persian Gulf, at the triangle where Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan meet, makes it geopolitically and strategically the most important part of Pakistan. It commands

nearly the country's entire coast – 470 miles of Arabian Sea. On the West, it borders Iran and after Peshawar, its northern border was the key staging area for the *jihad* in Afghanistan. It is a land that was ruled autocratically by its nawabs. Historically, it has been a loose tribal confederacy – and then four princely states – loyal, at various times, to the Persian emperor and the Afghan kings.¹⁰ The ethnic origins of the Baloch set them distinctly apart from the peoples of the Indo-Gangetic plains.¹¹

Most Baloch never wanted to join Pakistan in the first place. As early as 1930s, some Baloch leaders, foreseeing the eventual departure of the British, had started to advance claims for independence.¹² The Khan of Kalat, the traditional ruler of the predominant Baloch state of Kalat, had sought independent status and claimed that Nepal and Kalat had the same status.¹³ He was the most powerful ruler of Balochistan and acknowledged lord of all Baloch tribes.¹⁴ However, as the British departed, the territories under their control were merged with Pakistan, with the Quetta municipality, a body dominated by non-Baloch settlers, ratifying the merger. Subsequently, the Khan was forced to sign the merger document and Kalat was annexed. This led to the first armed insurgency in 1948 led by the Khan's brother.

Since then, the Baloch have risen in revolt three times – in 1958, 1963-69 and again in 1973-1977. Baloch history has been an unending saga of treachery by the ruling elite in Islamabad. Though insurgencies have been crushed with a heavy hand, they have left scars which are yet to heal. Each insurgency has been more intense than its predecessor, with organisational capabilities and popular support for the insurgents increasing with each successive insurgency. At the height of the insurgency in 1973, 55,000 insurgents faced 80,000 Pakistani troops, supported by the PAF as well as a team from the Iranian Air Force. More than 5,000 insurgents and over 3,300 soldiers were killed in the insurgency that lasted till 1977.¹⁵ The Pakistani armed forces used brute force to crush this insurgency as they had to redeem their honour after their rout in Bangladesh. The insurgents were hoping for Soviet intervention, which did not materialise.

Revival of Insurgency

After a hiatus of three decades, insurgency reared its head again in Balochistan in 2004. This time, the insurgents mainly targeted development activity and Pakistanis and foreigners involved in some vital projects. They made it a point to hit economic targets in Balochistan and carried out frequent acts of sabotage of gas pipelines, and attacked personnel laying gas transmission lines. Their more high profile acts

included the murder of three Chinese engineers working on the Gwadar Port Project, an attack on the Chief Minister's convoy and the attack on the Sui Airport Building. Similarly, power transmission lines and military and government installations have been targeted. According to the BBC, there were more than 30 bomb attacks in Quetta alone during 2004. The deadliest of these killed at least 11 people and wounded over 30 in December 2004. The BLA and the Baloch Liberation Front (BLF) claimed responsibility for these and stated that the attacks were an attempt to liberate Balochistan from Punjabi domination.¹⁶ During 2004, there were 626 rocket attacks of which 379 landed on the Sui gas fields and some targeted railway tracks. There were 122 bomb explosions along the gas pipeline.¹⁷ At first, the Pakistan government tried to ignore the issue hoping that it would resolve itself with time. Then, it mounted a rush operation and paramilitary forces laid siege to several areas across the province, with anyone resisting search operations being branded a terrorist.¹⁸ Thus, 31-years after the last military operation in Balochistan, armed forces were once again deployed in the province to destroy "terrorist training camps", protect vital economic installations like the Sui gas field, and vital projects such as the under-construction Gwadar port and Mirani dam.¹⁹

