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PAKISTAN:

**The Resurgence
of Baluch
Nationalism**

Frédéric Grare

South Asia Project



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THIRTY YEARS AFTER A BLOODY CONFLICT that official sources estimate caused more than five thousand deaths among the rebels and almost three thousand among the Pakistan Army, Baluchistan seems to be heading toward another armed insurrection. During the summer of 2004, there were numerous attacks against the army and the paramilitary forces as well as repeated sabotage of oil pipelines. Since the rape of a female doctor by a group of soldiers on January 2, 2005, in the hospital in Sui, the principal gas-producing center in Baluchistan, assaults have multiplied, culminating in a pitched battle between the Frontier Corps, a paramilitary unit, and the local Bugtis, one of the largest Baluch tribes. According to the Pakistani daily, *The Nation*, approximately 1,568 “terrorist” attacks occurred through April 3, 2005. These attacks have not been confined only to tribal areas but have targeted Pakistani armed forces and Chinese nationals working on major regional projects all over the province.

Long-standing resentments caused armed conflict in 1948, 1958, and 1973. Today, these resentments persist because of the central government’s suppression of nationalistic aspirations; the absence of economic and social development in Baluchistan despite its possessing almost 20 percent of the country’s mineral and energy resources; and the exclusion of the provincial authorities and local population from decisions on major regional projects, most notably the construction of the Gwadar port. Non-Baluch have also won major jobs and contracts from the armed forces and have benefited from land speculation. Whether because of or in spite of its strategic interests in Baluchistan, the Pakistan government has not integrated the province into the state. As a matter of fact, the Baluch believe that Baluchistan today is a colony of Punjab, the most populated and powerful province of Pakistan.

Three separate but linked issues bear on Baluchistan today: the national question, the role of the army, and the use of Islamism. The national question is obviously central. The four provinces of Pakistan, fifty-eight years after independence, still reflect ethnic divisions that the central government neither fully accommodates nor can eliminate. The elite, in particular the army elite, has never recognized ethnic identities. From Ayub Khan to Pervez Musharraf, the army elite has always tried to promote a united Pakistan. Former dictator Zia ul-Haq was quoted as saying that he would “ideally like to break up the existing provinces and replace them with fifty-three small provinces, erasing ethnic identities from the map of Pakistan altogether.”¹ To achieve unity, the army rule of the country has almost always favored military solutions over political ones and has tended to reinforce separatist tendencies. Cognizant of their province’s strategic and economic importance, the Baluch have been all the more resentful of the military’s arrogance and contempt. Finally, the Pakistan Army exercises its power by manipulating Islam to weaken Baluch nationalism and, even more important, to conceal the real nature of the Baluch problem from the outside world. The Baluch crisis is not just the unintended outcome of more or less appropriate decisions. The crisis epitomizes the army’s mode of governance and its relation with Pakistan’s citizens and world public opinion.

WHY BALUCHISTAN MATTERS

Baluchistan, which straddles three countries (Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan) and borders the Arabian Sea, is a vast and sparsely populated province (6,511,000 people² occupying 43 percent of Pakistan's territory) that contains within its borders all the contradictions that affect the region, including conflict between the United States and the Taliban.

A large part of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan are launched from the Pasni and Dalbandin bases situated on Baluch territory.³ The Taliban, backed by both Pakistan and Iran, also operate out of Baluchistan. If the pressure on Western forces in Afghanistan were to become unbearable, Washington and its allies could conceivably use the Baluch nationalists, who fiercely oppose the influence of the mullahs and also oppose the Taliban, to exert diplomatic pressure on Islamabad as well as Tehran.

Further, although it is the most sparsely populated province of Pakistan (about 4 percent of the present population),⁴ Baluchistan is economically and strategically important. The subsoil holds a substantial portion of Pakistan's energy and mineral resources, accounting for 36 percent of its total gas production. It also holds large quantities of coal, gold, copper, silver, platinum, aluminum, and, above all, uranium and is a potential transit zone for a pipeline transporting natural gas from Iran and Turkmenistan to India.

