Could Pakistan Lose Balochistan? Balochistan’s Insurgency and Its Implications for Pakistan and the Region

By Jamison C. Heinkel and Richard deVillafranca

In early 2012, the Chairman of the U.S. House of Representatives’ Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations convened a hearing on Balochistan¹ and, in a Sense of Congress resolution, called on Pakistan to recognize the ethnic minority Baloch right to self-determination.² Despite the non-binding nature of such resolutions, Pakistan’s government and much of its political class expressed outrage, viewing this as foreign interference in do-

²Expressing the sense of Congress that the people of Baluchistan, currently divided between Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan, have the right to self-determination and to their own sovereign country, H. Res. 104, 112th Cong., 2nd sess, (February 17, 2012).

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However, the real source of Pakistani anger may have been the unwanted international attention brought to Pakistan’s “other war,” the 67-year Baloch insurgency that has attracted far less international attention than the conflicts in Pakistan’s northwest tribal areas or its tense and dangerous relationship with India.  

Present Day Balochistan Province with Historic Kalat and its Former Dependent Territories

Pakistan is sensitive to foreign interference, real or perceived, in its domestic affairs, including in Balochistan. Pakistan’s poor security situation and government travel restrictions limit foreign access to “sensitive areas,” including Balochistan, where, allegedly for security reasons, foreign jour-

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nalists may not venture without the Army’s permission.\(^6\)\(^7\) Government forces and various militant groups have threatened and attacked journalists.\(^8\)

Although Balochistan, the largest and poorest province in Pakistan, historically has been a strategic backwater, its importance could change with the emergence of several factors. Rich in largely untapped mineral and energy resources and adjoining the Arabian Sea with access routes to Afghanistan and Iran, the province has chafed against centralized Pakistani control since the end of British rule in 1947. Since then, it has waged a low-level insurgency against the Punjab-dominated Pakistani government that has periodically resulted in periods of more intense armed conflict, including from 2005 to the present. Baloch nationalists seek greater autonomy, more control over revenues from Baloch natural resources, greater funds for development, and an end to extrajudicial killings and human rights violations. Some call for Balochistan’s complete independence from Pakistan. The central government, fiercely committed to maintaining the integrity of the Pakistani state, has generally circumvented Baloch demands with divide-and-rule tactics; when necessary, it has suppressed the insurgency with overwhelming military power.

Although the Pakistani military has constrained the Baloch insurgency, the constraints could weaken along with the Pakistani state itself. Since 2006, Pakistan has drifted between the 9th and 13th positions on the Fund for Peace annual list of the world’s most fragile states—well within the “high alert” range.\(^9\) Pakistan’s problems include growing Islamic extremism and ethno-sectarian violence, a lack of human and civil rights enforcement, an increasingly dysfunctional economy, underdeveloped government institutions and government instability, the absence of a public consensus on what Pakistan stands for as a nation and a state, and a powerful military...


bureaucracy that controls Pakistan’s foreign and security policy. As these problems have compounded over the years, Pakistan’s foreign and security policy toward its neighbors has grown both increasingly defensive and aggressive, marked by consistently fractious relations with Afghanistan and, particularly, with the much larger and more powerful India, with whom it has fought three major wars.¹⁰

While the possibility of an independent Balochistan appears unlikely in the short term, this possibility nevertheless deserves attention as a factor associated with the incremental decay of the Pakistani state, which could be, and historically has been, revealed in sudden, unexpected developments. One such development was the loss at partition in 1947 of Kashmir, destined in the minds of Pakistan’s pre-partition leaders to become an integral part of the new Pakistani state. Another was the 1971 loss of East Pakistan, which became the independent state of Bangladesh after a conflict with the central state much shorter than Balochistan’s.

Separation Indicators

Certain precipitating indicators or developments would precede Balochistan’s separation. The Baloch have been fragmented in their opposition to Islamabad. Those seeking greater Baloch autonomy within the Pakistani state have been as consistently disappointed in the state’s responses over the past 67 years as those seeking outright independence. Given the state’s adamant commitment to maintaining and even strengthening central control, they may be swayed by arguments in favor of seeking outright independence. A Baloch political and military front united in a separatist objective would vastly enhance the credibility of Baloch grievances and goals, making it a true nationalist movement more able to overcome Islamabad’s colonial divide-and-rule tactics. A united Baloch movement would be able to undermine the Pakistani narrative that the province’s discontent stems from a few disagreeable tribes conducting terrorist and criminal activities.