The year 2005 began on an ominous note, as clashes erupted in Sui after reports that a lady doctor had been gang-raped by a Captain and three personnel of the Defence Security Guards (DSG). The inability of the administration to deal with this alleged outrage prompted retaliation by the BLA,²⁰ resulting in large-scale damage to property of residents as well as of Pakistan Petroleum Ltd (PPL). The insurgents also targeted the acid pipeline, the gas purification plant and residences of PPL workers.²¹ As a result, gas supply from the plant was temporarily shut down. The situation had become so serious that even when the firing had stopped, no one was willing to go and repair the damaged pipelines.²² According to the Pakistan government, in four days of fighting, the insurgents fired 14,000 rounds of small arms, 436 mortar and 60 rockets²³ and as is usually the case, the security forces responded with much more firepower. During this period, the Dera Bugti district was totally cut off from the rest of the country. Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti accused the Army for the rape incident and asked the 'Punjabi Army' to go back and refrain from perpetrating such crimes on Baloch soil.²⁴ Besides 7,000-10,000 Frontier Corps men and 750 DSG men, who were already present in the region, 300 army troops along with artillery and helicopter gunships were moved to the area. Also, between 3,000 and 4,000 rangers were deployed just outside the area on the Sindh, Punjab border.²⁵

The violence saw two dozen troops being killed and disruption in gas supplies to major industrial units in Punjab and Sindh, forcing the government to send

thousands of troops supported by helicopter gunships to put down the Bugti and Marri tribesmen. The conflict was painted as standard *sardari* 'mischief' by the government. But the facts were quite different and alarming.²⁶ It took more than seven days to restore supplies to their normal level. The amount of disruption caused to the Pakistani economy and the life of urban Pakistanis can easily be visualised, as gas from the Sui fields meets 43 per cent of the industrial and domestic consumer demand in Pakistan. The government even considered dislodging the Baloch population from Sui and securing the gas plants and installations. Baloch nationalists, however, warned that such action would lead to retaliatory movement that would engulf entire Balochistan. They also alleged that the military rulers were using the damage to the Sui gas installation as an umbrella for launching a military operation to ensure completion of anti-Baloch mega projects and establishment of cantonments in different areas to exploit provincial resources without any resistance.²⁷ They threatened that if military operations were initiated, the gas compression and precipitation plants at Sui could be attacked and destroyed with disastrous consequences.²⁸

After the January incidents, an uneasy truce came to prevail in the Bugti lands, with governmental agencies blaming Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti for the incidents. The media was fed with stories as to how the Nawab's lavish lifestyle was being financed by the PPL. Despite this, however, the next two months saw sporadic cases of violence throughout Balochistan and in areas adjoining it. Rail tracks and power grids were the main targets. The Balochistan secretariat building in Quetta was also attacked twice within a month.²⁹ Following this, the government decided that trains would not run in the province after sunset given the tense situation in Dera Bugti and the surrounding region. The period saw tribesmen occupying positions in the hills while military build up continued in Dera Bugti and Sui.

The tenuous peace was broken on March 17, when army personnel stopped a Bugti tribesman outside Dera Bugti and tried to disarm him. Following this, the FC men and tribesmen, who were already in a stand off position since January, resumed firing rockets and mortars at each other's positions, as well as at the civilian population. A number of shells hit Nawab Bugti's residential complex and the surrounding Hindu Mohalla. The day-long shelling claimed 60 lives, including those of 33 Hindus and eight FC men. Over 100 people were injured and large number of houses and temples severely damaged.³⁰ It appeared as if the security forces wanted to eliminate Nawab Bugti. It seemed that President Musharraf thought "the shock and awe" that he seemingly believes his Army exudes in Pakistan would terrorise Bugti into blinking. But instead, the world saw Musharraf blinking and sending his political arm into the fray to broker a ceasefire.³¹ During heavy

shelling, it was the FC that announced ceasefire several times, but the Bugtis ignored all calls. The ceasefire eventually came into effect following indirect negotiations with Nawab Bugti's nephew. Both sides agreed to allow free movement to evacuate the injured and bury the dead. They also agreed to return to their previous positions.