The Baluchistan coast is particularly important. It provides Pakistan with an exclusive economic zone potentially rich in oil, gas, and minerals spread over approximately 180,000 square kilometers while giving Baluchistan considerable strategic importance. Two of Pakistan's three naval bases—Ormara and Gwadar—are situated on the Baluchistan coast. Located close to the Strait of Hormuz, at the entrance to the Persian Gulf, Gwadar is expected to provide a port, warehouses, and industrial facilities to more than twenty countries—including those in the Gulf, on the Red Sea, and in Central Asia and East Africa as well as Iran, India, and parts of northwest China.⁵ Now that the first phase of construction has been completed, the port is capable of receiving freighters with a capacity of 30,000 tons and container vessels going up to 25,000 tons. The completion of the second phase of construction by 2010 will enable the port to receive oil tankers with a capacity of almost 200,000 tons. A special industrial development zone and an export zone have also been planned, and Gwadar should soon be declared a free trade zone. Finally, to make Pakistan the nerve center of all commercial activity in the region, the Pakistan government is building a road and rail network linking Gwadar to Afghanistan and Central Asia; the network is intended to provide these landlocked areas with an outlet to the sea.

Gwadar port, situated 725 kilometers to the west of Karachi, has been designed to bolster Pakistan's strategic defenses by providing an alternative to the Karachi port, which once had to face a long blockade by the Indian Navy. Karachi's vulnerability was confirmed when the threat of another blockade loomed large during the Kargil conflict.⁶ In fact, the Gwadar project is an integral part of a policy that seeks to diversify Pakistan's port facilities. The construction of the Ormara base in Baluchistan, which became operational in 2000, is also a part of the same policy.⁷

China's presence further enhances Gwadar's importance. In fact, the port was built mainly with Chinese capital and labor. Some even consider this isolated township in the southwest of Pakistan as a Chinese naval outpost on the Indian Ocean designed to protect Beijing's oil supply lines from the Middle East and to counter the growing U.S. presence in Central Asia.⁸ General Musharraf

and Shaukat Aziz, who was then finance minister, were supposed to have insisted that the Chinese government finance the project in exchange for docking facilities in Gwadar and Ormara and for permission to set up a listening post on the Makran Coast to intercept the communications of U.S. military bases in the Gulf. Beijing also operates the gold and copper mines in Saindak, near the borders of Afghanistan and Iran not far from the Ras Koh, the mountains where Pakistan's nuclear tests are conducted.

Iran, which has a Baluch population of about one million, is closely monitoring these developments. Tehran is afraid of Baluch nationalism and of subversive U.S. actions (supported when the need arises by Islamabad) on its own territory. It is also worried about competition from Pakistan in opening up Central Asia.

REASONS BEHIND THE CRISIS

Today's crisis in Baluchistan was provoked, ironically, by the central government's attempt to develop this backward area by undertaking a series of large projects. Instead of cheering these projects, the Baluch, faced with slowing population growth, responded with fear that they would be dispossessed of their land and resources and of their distinct identity. In addition, three fundamental issues are fueling this crisis: expropriation, marginalization, and dispossession.

Expropriation

Baluchistan has failed to benefit from its own natural gas deposits. The first deposits were discovered in Sui in 1953. Gas was supplied to Multan and Rawalpindi, in Punjab, in 1964; but Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan, had to wait until 1986 for its share of the gas, which it received at that time only because the central government decided to extend the gas pipeline because it had decided to station a military garrison in the provincial capital. In the Dera Bugti district, home to the gas fields of Sui and Pircoah where conflicts have taken place recently, only the town of Dera Bugti is supplied with gas. It receives its supplies only because a paramilitary camp was opened there in the mid-1990s. Overall, only four of the twenty-six districts constituting Baluchistan are supplied with gas.

In fact, although it accounts for 36 percent of Pakistan's total gas production, the province consumes only 17 percent of its own production. The remaining 83 percent is sent to the rest of the country. In addition, the central government charges a much lower price for Baluch gas than it does for gas produced in other provinces, particularly Sind and Punjab.⁹ Moreover, Baluchistan receives no more than 12.4 percent of the royalties due to it for supplying gas.