The return of exiled Baloch nationalist leaders might indicate heightened or widespread popular support for the movement. Most prominent Baloch separatist leaders have left South Asia to avoid death or detention at the hands of Pakistani security forces. They now primarily reside in Europe,

which provides them greater access to international organizations. However, living abroad opens these leaders to abandonment accusations and also hampers their ability to exercise command and control over subordinates and improve group cohesion.\textsuperscript{11}

A third indicator might be evidence of foreign political or military support for insurgents, including more sophisticated insurgent attacks, bomb-making, or explosive emplacement techniques. The clearest sign of external support would be the insurgents’ introduction of advanced weaponry such as surface-to-air or anti-tank missiles and armored or tracked vehicles. Foreign political support, such as condemnations of Pakistan’s treatment of the Baloch, international recognition of the conflict, or other signs of political support or solidarity with the Baloch cause would generate a harsh diplomatic reaction from the Pakistani government. Large-scale counter-insurgency operations in Balochistan leading to mass atrocities, genocide or a humanitarian disaster would likely heighten and broaden foreign attention.

While none of these developments appear imminent, all are possible, particularly in the context of a weakening or failing Pakistani state that could foster a more coherent, focused, and stronger insurgency.

**Direct Outside Intervention**

Direct foreign intervention in response to the Baloch conflict or on behalf of the Baloch by one or multiple countries would further raise the probability of Balochistan’s separation. Although this development might appear implausible, in the early 1960s, the idea of Pakistan’s then-largest province separating from the state seemed equally far-fetched. Yet by 1971, East Pakistan was independent, in part because of direct Indian intervention in the conflict. Balochistan is experiencing some of the same cultural and resource-driven motivations to separate that East Pakistan experienced, accentuated by the same heavy-handed Pakistani military mindset that fueled the 1971 crisis.

Resolving the long-standing Baloch conflict on its own terms is central to Pakistan’s long-term strategic and economic goals.\textsuperscript{12} Pakistan, as a rentier

\textsuperscript{11}“Balochistan Tragedy—Who is Actually Responsible?” \textit{Ummat Online}, July 28, 2014.

state, has an enormous stake in ensuring the smooth implementation of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) plan, which features $46 billion in Chinese-financed energy and infrastructure projects between Gwadar Port in Balochistan and China’s Xinjiang Province. China’s investment in the route would allow it to bypass longer logistical routes through the Strait of Malacca. In addition, China could also use a logistically supportable Gwadar port facility for the Chinese Navy. CPEC has further bolstered Pakistan’s resolve to remain in firm control of Balochistan. Yet there is little evidence to suggest that the importance of these projects to Pakistan has had any effect on Pakistan’s strategy toward its unruly province and its grievances. During the mid-2000s, Baloch insurgents attacked the Chinese presence in Gwadar, and currently they threaten CPEC projects. The insurgents’ interest in CPEC is not just as a point of leverage against Islamabad; they also see in CPEC a pattern of outside power exploiting the province.

Baloch insurgents may also see a familiar pattern in Islamabad’s divide-and-rule response. In mid-2015, Pakistan’s military vowed to crush the insurgency. It increased operations in Balochistan, and created a protection force for the CPEC Chinese workers. Islamabad simultaneously reached out to exiled Baloch nationalist leaders and offered an amnesty program for local fighters. These measures were likely attempts by Islamabad to reassure China about its investment in the province and do not address the underlying causes for the insurgency.

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Balochistan Unified or Fragmented?

Looking even further into the future, key questions include whether a separated Balochistan would fragment or function as a nation state, what kind of state it might become, whether it would become a rentier state dependent on an outside power, and whether it would be a secular state or a proxy space for a fundamentalist religious regime.

In the event that Pakistan could no longer control the Baloch space, the primary challenge for the Baloch would be to unify and maintain order. Balochistan’s history in this regard is not promising; it suggests that tribal rivalries and competing platforms would fragment the Baloch space. The Baloch came closest to establishing a loosely centralized government covering all of Balochistan under the Khan of Kalat in the late 18th century. The Bugti and Marri tribal areas in north-eastern Balochistan were nominally part of Kalat but fiercely exercised their autonomy, while Kalat dependents Las Bela, Kharan, and Makran operated semi-autonomously. After the partition of India in 1947, Kalat briefly retained independence until Pakistan forced its accession in 1948. A Baloch revolt followed, the first of many against the Pakistani state.