Insurgent Tactics

The BLA is the main force spearheading insurgency in Balochistan. The government initially insisted that this organisation did not exist in actual terms. But after the bomb blast in Quetta in December 2004, Balochistan Chief Minister Jam Mohammad Yousaf for the first time said that this organisation did exist.³² Unconfirmed reports indicate that it is Nawabzada Balaach Marri, the Moscow-educated son of Nawabzada Marri, who is leading the latest insurgency. The elder Marri had played an important part in the armed uprising in the 1970s that was eventually crushed with brute military force. The role of the loosely knit BLA, which cropped up in the 1980s as a pro-Soviet militant organisation, is unclear. Marri tribesmen are believed to comprise its backbone and have recently been joined by members from other tribes.³³ The organisation claims its commitment to carving out a greater, independent 'Balochistan', incorporating land in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. The BLA is thought to be behind most of the dozen or more rocket-firing incidents over the last year in Quetta. The attacks merited only brief mentions in the press, and did not apparently inspire any effort to better understand the overall situation, especially in eastern Balochistan – the stronghold of the most powerful Baloch tribes.³⁴

The insurgents realise that despite their relatively small strength, their biggest asset is the arid and inhospitable terrain and climate of Balochistan. In 1893, British warrior John Jacob had described its hostile nature:

The heat in this part of the world is more deadly than the sword of a human enemy. The place is remarkable for its dust storms of almost incredible violence and density. They occur frequently at all seasons of the year, sometimes changing the light of midday to an intensity of darkness to which no ordinary night ever approaches, and this darkness in severe storms lasts occasionally for one, two or more hours. These dust-storms on both sides of the desert are some times accompanied by blasts of the simoon, a poisonous wind which is equally destructive to vegetables and animal life.³⁵

Climatically, Balochistan falls under hyper-arid to arid climatic conditions. The rainfall is highly erratic and irregular with mean annual rainfall varying from 50 mm in the South and West to 350 mm in the East.³⁶ Pakistani security forces are

neither familiar with the terrain nor comfortable with the climate and depend upon tenuous communication links with other provinces for their sustenance.

The insurgent tactic, therefore, has mainly been to attack communication links and developmental activity, and target Pakistanis and foreigners involved in major projects.³⁷ They have attacked electricity pylons, sub stations, telephone exchanges, gas pipelines and railway lines. In carrying out these attacks, the aim has not been to kill civilian population but to disrupt communication links of the state with the rest of Pakistan and to damage the infrastructure. Like the insurgency in 1973, BLA actions appear to be aimed at delinking Balochistan from other provinces. Some of these attacks have also been carried out in areas adjoining Balochistan. In addition, stray attacks have been carried out on government buildings and cantonments to gain publicity. These attacks are aimed at creating a psychological impact on the agents of the state. Some ambushes have also been carried out on high-profile government officials visiting the Baloch hinterland. The targeting of Chinese nationals involved in the Gwadar Project in May 2004 was the most high profile act and had the desired effect. The fact that the first phase of the Gwadar Project was not inaugurated during Wen Jia Bao's recent visit to Pakistan can be attributed both to the delay due to disruption of work and security concerns about the Chinese Premier's visit.

Barring the two incidents in Sui and Dera Bugti, where tribesmen dug in to face the troops, insurgents have generally avoided taking on the security forces head on. The targets have been selected carefully and the weapons appropriately selected. The insurgents seem to have a big stockpile of weapons as can be seen from the fact that more than 650 rockets were fired during 2004³⁸ and despite that they had adequate reserves to dig in and be prepared to face the security forces for a protracted war. The insurgents have also been prompt in taking credit for the acts of violence and BLA spokesmen have been prompt in contacting the media and propagating their views. They have invariably claimed that they will continue their struggle for securing the rights of the Baloch nation and have expressed their grief over collateral civilian casualties. Their actions indicate a very high level of understanding of military craft, especially psychological operations. They understand that the Balochs simply do not have the numbers to take on the army in a frontal attack and appreciate that their most potent weapons are the hostile arid mountainous terrain of Balochistan and local support.