What to do about the gas and hydrocarbon reserves lying under the soil of Baluchistan is also an issue. Baluchistan produces more than 40 percent of Pakistan's primary energy (natural gas, coal, and electricity). The government has announced that the gas deposits being exploited at present will be depleted by 2012, leading to the need to drill deeper and undertake fresh exploration. Reports by geological experts indicate the presence of 19 trillion cubic feet of gas and 6 trillion barrels of oil reserves in Baluchistan, but the Baluch are determined to prevent further exploration and development without their consent. They want an agreement for the equitable sharing of resources.¹⁰

Marginalization

The Baluch have had only a small role in the construction of Gwadar port, a project entirely under the control of the central government.¹¹ The project will benefit the people of Baluchistan only if a massive effort is undertaken to train and recruit local residents and if the port is linked with the rest of Baluchistan, which is certainly not the case at the present time. Of the approximately six hundred persons employed in the construction of the first phase of the project, only one hundred, essentially daily-wage workers, were Baluch. There has also been only one road, which joins Gwadar to Karachi, opening the port to the rest of the country.

Although Gwadar is the region's only deepwater port, there is yet no well-defined policy to turn it into a free trade zone. No effort has been made to train the local population so that they can find work with the development project. There is not a single technical school or college in Gwadar or in the surrounding area. In addition, the land around the port that was acquired below market price by the Pakistan Navy and Coast Guard and distributed to officers has since been subject to a great deal of financial speculation.¹²

The Baluch in Gwadar fear that they will become a minority in their own land. If the central government's plans succeed, the population of Gwadar and its surrounding areas will rise from seventy thousand to almost two million. The Baluch are convinced that the majority will be Sindis and Punjabis.

Dispossession

The government is willing to construct military garrisons in the three most sensitive areas of Baluchistan—Sui, with its gas-producing installations; Gwadar, with its port; and Kohlu, the “capital” of the Marri tribe, to which most of the nationalist hard-liners belong. The Baluch, already feeling colonized by the Punjabis, feel dispossessed by these projects.

Behind these three problems, which the Baluch consider a *casus belli*, looms the demand for autonomy, if not for total independence. While Islamabad considers Baluchistan's resources as national property and has acted accordingly, the Baluch are demanding that the province's resources be used only for the benefit of the Baluch people.

RESURGENCE OF BALUCH NATIONALISM

Islamabad has always denied the existence of Baluch nationalism, but the Baluch lay claim to a history going back two thousand years. Its most significant milestones are the confederation of forty-four Baluch tribes under the leadership of Mir Jalal Khan in the twelfth century, the confederation of Rind Laskhari in the fifteenth century, and the establishment of the khanate of Baluchistan in the seventeenth century. The Mogul and Tatar invasions and the wars and mass migrations in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries also confirm and reinforce the idea of a national identity.¹³

During the Raj, British administrators claimed a narrow strip of land adjoining Afghanistan, which they called “British Baluchistan,” but beyond that they refrained from interfering in the affairs of Baluchistan as long as the Baluch did not deny access to Afghanistan to the British Army. They paid the sardars (tribal chiefs), whom they allowed autonomy, for this favor.

The Baluch had secretly campaigned for independence during the final decades of the British Raj, and they were shocked by the inclusion of Baluchistan in Pakistan in 1947.¹⁴ The Baluch nationalists' desire for independence clashed with the aims of the Pakistan government, which wanted to destroy the power of the tribal chiefs and concentrate all authority in the hands of the central government.¹⁵ The government in Islamabad sought to assimilate Baluch identity into the larger Pakistani identity. Since independence, Islamabad has come into conflict with the Baluch on four occasions—in 1948, 1958, 1962, and, most vigorously, from 1973 to 1977 when a growing guerrilla movement led to an armed insurrection that ravaged the province. During this most recent period, some fifty-five thousand tribesmen fought against seventy thousand Pakistan Army troops, deepening the resentment Baluch nationalists felt toward Islamabad.

