



Who Owns Balochistan?

India may be trying to play Balochistan as a thorn in Pakistan's side.

by Animesh Roul



THE AGE-OLD India-Pakistan rivalry is reaching new heights over another contested territory. This time, the tug of war is over the conflict-ridden region of Balochistan—the largest, resource-rich, and yet most sparsely populated province of Pakistan.

Ever since Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi criticized the state of human rights violations in Balochistan during his Independence Day speech this August, the province has become a major point of contention between the two countries, as Pakistan's poor human rights credentials were highlighted in world forums.

A couple of days earlier, at an all-party meeting on Jammu and Kashmir, Modi also raised the issue of Pakistan's atrocities against the people of Balochistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir (PAK). It comes at a time when India would rather shift the spotlight off its own record in the Indian-administered sections of Kashmir. (See the article "The Kashmiri Faultline" in this issue.) Modi raised the stakes even higher by suggesting that PAK belonged to the Indian-administered regions.

Even India's representative to the United Nations made a point of discussing Pakistan's grave human

rights violations in Balochistan and elsewhere in Pakistan, including Gilgit and PAK.

Some regional observers believe that the sudden shift in India's Pakistan policy is directed at striking a balance, or, in other words, countering Pakistan's concerted propaganda against India over Jammu and Kashmir. India would rather be seen to be expressing humanitarian concerns for a people oppressed in a garrison state rather than meddling in Pakistan's internal affairs. The plight of the people of Balochistan, including systemic genocide, mass killings, and disappearances, needs highlighting, but the timing is interesting for India.

The plight of the people of Balochistan needs highlighting, but the timing is interesting for India.

Nonetheless, India's decision to raise the issue has been largely welcomed by Baloch nationalists, especially the diaspora and exiled peoples. The chairman of the Baloch National Movement, Khalil Baloch, called Modi's statement on Balochistan "a positive development", and lamented the prevalent "policy of indiffer-

Who Owns Balochistan?

ence adopted by the international community towards Pakistan's war crimes in occupied Balochistan that include both ethnic cleansing and genocide." Those who voice support for Modi's speech inside Pakistan, however, risk government retribution.

Tracing the Conflict

Pakistan perceives Balochistan's freedom struggle as terrorism against the country and a threat to its territorial integrity. The Baloch nationalists see the Pakistan government and military as an occupying force and exploiter of economic resources. Strong anti-Pakistan sentiments arose in the dominant Baloch tribes—especially the Bugtis, Marri, and Mengals—in the late 1990s.

The origin of the Balochistan crisis, however, can be traced to 1947, when one of the princely states, Kalat, refused to join Pakistan under the British arrangement. The forceful annexation of Balochistan ended the immediate crisis but began another. A decade later, several tribes resorted to armed resistance and guerrilla warfare against Pakistan's 'One Unit' policy, which merged Balochistan, the North West Frontier Province, Punjab, and Sindh into a single administrative unit as known as West Pakistan, thereby curtailing the power of tribal leaders. Following a quiet period, Baloch nationalists again consolidated to resist Pakistan's dominance and extraction of mineral resources, resulting in a bloody insurgency movement which lasted until 1969 and was followed by a truce agreement that recognized Balochistan as the fourth province of Pakistan. In early 1970s, another crisis erupted when then-



Balochistan within Pakistan

President of Pakistan Zulfikar Ali Bhutto dismissed the provincial government of Balochistan and imposed martial law. This led to the formation of armed militant groups such as the Khair Baksh Marri-led Balochistan People's Liberation Front, which spearheaded the armed insurgency in Balochistan and fought with the Pakistani army in the battle of Chamalang in 1974. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, however, the province remained relatively calm and consolidated under Islamabad administration.

The current phase of crisis dates back to 2003-04, when waves of armed insurgencies were reported in Balochistan, led by two Baloch nationalist leaders, Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti and Mir Baloch Marri, representing the Bugti and Marri tribes respectively.



Quetta, capital of Balochistan

The situation reached serious proportions as the militant Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) stepped up attacks against Pakistani security forces and power plants across the province. In retaliation, the Pakistani army unleashed a major offensive against the Bugti and Marri tribes. The BLA's argument for resorting to violence against Pakistani troops was primarily the exploitation of resources and military excesses in the province

The Baloch militant nationalist leaders renewed the decades-old Baloch struggle, demanding greater control of natural resources and urged the regime of Pervez Musharraf to suspend the construction of military bases in 2005. Subsequent assassination attempts on Musharraf in mid-December that year prompted a massive military crackdown on Baloch nationalists, ultimately leading to the deaths of Akbar Bugti in 2006 and of Baloch Marri in 2007.