They also know that as the number of Baloch in the overall population of Pakistan is miniscule, they will not be able to win against a much larger army. They have, therefore, cemented a special alliance with Sindhi nationalists for a larger

cause against the federation.³⁹ The acceptance of responsibility for the Hyderabad bomb blast by the Sindh Liberation Front is an indicator of things to come. After the January incident at Sui, when a Sindhi lady doctor was raped, Nawab Bugti said with the purpose of motivating the Sindhis that, “The Sindhis should have raised their voice more than us against the rape but they are, unfortunately, silent.” He further went on to say, “No Sindhi has raised his voice against the rape. Sorry to say, I don’t appeal to dead people.”⁴⁰ Certain other political elements are also rallying behind the Baloch to gain political mileage for their own separatist movements or their struggle against the federation.⁴¹ Besides Sindhis, Altaf Hussain, the leader of MQM, has come out strongly in support of Baloch nationalists and has pledged Mohajirs’ support to them. He also threatened that the MQM would walk out of the government if any Army operation was launched in Balochistan. Baloch leaders have lauded the MQM announcement for being “timely” and the first of its kind by any major politico-nationalist party.⁴²

The insurgents have even been able to attack the main gas pipeline in the heart of Punjab near Pattoki, thereby indicating that the fire ignited in Balochistan is spreading. It has broadened the scope of the conflict as well as its toll. The BLA and its allies are now challenging the writ of the state in areas where it is not too soft. They have been successful as far as executing their plan goes and their actions are creating a sense of insecurity among the people and shattering whatever confidence exists that the state will provide them security and protection. They have highlighted their reach by selecting targets of their choosing, whilst reflecting the failure of the security and intelligence machinery to preempt and apprehend them. The fact that they are fighting the state and not the people is evident by the choice of targets, for example gas pipelines, that cause public panic as well as register the BLA’s capacity to strike. The purpose does not seem to kill but to only hurt.⁴³

Causes of Insurgency

The Pakistani elite has rather simplistically attributed the triggering of violence in Balochistan to mainly two factors - first the rejection of nationalist parties in the last elections and their consequent removal from power; and secondly, the apprehension of the feudal lords that the mega developmental projects would expose the population to the outside world and thereby weaken their hold on them. However, a careful analysis of the events shows that there is a deep-rooted alienation of the Baloch population. In addition, despite the support of the sardars, the Baloch insurgent movement is led by the urbanised, educated youth influenced by Marxist thinking, who have been receiving support across the tribal divide. It is

pertinent to note that out of 250-odd Baloch sardars, only three - Akbar Khan Bugti, Khair Bux Marri and Ataullah Mengal - have been opposing the government in recent times. The Baloch, cutting across tribal barriers, have certain genuine grievances. As far as Baloch grievances are concerned, ethnicity intertwined with a sense of political isolation and relative economic deprivation continues to be a potent force in evoking Baloch mobilisation. Such a feeling is more intense amongst the Balochs as compared to other ethnic groups in Pakistan for historical and economic reasons.

One of the main causes of insurgency has been the perception that the Baloch have been denied representation in the government. There are scarcely any Baloch personnel in the Pakistani army, civil service, or diplomatic corps. In 2002, out of a total of 14 provincial government secretaries in Quetta, only four were Baloch; of a total of 3,200 students at Balochistan University, fewer than 50 were Baloch; of a total of 180 faculty members, only 30 were Baloch.⁴⁴ According to Baloch MP Abdul Rauf Mengal, as on March 2005, there were very few government servants from Balochistan in Islamabad and not a single Baloch in foreign missions abroad.⁴⁵ Balochistan continues to be grossly under represented in all the organs of the Pakistani State and even most of the provincial jobs are held by outsiders. As a result, people find it difficult to identify themselves with the government. The government and its organs are, therefore, perceived as aliens lording over Baloch territory.