The similarity between the period preceding the insurrection in 1973 and the present situation in Baluchistan is quite striking. It was during the 1960s that the Baluch nationalist movement acquired its peculiar characteristics that are evident even today. When the army, after the clash in 1962, began to increase its garrisons in the interior of the province, politically motivated Baluch, who wanted to follow in the footsteps of Marxist-Leninist national liberation movements, began to plan a resistance movement capable of defending Baluch national interests.

A score of ideologically motivated men got together under the leadership of Sher Mohammed Marri and worked secretly for almost two years to set up what would become the basic structure of the 1973 insurrection. In July 1963, twenty-two camps of different sizes were set up to cover a vast array of territories ranging from lands belonging to the Mengal tribes in the South to those of the Marris in the North. Managed by some four hundred full-time volunteers, each camp consisted of several hundred loosely organized reservists who could be mobilized according to the specific requirements of each operation.¹⁶ This movement later became the Baluch People's Liberation Front (BPLF).

The BPLF did not initially seek independence; but Baluch nationalists, particularly of the younger generation who became alienated from Pakistan during the 1973–1977 confrontation, adopted independence as their goal.¹⁷ At the end of the conflict, their leader, Khair Bux Marri, chief of the largest Baluch tribe living in the eastern part of the province,¹⁸ took refuge in Afghanistan, where, working within a Marxist-Leninist framework, he continued to fight for the recognition of the rights of nationalities.¹⁹

From the end of the conflict in the 1970s to the summer of 2004, the major trends underlying the present Baluch national movement gradually emerged:

- Khair Bux Marri, who returned to Pakistan in early 1991, is thought to be the leader of the Baluch Liberation Army (BLA), a clandestine militant group that was formed in the early 1980s and was close to Moscow until 1991. It was responsible for most of the attacks against the government of Pakistan. It demanded the creation of a Greater Baluchistan, which would include the Baluch territories in Iran and Afghanistan.
- Ghous Bakhsh Bizenjo, leader of the most moderate Baluch faction, formed a new political party, the Pakistan National Party (PNP). The PNP has called for extensive provincial autonomy that would limit the central government to controlling defense, foreign affairs, currency, and communications. It has also demanded a redemarcation of the provinces on linguistic and cultural lines. Convinced that an armed struggle has very little chance of

success, the PNP has concentrated all its efforts on winning political support for nationalism among the Baluch people. Bizenjo, the PNP's founder, died in 1989, and the PNP has since joined with others to form the Baluch National Party (BNP).

- Ataullah Mengal, leader of the Baluch National Movement (BNM) and chief of the second-largest Baluch tribe, played an important role along with Marri in instigating the 1973 revolt. At the end of this revolt, he went into self-imposed exile, settling in London where he set up the Sind-Baluch-Pashtun Front (SBPF), a simple body representing Sindi, Pashtun, and Baluch nationalist organizations. The SBPF demanded the transformation of Pakistan into a confederation in which each state would have the right to secede and the central government's power would be limited to whatever each of the sovereign states delegated to it. Soon afterward, Mengal distanced himself from this organization. Today, Ataullah Mengal plays a minor role. When he takes part in the political debate defending the rights of the Baluch people, he does not speak as the head of an important armed rebel force, as his counterpart Marri does. Meanwhile, the BNM merged in 1996 with the PNP; later the leaders of the BNM and PNP founded the Baluch National Party (BNP).²⁰
- The Baluchistan Students' Organization (BSO) also emerged quickly during this same period. Its various factions supported one or the other of the three parties mentioned above, but that support did not prevent it from acting as an independent party. The organization has campaigned for a multinational Pakistan and for the revival of Baluch nationalism.²¹ It generally represents the aspirations of the educated but underemployed Baluch middle class. It calls for the continuation of quotas²² and for the recognition of the Baluch language as a medium of instruction in the province.
- Akbar Bugti, another important leader of the Baluch revolt today, leads a force of approximately ten thousand tribal insurgents. A moderate like Bizenjo, Bugti is nevertheless Islamabad's public enemy number one because of the natural gas in his territory and the royalties it generates. The Pakistan government has held him up as the symbol of the obscurantist and narrow-minded sardars whom it blames for the Baluch problem. In the spring of 2005, the Pakistan government concentrated its attention solely on the Dera Bugti district (where the principal gas reserves of the province are located) and on Akbar Bugti, the district chief, even though attacks were increasing in the entire Baluch territory and especially in the nontribal areas.