The deaths of Bugti and Marri were followed by the unlawful detention and disappearance of many Baloch leaders. The response of the Pakistani army was seen as heavy-handed and further fueled the Baloch nationalist movement. Militants carried out retributive attacks on Pakistan security forces, on gas pipelines, and on power grids. Apart from the BLA, other groups have carried forward the armed resistance against Pakistan, including the Baloch Republican Army (BRA) and the Baloch Liberation Front.

Enter India

At a 2009 bilateral meeting between India and Pakistan in Egypt, Pakistan complained about India's meddling in its internal affairs in Balochistan. India had long kept silent on any involvement until India's external affairs spokesperson indirectly admitted in 2015 to having given refuge to people from Balochistan who had been persecuted by Pakistan. One such refugee, Baloch Pardili, a representative of the Baloch Liberation Front, has been staying in India since 2009, gathering support on behalf of his leader, Hyrbyair Marri.

Islamabad has blamed India for supporting the Baloch insurgents, including those who have fled to Afghanistan and then moved to European and American cities. Pro-freedom Baloch leaders such as Hyrbyair Marri, Brahumdagh Bugti, and Javed Mengal are liv-



Indian P.M. Narendra Modi and Pakistani P.M. Nawaz Sharif

ing in exile after long spearheading the freedom movement at home. Marri has lived in London since the late 1990s. Bugti, the current leader of the Baloch Republican Party, at first lived in exile in Afghanistan, and since 2006 has lived in Geneva, following the death of his grandfather, the leader of the powerful Bugti tribe. He is now seeking political asylum in India. The support India has allegedly given to leaders like Marri and Bugti are at the center of Pakistan's criticism of India.

If India grants asylum to Brahumdagh Bugti, the tension between India and Pakistan will climb, increasing the seriousness of India's Balochistan policy.

India's overt interest, especially in Balochistan and other areas such as Gilgit-Baltistan and PAK, has touched another nerve. Balochistan is important for China, which is keen to build its China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), part of its ambitious "One Belt, One Road" project that aims to eventually connect China with Central Asian and European nations through Pakistan. A 2,000 km road and rail infrastructure worth billions will connect China's largest province, Xinjiang, with Pakistan's Gwadar port in Balochistan. (See article "Can China Curb Terrorism?" in this issue.)

This project fuels Baloch resentment, as it typifies Pakistan and China's exploitation of Balochistan's re-

Who Owns Balochistan?



Gwadar Port

sources, such as oil and gas, and Pakistan's China-aided oppression of the province's people. By taking the side of the Baloch people, a move seen as demonstrating opposition to CPEC, India has sent a clear message to both Pakistan and China about its intention to uphold the rights of Balochistan's populace. The Indian Prime Minister again raised his supposedly humanitarian concerns over the \$46 billion project at a bilateral meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Hangzhou, China in early September.

Pakistan, meanwhile, has declared that India is attempting to sabotage CPEC by fueling anti-Pakistan sentiments in Balochistan. Certainly, a free Balochistan would be a major hurdle for the ever-expanding influence of China towards the Indian Ocean.

In reality, India has little ability to intervene directly in the affairs of Balochistan, the way it did during the Bangladeshi freedom struggle of the early 1970s. India shares neither a border nor a common peoples with Balochistan, as it does with Bangladesh. Without direct access it would be difficult to make any interventions, whether humanitarian or otherwise. The only thing India can do is rake up the matter of human rights in international forums. If India wishes to seriously take up the Baloch cause, it would need the help of other regional players, like Iran and Afghanistan. Any unilateral action against Pakistan, be it diplomatic isolation or military intervention, would prove largely futile.

The other stakeholders, including China and the United States, would not want to see any Indian intervention or meddling in Pakistani internal affairs. Nevertheless, India's vocal and moral support has given renewed motivation to Baloch nationalist leaders and followers at home. Just as Pakistan is demanding a referendum in the Indian-administered state of Jammu and Kashmir, Balochistan leaders, allegedly at the behest of India, are calling for an internationally supervised referendum to find a solution to the decades-old insurgency.

Although India's policy shift on Balochistan is still a work in progress, it is amply clear that India would not hesitate to encourage Baloch nationalist leaders to strive for sovereignty in their own country. India may be mostly impotent in the matter, but it has nonetheless spoken out on Balochistan's behalf, unnecessarily worsening its relationship with its northern neighbor. Ignoring the humanitarian cause and looking at what India stands to gain suggests that India is likely trying to up the ante in its geopolitical rivalry with Pakistan over the Kashmir region.

Irrespective of what India chooses to do next, the situation in Balochistan is already escalating. ■

Animesh Roul is a New-Delhi-based public policy analyst, with specializations in counterterrorism, radical Islam, terror financing, and other issues relating to armed conflict.