Then there is the case of perceived economic exploitation by Islamabad, for the Baloch feel that their natural assets are being exploited without giving them anything in return. A case in point is Sui gas, which is being supplied to almost all households and industries across Pakistan, except in Balochistan. Even today, only 6 per cent of Balochistan's population has a gas connection. Ironically, these connections came a decade after gas had been supplied all over Pakistan. In fact, had the Zia regime not decided to set up an army corps headquarters in Quetta, there would still be no gas supplies to people there.⁴⁶

The Baloch also fear that they are being marginalised in their own province by the rising influx of Pakhtoon and other Pakistanis. The influx of a large number of Afghan refugees of Pakhtoon origin has created an abrupt and disruptive imbalance in the numerical strength of the two communities.⁴⁷ Already, the Northern Districts are overwhelmingly Pakhtoon. This feeling of being reduced to a minority has also led them to oppose the mega projects being undertaken in Balochistan, as they perceive that these will not result in greater economic opportunities for them but will be used by outsiders to colonise their land and reduce them to a minority. The

project that has caused maximum heartburn is Gwadar Port as the Pakistani establishment has been propagating that it will be another Karachi. Also Gwadar is being connected to Karachi but has not been connected through Turbat, Panjgur and Khuzdar to Quetta; as a result, the rest of the province will not derive any benefit from these projects. This has made the people restive and they feel that they are being converted into a landlocked province despite having the longest coastline in the country.⁴⁸

Absence of genuine federalism and the lack of any worthwhile decision-making powers with the provincial government under the current military dispensation have accentuated the alienation of the population. Within Pakistan, poverty and unemployment is the maximum in Balochistan. According to the latest census, the unemployment rate in Balochistan was 33.48 per cent, as against the overall unemployment ratio of 19 per cent for entire Pakistan.⁴⁹

External Involvement

An insurgency of this magnitude cannot last without some amount of foreign support. Intelligence agencies in Islamabad and government circles in Quetta estimate the monthly expenses of BLA's operations to be Rs 40-90 million.⁵⁰ The Urdu press visualises the insurgency to be a conspiracy aimed at making Balochistan secede from the federation, with the motive being the huge oil reserves that are likely to be discovered in the province. External powers want this resource to be governed by an independent Balochistan rather than Pakistan.⁵¹ "The presence of external influences in Balochistan is no hidden secret. The BLA in large part has been funded by external interests who have sought to maintain some clout in the affairs of the province."⁵² The members of the BLA appear to be well-trained, and the selection of targets indicates that they understand their tactical and strategic aims quite clearly. They also appear to be everywhere and seem to have an effective communication network. All these tend to indicate that at least a core group, if not a larger number of BLA members, has been trained by persons well versed in military matters. As there are unlikely to be BLA sympathisers in Pakistani Army, the obvious interpretation is that military training to BLA is being imparted by foreigners. Moreover, the weapons being used by the BLA are Russian in origin and are not held by Pakistani Army.

According to a prominent commentator who represents the establishment views, Shireen Mazari, Director General of the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad: "A pattern can be discerned which points to a deliberate targeting of communication systems and national assets, impacting the country across provincial

boundaries. With more sophisticated explosives, which demonstrate a greater access to external sources of weapons and money, the so-called BLA has moved away from targeting soft civil society targets to installations, military set-ups and communication links. The acts of sabotage are clearly not random but have careful planning behind them – as well as a certain level of technical sophistication. And, of course, there is the very important financial aspect. All these indicators prove the strong external linkages to what is happening in Balochistan.”⁵³ According to Ayesha Siddiqi, a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Centre, Washington DC, “The fire could be stoked by the Indians, possibly Iranians. There are even rumours of American intelligence operating in Balochistan.”⁵⁴