The Pakistan government contends that the entire Baluch problem is the result of the cupidity of a few corruptible and corrupt sardars strongly opposed to any development that would threaten their power. But of the approximately twenty-eight sardars who matter in Baluchistan, only three have risen in open revolt against the government. In addition, even though the nationalist parties are often tribal parties,²³ the revolt has spread well beyond the tribal areas, particularly to Makran.

Bugti, Mengal, and Marri—the principal tribal chiefs in open rebellion against the government—are highly suspicious of each other. Ataullah Mengal and Khair Bux Marri represent two extreme and contrary tendencies: Mengal has limited forces at his disposal and is therefore naturally inclined to negotiate, while Marri looks at the problem from an almost exclusively military angle. Bugti knows how to use the sizable force at his command as an instrument of negotiation, but he has to contend with the distrust of his peers stemming from his controversial role in the civil

war of 1973.²⁴ The three tribal chiefs know, however, that any division in the movement would be suicidal.

The chiefs' unity in spite of differences reflects the larger reality of Baluchistan, where the tribes are in conflict with one another but are united in the defense of a territory they believe they own jointly. The Baluch movement is not confined to the tribal areas but has spread to the entire province. (The only exceptions are the Pashtun territories in the North and the border areas adjoining Afghanistan that were incorporated into Baluchistan in 1971 and that the Baluch do not consider to be part of Baluchistan.) Attacks have multiplied in the coastal areas during the past few months. When Islamabad scheduled a visit on March 21, 2005, by President Musharraf and the prime minister of China to inaugurate the port of Gwadar, it had to be cancelled because of a general strike and protests in Gwadar that raged for three days and destroyed shops belonging to the non-Baluch population. Islamabad blamed the troubles mainly on the godfathers of the local mafias (whose number seems to have decreased after the repression that followed the killing of two Chinese workers in 2004), but the nationalist phenomenon is as significant in Gwadar as it is in other parts of the province.

In the Gwadar region, a nationalist revolt against Islamabad is also being driven by a middle class that is woefully underrepresented in the Pakistani administration and army, especially in the higher ranks. It has found a champion for its demands in the Baluch National Movement founded by Abdul Hayee Baluch in the early 1980s. This middle class provides the movement with many of its educated cadres. Abdul Hayee Baluch's Baluch National Movement opposes a separate agreement, either collective or individual, between Islamabad and the tribal chiefs and knows how to take political advantage of tribal rivalries by imposing itself as an arbiter. Its presence makes it difficult for either Bugti, who represents the Jamhoori Watan Party, or Mengal, who represents the Baluchistan National Movement (Mengal faction), to reach a separate agreement with the central government. Afraid of being marginalized, Ataullah Mengal, for example, has adopted a more radical stance and no longer demands autonomy for his area but, instead, demands independence for Baluchistan. Because of the Baluch parties and their leaders looking over their shoulders, Islamabad has been unable to divide the movement by arresting some of its leaders, buying off others, fomenting conflict among them, or taking advantage of the lack of central communications to spread divisive disinformation.

FOREIGN INTERVENTION?