The insurgency has evolved from sporadic resistance by a few Baloch leaders and tribes to a much broader, though disjointed, nationalist movement against Balochistan’s perceived Punjabi occupiers. Baloch tribes, political groups, and separatists lack unity and have been susceptible to Pakistani divide-and-rule tactics that favor some groups and leaders while punishing others. Disparate Baloch groups and political parties have differing goals and objectives that encompass multiple, often conflicting end-states, ranging from full independence to greater autonomy to redress of grievances. Rivalries and competition between tribes and personalities, with no single voice able to speak for all, further complicate the prospects for unity. In the event of independence and in the absence of an effective power-sharing agreement, a Baloch state would very likely fragment and be

21 Ibid., 107.
23 Ibid., 348.
extremely vulnerable, divided between and across tribes, traditional (rural) and modern (urban) segments of the population, the educated middle class, political parties, and various militias.

**Outside Influences**

Even a unified Baloch state would most likely require substantial, long-term external aid to become viable. With much of the Baloch population in poverty, illiterate, and without bureaucratic and technical expertise, the state would also require aid to develop its natural resources. External powers would seek to influence the fledgling state and potentially try to control Balochistan for access to its mineral and energy wealth.

Baloch activists have generally seen Islamabad’s enemies, Afghanistan, India, and Russia in the 1980s as potential friends, while viewing Pakistan’s friends, China and the United States, as possible enemies. This position has evolved, however, with nationalists discriminating less and searching for support across the international community. Other than appealing to the world about their plight, the separatists have not offered anything in exchange for foreign support. A nascent Baloch state would be unlikely to receive support from neighboring Afghanistan or Iran, who fear an independent Balochistan would influence their own Baloch minorities.

**What Kind of State?**

Would a new Balochistan host or espouse religious extremism? Throughout the conflict, Baloch insurgents have used nationalism, tribal honor, and human rights as rallying calls for their cause. They identify as Muslims, but Baloch religious beliefs do not trump their sociocultural values and ethos. Thus far, the Baloch appear to have resisted the broader trend toward Islamist extremism and are generally secular, tolerant, and favor nationalism rather than religion as a unifying narrative.

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26 Ibid.

27 Naseer Dashti, *The Baloch and Balochistan: A Historical Account from the Beginning to the Fall of the Baloch State* (Trafford, 2012), 143.

28 TheBaloch@BalaachMarri, “Balochistan Liberation Front’s [BLF] statement on Pakistani-Backed Boko-Harams in Panjgur,” Twitter, May 9, 2014. In mid-2014, a Baloch separatist group, the BLF, called for the Baloch to set aside differences and unify against Pakistan state-sponsored religious groups.
ists have no known significant relationships with external militant organizations, Islamist or otherwise. Islamabad sometimes links the Baloch to anti-Shia attacks in Quetta, but extremist militant groups such as Sipah e-Sahaba (SSP) and Lashkar e-Jhangvi (LeJ), some supported by elements of the Pakistani government and led by local ethnic Baloch, likely conducted these attacks. Although radical Baloch separatist groups see Punjabi settlers as acceptable targets, they do not perceive the Shia or other minorities as threats. The Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL) and its offshoot in South Asia, ISIL-Khorasan (ISIL-K), have purportedly spread through southern Afghanistan and into Pakistan’s Balochistan Province. This ISIL offshoot reportedly consists of disaffected Pashtun militant groups and has skirmished with the Afghan Taliban. The independent and secular Baloch have made no attempts to join the anti-Pakistan and anti-American Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TT-P) and are equally unlikely to find ISIL-K recruitment efforts attractive, even if the articulated ISIL-K target becomes Islamabad. The Baloch might even counter-balance extremist militant groups should militants attempt to gain a foothold in predominantly Baloch-populated areas.

No Voice and No Vision: Implications for Pakistan and the Region

Balochistan’s separatists have struggled to find a unified voice, and today the insurgency remains only a distraction for the Pakistani military and the civilian government, albeit one that waxes and wanes in intensity. But Balochistan’s insurgency is also one of several conflicts that cumulatively are placing increasing strain on the Pakistani polity. It is currently the most articulated example of a consistent pattern of separatist and regionalist impulses challenging Punjab-centric rule throughout Pakistan’s troubled history. This pattern persists in part because of the correlation of Pakistan’s regional (provincial) divisions and its ethnic divisions.