If an external power is involved, then who can that power be? The countries contiguous to Balochistan are Iran and Afghanistan. The BLA has never been in short supply of sophisticated arms and ammunition, and possesses a large quantity of rockets and rocket launchers. The question arises from where does it get these supplies of arms and ammunition? The most probable source of armament supplies appears to be Afghanistan. In the early 1970s, when Bhutto was forced to launch military operations in Balochistan, Afghanistan was the sole source of arms and ammunitions for the insurgents. However, today President Hamid Karzai has neither any reason nor any resources to stir trouble in Balochistan. Secondly, the American presence in Afghanistan will not allow the government to indulge in activities opposed to its policies.⁵⁵ As regards Tehran, Islamabad believes that Iran is an opponent of Gwadar port because this project would compete with Iran’s newly built Chahbahar Port on Balochistan coast⁵⁶ being built by India to emerge as a gateway to Central Asia. Pakistani intelligence agencies believe that Iran and India are providing financial support and arms to insurgents, as they are not happy with the construction of the Gwadar port.⁵⁷ This seems quite unlikely as Iran also has a substantial Baloch population – the Seistan province is primarily inhabited by the Baloch. Any insurgency that espouses the cause of a Baloch homeland is bound to generate unrest in Baloch inhabited areas in Iran. This is exactly the reason why the Shah of Iran went out of his way to provide military support to Pakistan during the last insurgency in Balochistan.

Predictably, some Pakistani politicians and journalists have yet again blamed India as the force behind this insurgency. Balochistan Chief Minister stated that RAW was running at least 40 camps in the province. They also feel that with an Indian presence on the Pak-Afghan border and in Zahidan, as explained earlier, the opportunities for sponsoring low intensity conflict have multiplied for India.⁵⁸ However, the fact remains that not a single Indian agent has been arrested, even though the Pakistani media has been rather lavish in ascribing enormous capabilities

to Indian intelligence agencies. Moreover, India does not have a contiguous border with Balochistan and therefore cannot supply heavy arms that are being used by BLA. Not a single arms consignment has ever been apprehended either on the Sindh border or the Makaran coast. Moreover at a time when Indo-Pak relations are on the upswing and the region is looking forward to a period of sustained growth and closer economic integration, it is far fetched to blame India for the trouble in Balochistan.

The Russian origin of the weapons being used by BLA has led some people in Pakistan to speculate about a Russian hand. Their familiarity with Balochistan on account of their involvement with the previous insurgency, and the reports that they are peeved with Pakistan for humiliating them in Afghanistan and for the widespread support to Chechen rebels, may lend some credence to this speculation. A Central Asian website has reported the presence of Soviet era agents involved in Balochistan, previously, running camps in Afghanistan and Balochistan in collusion with India and the US.⁵⁹ However, Russia is too preoccupied with its own problems and problems in its backyard to spare time and resources for stirring trouble in remote Balochistan, which has lost its strategic significance for them with the disintegration of USSR. Also, it is inconceivable that the US would allow Russia to run such camps in Afghanistan. The involvement of certain individuals with previous experience in Balochistan, however, cannot be ruled out. But individuals by themselves can hardly have the resources to trigger an insurgency of this magnitude.

That brings us to the possibility of the involvement of the US, the sole superpower, which is today occupying Afghanistan and has direct access to Balochistan. As a cursory thought, it would appear preposterous that the US could stir trouble inside Pakistan. After all, it is their prime ally in their fight against Taliban and Al Qaida. However, according to leading Pakistani English magazine, *The Herald*, the US tops the list of possible sources of BLA's funding as it "may want to put a damper on growing Chinese presence in Balochistan."⁶⁰ A massive amount of cash is reportedly flowing into the insurgents' camps. American defence contractors – a generic term applicable to Pentagon operatives in civvies, CIA foot soldiers, instigators in double-disguise, fortune hunters, rehired ex-soldiers and freelancers – are reportedly playing a big part in shifting loads of money from Afghanistan to Balochistan.⁶¹ To suddenly have a strategic port at Gwadar, uncomfortably close to the main US overseas base in the Gulf, to which China will have access, also appears to be an unacceptable notion for the US.⁶² Interestingly, Gwadar, a future Chinese naval base and a city that will turn the Baloch into a minority in their own province, is a thorn both for the Baloch and the US. It is a