Pakistan's press, claiming that Baluchistan's rebels possess highly sophisticated armaments, is constantly discussing the possibility of foreign intervention in the province.²⁵ Ever since the crisis started, the press has been repeating official declarations and spreading rumors about a "foreign hand" being responsible for the troubles in Baluchistan. The chief minister of Baluchistan province, Jam Muhammad Yusuf, declared on August 13, 2004, that the Indian secret services were maintaining forty terrorist camps all over Baluch territory.²⁶ More recent articles have continued to refer to India, but they also have expressed suspicion about Iranian and even U.S. involvement.²⁷

Since India, a traditional enemy, reopened its consulates in Jalalabad and Kandahar, it has been suspected of wanting to forge an alliance with Afghanistan against Pakistan. At the least, it

is thought to want to exert pressure on Pakistan's western border to force it to give up once and for all its terrorist activities in Kashmir and, if possible, to bring the "composite dialogue" to an end on terms favorable to India. India is supposed to consider China's role in the construction of the Gwadar port a potential threat to its economic and strategic interests in the region. (Some Indian analysts have linked the construction of the Gwadar port to China's setting up a listening post on Burma's Coco Island to keep a watch on India's maritime activities and its missile tests in Orissa.²⁸) When he was chief of India's naval staff, Admiral Madhavendra Singh expressed fears that ties forged by the Chinese navy with some of India's neighbors might endanger India's vital sea routes to the Persian Gulf.²⁹

The Pakistanis also suspect Iran of supporting Baluch activists in order to counter a Pakistan-U.S. plot to make Baluchistan a rear base in a future offensive against Tehran.³⁰ Iran, which is keen on becoming the preferred outlet to the sea for Central Asia at Pakistan's expense, has built its own port at Chah Bahar (recently renamed Bandar Beheshti) with Indian assistance.³¹

Iranian involvement is unlikely. Tehran has denied any involvement in the troubles in Baluchistan, claiming that it is not hostile to the Gwadar project.³² If it were to get involved in the Baluch imbroglio, it would probably not be in opposition to Pakistan and certainly not because of its rivalry with Pakistan over providing an outlet to the sea for Central Asia. Iran and Pakistan have a common interest in exporting Iranian gas to India, and an insurrection in Baluchistan would only harm their chances of building a gas pipeline through the province.³³ Iran also has reason to worry about Baluchistan's claims to its border regions. In fact, Tehran sent helicopters to Islamabad between 1973 and 1977 to help it put down the Baluch insurrection.

Finally, the Baluch as well as the Pakistanis see the United States as a potential troublemaker. Some Pakistanis suspect that Washington would like to use Baluchistan as a rear base for an attack on Iran and would also like to get China out of the region.³⁴ They do not make clear which side the Americans are on: whether they are opposing the Baluch nationalists because they are supported by Iran or whether they are supporting the Baluch because they are hostile to the Chinese. Other Pakistanis see a continuation of the "Great Power game" being played in Central Asia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Proponents of this view believe that the United States, in competition with China and Iran, would like to control the oil supply lines from the Middle East and Central Asia and would also like to use its Greater Middle East initiative to dismantle the major Muslim states and redefine borders in the region.³⁵ In contrast, some Baluch nationalists charge the United States with conspiring with the Pakistan government to put an end to Baluch claims. So far nobody has been able to prove any of these accusations.

Contrary to Pakistanis' suspicions, it is also not certain that Baluchistan really needs outside financial support. The province is in fact an important center for the trafficking of arms and drugs³⁶ that generates, sometimes with the complicity of corrupt intelligence officers, a very substantial income capable of financing the supply of arms and ammunition to local armed groups. The governor of Baluchistan disclosed in April 2005 that arms valued at approximately 6.4 million euros had secretly entered the province during the preceding six months in spite of the approximately six hundred check posts spread all over the territory.³⁷ In addition, the large number of Baluch workers in the Gulf is capable of helping to finance these groups.

EXPLOITING ISLAM

Charges by Pakistan that the Baluch rebels are financed abroad are mainly important for what such accusations are trying to achieve politically: they could serve to mobilize international support for Pakistan, particularly from the United States, and neutralize opposition to a Pakistani military intervention. The charges are part of a larger effort to discredit Baluch nationalism. They should be seen alongside Pakistani attempts to use the specter of Islamism to undermine the claims of Baluch nationalism in Pakistan and internationally.