29 Arif Rafiq, “Sunni Deobandi-Shi’i Sectarian Violence in Pakistan: Explaining the Resurgence Since 2007,” Middle East Institute, December 2014, 49-51
The pattern also persists because of larger flaws within Pakistan, in particular its increasingly illiberal and extractive governing institutions that favor political and military elites, particularly those of Punjab, Pakistan’s richest province. Poor but resource-rich Balochistan, with its history of autonomous or Princely State (suzerainty) relationships with distant power centers,bridles under these direct and extractive institutions.

If Balochistan has yet to find a unified voice, Pakistan itself has yet to find a unifying vision, whether in Islamism or in the vision of M.A. Jinnah, Pakistan’s founder, whose secular and liberal ideas might, given time, have developed sufficiently to overcome Pakistan’s natural divisions. The little unity Pakistan enjoys is driven by a vision of India as an existential enemy, and that vision is slowly nudging Pakistan toward state failure.

Since the 1971 loss of East Pakistan, Pakistan has become a “bunker” state. The national goal has been the security and physical integrity of the state; the state’s resources, once focused on growth and development, have been dedicated instead to state survival. Pakistan’s survival strategies—its nuclear arsenal, its reliance on and support of Islamism and militant Islam as an instrument of asymmetric warfare, the virtually unfettered access by its military to the state’s dwindling resources, and the military’s periodically ruthless behavior in Balochistan and elsewhere within the state—are all children of this event.

Balochistan’s separatists support neither the strategies nor the goal itself, and likely see the weakening of the state as a positive trend that they are not yet able to influence to any significant degree. They may find an opportunity to do so, however, with the implementation of Pakistan’s massive CPEC infrastructure project, centered on Balochistan’s Gwadar port. Insurgents will almost certainly target CPEC’s road, rail, or pipeline projects. But the stakes are high; Pakistan desperately needs the infusion of Chinese funds the project would supply. Should the military follow its past pattern and respond with overwhelming force, the Baloch insurgency’s segmented leaders may finally find the incentive to identify, articulate, and act on the commonalities among them, thus finding both a unified voice and a unified vision.

A unified insurgency would present Pakistan with three critical and simultaneous conflicts: against Islamist militancy throughout the state; against a perceived existential threat from India to the east, and against a coherent, ethno-nationalist threat in the southwest.
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This would pose a dilemma for Pakistan’s neighbors as well. China has direct interests in all three conflicts. Lacking either the means or desire to intervene directly on Pakistan’s behalf, it might reconsider the wisdom of its $46 billion investment plan. Iran, which supported Pakistan’s suppression of earlier spikes in the Baloch insurgency but is now at odds with Islamabad over Pakistan’s sectarian conflict, seems an unlikely ally this time around, though it must consider the effects of a successful insurgency on its own Baloch population. Although India intervened in East Pakistan’s 1971 separatist movement, it has since realized, certainly since Pakistan’s 1998 nuclear tests, that a besieged, suspicious, and failing Pakistan is not in Indian interests. Should the Baloch insurgency retain its secular, ethnonationalist credentials, India would likely resist the temptation to intervene. But the Pakistani state’s post-1971 choice to under-invest in public education in Balochistan, as elsewhere, in favor of foreign-funded Islamic schools (madari), including some that have produced a steady flow of Islamist fighters, could yield a different outcome. India might reconsider its options should militant Islamism, whether ISIL-K, TT-P, or some other organization gain a further foothold against a distracted Islamabad fighting on three fronts.

For the United States, with its equities in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, the secular nature, independence, and strategic location of the Baloch merit much closer attention and research. The Baloch could become a valuable friend and ally to the West against Islamist militancy in South Asia, or they could become victims and hosts of the epidemic of radical, militant Islam sweeping the region.

Conclusion

For now, Pakistan still has choices. The military cannot end the insurgency. How the Pakistani state addresses Baloch demands may determine Balochistan’s future and possibly its own. In the meantime, violence between Baloch insurgents and Pakistani security forces will continue in parallel with central government or Baloch reconciliation attempts of variable sincerity. Without addressing Baloch grievances, any kind of peaceful resolution for Islamabad is doubtful, and thus the province will continue to distract the Pakistani military and the state, with the growing potential to produce much more than mere distraction.