deadly convergence of interests in a delicate geopolitical context.⁶³ As long as Balochistan remains unstable and the law and order situation remains uncertain, Gwadar's true potential cannot be realised. The Chinese may be compelled to take a second look at their growing economic commitment in Pakistan.⁶⁴ Also as long as Balochistan remains disturbed, the Iran-India oil pipeline cannot materialise. The US has not hidden its discomfort with the proposed pipeline. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Balochistan's importance has increased in the eyes of the US, as the area lies along the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman, two most strategic points for the US military in the Persian Gulf. The recent US-Iran dispute has further increased the geographical importance of Balochistan in the eyes of US policymakers. Moreover, as stated earlier, the Chinese presence in Gwadar is a matter of anxiety for the US, as it doesn't want China to be anywhere near its military bases in the Gulf area.⁶⁵

There is also a need to analyse the implications of a sovereign Balochistan. It will provide the ideal gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia, and preclude the requirement of depending on Pakistan or Iran for access to Central Asia. It will also cut Iran to size without having to go for an internationally unpopular war with it. These are in US interests and in any case Baloch nationalists are not Islamists, they are left-leaning secularists. The Baloch in general are not very staunch in their religious practices and the resurgence of Baloch nationalists has started the marginalisation of the MMA, which is in power in Balochistan and has a significant support base amongst Pakhtoons in Balochistan. Thus, the rising Baloch nationalism has started rolling back Taliban and fundamentalist influence in Balochistan. This is an exigency that would be favourable to the US. It is not to suggest that US wants to create a sovereign Balochistan - it possibly wants to keep that option open, in case future regimes in Pakistan are not so pliant. US Ambassador to Pakistan Ryan Crocker's meeting with Baloch nationalists on February 14, 2005, in Karachi assumes importance in this context.⁶⁶

Pakistani analysts opine that for the US, Baloch instability is far more preferable to a stable and economically booming Balochistan with its strategic location – especially since the latter will have a positive economic fallout for neighbouring Iran.⁶⁷ It will suit the US to aggravate Pakistan-Iran relations by planting rumours that Iran is involved in the Balochistan violence, thereby compelling Pakistan to seal the Pakistan-Iran border. As the US rhetoric against Iran has increased in belligerency, the acts of sabotage in Balochistan have increased in frequency and intensity.⁶⁸ According to Shireen Mazari, "For the US, there is a much wider context to what is happening in Balochistan. Breaking up larger Muslim states,

redrawing borders between some of them, creating new political entities – all these are part of the new strategic game plan. In Pakistan's context, it is important to remember that the Afghan elections revealed a clear ethnic split and that targeting Iran also includes seeking opportunities to encourage old notions of Greater Balochistan."⁶⁹ The new US agenda could include the creation of a Kurd state in Iraq, notwithstanding the opposition from its ally - Turkey. If it is extended to the creation of a new Baloch state, it should not be a surprise. An independent Baloch state will give the US an excellent base, which can replace/supplement both Afghanistan and Pakistan. It will be a clean corridor for the US from the Indian Ocean till Central Asia for pipelines, with no problem clients like the Pakhtoon, Taliban or the Pakistani military junta.⁷⁰

Conclusion

Sporadic cases of violence continue across the entire length and breadth of Balochistan. The Gwadar port, Mirani dam, and government buildings have been targeted besides communication links and gas pipelines that have been hit by the insurgents with alarming regularity. Security forces have raided some Baloch living in Karachi and Quetta and claimed to have recovered a large cache of arms from Marri camp in Quetta. Political attempts to negotiate have come to a nought, though the parliamentary committee on Balochistan has recommended a hefty economic package for the province but the nationalists are firm on their two demands namely, halting the construction of three new cantonments in Balochistan and handing over the Gwadar port and its development to the provincial government.