Following the policies adopted by Zia ul-Haq in the 1980s, Pakistan's government continues through its Ministry of Religious Affairs to encourage the setting up of madrassas in the province in order to penetrate deeper into the ethnic Baluch areas stubbornly opposed to the mullahs. Setting up these religious schools has been at the expense of secular education, the lack of which is even more noticeable in Baluchistan than in the rest of the country. The budget of the Ministry of Religious Affairs for the province is said to be approximately 1.2 billion rupees, compared with 200 million rupees allotted to the Ministry of Education. It inevitably follows that the role of the clergy has been increased, angering nationalists who have long been demanding that the Ministry of Religious Affairs be dismantled.³⁸

The growing power of the clergy—enhanced by the manipulation of elections enabling the religious parties and particularly Fazlur Rehman's Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam to join the provincial government in October 2002—has allowed the central government to draw the attention of foreign powers to the risk of the spread of fundamentalism in the region and to launch a systematic disinformation campaign equating the Baluch resistance with Islamic terrorism. Pakistan's intelligence services have linked nationalist militancy to the terrorism of Al Qaeda and the Taliban.³⁹ (Ironically, when the Baluch insurgents took refuge in Afghanistan, they sided with the Communist forces and their Soviet protectors.⁴⁰) The same attempt at disinformation dictates the identification of Baluch nationalism with Iran's Islamic revolution at a time when the United States and Western Europe are protesting Tehran's nuclear ambitions.

CONSEQUENCES OF AN INDEPENDENT BALUCHISTAN

If Baluchistan were to become independent, would Pakistan be able to withstand another dismemberment—thirty-four years have passed since the secession of Bangladesh—and what effect would that have on regional stability? Pakistan would lose a major part of its natural resources and would become more dependent on the Middle East for its energy supplies. Although Baluchistan's resources are currently underexploited and benefit only the non-Baluch provinces, especially Punjab, these resources could undoubtedly contribute to the development of an independent Baluchistan.

Baluchistan's independence would also dash Islamabad's hopes for the Gwadar port and other related projects. Any chance that Pakistan would become more attractive to the rest of the world would be lost.

Pakistan's losses from an eventual secession would not be limited to the economic domain. Although the central government could still find facilities for testing its nuclear weapons and missiles, the test sites would have to be in the vicinity of more populated areas. Some nationalists,

who are fully aware that they hold a trump card that would allow them to play on international sensitivities, claim that they would accept immediately the denuclearization of any future Baluch state in exchange for international support in their struggle for independence.

Neighboring countries are also not very enthusiastic about the prospect of a Pakistan weakened by the secession of Baluchistan. Iran, which in 1973 sent its military helicopters to assist Pakistani armed forces, and Afghanistan have strong Baluch minorities in their territories. They do not want a Baluch state, with a *raison d'être* that is essentially ethnic, on their southeastern border. The independence of Pakistani Baluchistan would inevitably give rise to the fear of the revival of Baluch support for a Greater Baluchistan.

India may be tempted to look at the further partition of Pakistan as an opportunity for forging a new anti-Pakistan alliance. An insurrection in Baluchistan might pressure Islamabad to resolve the India-Pakistan conflict over Kashmir, but a change of regional boundaries could revive fears of irredentism in Kashmir and in the territories of the Northeast that a vengeful Pakistan would be only too eager to exploit.

Despite the secular nature of Baluch nationalism, the United States is worried about the possibility of a war for independence complicating the U.S. fight against Islamist terrorism in the region. If the United States were to undertake a military action against Iran, it could also use Pakistani Baluchistan for conducting subversive acts in Iranian Baluchistan. For the United States to be able to do this, the Pakistani province would have to remain calm and not pose a threat to the interests of Washington's allies.

The final question is whether an independent Baluchistan would be a viable state, or whether it would itself become a threat to regional stability. If an independent Baluchistan did not receive foreign technical assistance, it might not be able to exploit the control of its natural resources it would gain from independence. With a ridiculously low level of literacy⁴¹ and a lack of administrative experience, Baluchistan may not at the present time have the human resources required to develop its natural resources.