It would be misleading to consider the incidents at Dera Bugti and Sui as distinct from other events in Balochistan. The fighting against the security forces around Sui and Dera Bugti has been largely carried out by Bugti tribesmen, as is borne out by the control that was exercised by Nawab Bugti on the tribesmen. But the BLA's involvement has also been clearly evident. In fact, an organisation called Baloch Liberation Front (BLF) claimed responsibility for the firings on the Sui gas plant. Nawab Bugti has claimed that BLA, BLF and BPLF are different organisations, but they appear to be one and the same organisation or at best three closely allied organisations. Their men are suspected to be manning the positions on the hills surrounding the region. It is likely that the firing of Russian made rockets and mortars has been coordinated by these three groups. Nawab Bugti as well as Nawab Khair Bux Marri and Sardar Ataullah Mengal have not hidden their sympathies and support for the BLA. Their articulations of Baloch demands and negotiations indicate that they have influence with the BLA, but they

may not control this organisation. “This is why anti-Islamabad Baloch leaders are not prepared to take responsibility for the actions of BLA even as they secretly urge it to wage war against the external ‘occupying’ power.”⁷¹

If the violence in Balochistan intensifies, the Pakistani army will definitely be sucked into a war that will fester and bleed Pakistan. According to a well-known Pakistani journalist Ayaz Amir, “While there is no comparison between the army and the Bugtis, taking on them would be no tea party. You can bet they will take to the hills, thus creating another South Waziristan for the army.”⁷² With the mullahs having identified Musharraf as a prime target as a Bush nominee, the sands of Balochistan will serve to bring the Pakistan Army to a hostile environment where tanks and APCs will be less useful than they are in Iraq. The latest threat is from the suicide bomber. Pakistani Army has been trained to fight the traditional war. The suicide bomber is not new for them, but has been used by them against others – the so-called infidels. Troops will find it difficult to understand the cross-labelling. According to columnist Fakir S Ayazuddin, “There is the possibility that a situation could develop whereby all these fronts could open up and we would be on hunt and attack missions in all these areas. To see India bleed in Kashmir, the US in Afghanistan and now in Iraq makes for a spectacle on CNN. But if Pakistan were to find itself in such a situation, it would be a disaster. Pakistan does not have the staying power of the US or India, and so the thinkers in Islamabad must be reined in lest they lead us into yet another debacle. They would be well advised to read the Hamoodur Rahman Commission report, which points to the mindset that lost us half the country.”⁷³

The political developments in Balochistan indicate that Islamabad has not learnt any lessons from the past. To start with, the Baloch have a problem, not of their own making, but that has been thrust upon them – the economic deprivation and political alienation of its people. They have been robbed of their natural resources and without substantial industrial investment. The Baloch like other smaller ethnic groups perceive Punjabi hegemony as a single important factor in perpetuating internal colonialism. Islamabad is playing a dangerous game in exercising power, with a colonial mindset that believes in the use of brute force to brow beat the Baloch into submission. This tactic has not worked as the continuing violence in the province suggests. The emergence of Bangladesh due to the use of brute state power is case in point and Islamabad does not seem to have learnt any lesson from the past. In this context Mengal’s remark, “This is not the 70s” is prophetic. Today, the Pakistanis, whether Baloch or otherwise, is better armed than ever before. Along with hardcore economic issues, strong emotions exist based on

ethno-cultural identity. If the issue is not dealt with prudently, it may not be long before an epitaph of the Pakistan nation is written in Balochi blood.

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