Baluchistan's sparse population, which is scattered over a huge area, would also affect the economic and political viability of the new state. In addition, its ethnic composition could pose problems. Although the population of Baluchistan in 1998 was estimated to be about six and one-half million, only approximately three and one-half million are Baluch; two and one-half million are Pashtun and a little more than a half million belong to other ethnic groups.⁴² The Baluch do not see this as a handicap because the Pashtun population is found in the northern part of the province and along the Afghan border, territories that are not historically a part of Baluchistan.⁴³ They do worry, however, about projects like the Gwadar port that bring in non-Baluch residents; these newcomers could bring about a marked change in the province's ethnic balance. Although large Baluch minorities have settled outside the province, they are not likely to return to their homeland if it becomes independent because of the lack of adequate development there.

If Pakistan is divided at some time in the future, an independent Baluchistan would become in all probability a new zone of instability in the region. Its instability would affect the interests of all the regional players. Yet, unless Pakistan changes its policy toward Baluchistan dramatically, the possibility of Baluchistan eventually gaining its independence cannot be ruled out.

CONCLUSION

In the absence of foreign support, which does not appear imminent, the Baluch movement cannot prevail over a determined central government with obviously superior military strength. Still, it can have a considerable nuisance value. The risk of a prolonged guerrilla movement in Baluchistan is quite real.

Most observers concur that the Baluch nationalists are raising the stakes to strengthen their negotiating position vis-à-vis the central government. Movement leaders have made it known that they would be satisfied with a generous version of autonomy. In the absence of their winning autonomy, however, the medium- and long-term consequences of the struggle for independence cannot be predicted today. The outbreak of another civil war in Baluchistan between the nationalists and the Pakistan Army cannot be ruled out if the minimum demands of the Baluch are not met.

Almost six decades of intermittent conflict have given rise to a deep feeling of mistrust toward the central government. The Baluch will not forget General Pervez Musharraf's recent promises and the insults hurled from time to time at certain nationalist leaders. The projects that were trumpeted as the means to Baluchistan's development and integration have so far led only to the advance of the Pakistani military in the province, accompanied by the removal of the local population from their lands and by an intense speculation that benefits only the army and its henchmen.

Baluch nationalism is a reality that Islamabad cannot pretend to ignore forever or co-opt by making promises of development that are rarely kept. For the moment, with little certainty about the conclusion of an agreement between the central government and the nationalist leaders,⁴⁴ the province is likely to enter a new phase of violence with long-term consequences that are difficult to predict. This conflict could be used in Pakistan and elsewhere as a weapon against the Pakistan government. Such a prospect would affect not only Pakistan but possibly all its neighbors. It is ultimately Islamabad that must decide whether Baluchistan will become its Achilles' heel.

NOTES

- 1 Selig Harrison, *In Afghanistan's Shadow: Baluch Nationalism and Soviet Temptations* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1981), p. 151.
- 2 Data are from the 1998 census.
- 3 The Jacobabad base is situated in Sind.
- 4 It was 5.1 percent of the population according to the 1998 census, which shows the relative decline of the Baluch population compared with Pakistan's total population.
- 5 Hamid Hamza Qaisrani, "Gwadar Port Ready for Inauguration," *Gwadar News*, April 2005, pp. 2–3.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 7 Tarique Niazi, "Gwadar: China's Naval Outpost on the Indian Ocean," *China Brief* 5, no. 4 (February 15, 2005), www.jamestown.org/publications_view.php?publication_id=4.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 One unit of gas priced at 27 rupees in Baluchistan costs between 170 and 190 rupees in Sind and Punjab, even though the technical conditions of production do not justify this price difference.
- 10 Akbar Bugti, in an interview with the author on April 16, 2004, remarked that, in 2001, a Chinese company was given permission by the Pakistani government to prospect and map the area. The Chinese had express instructions not to talk to members of local tribes. Tribesmen killed two Chinese employees and one Pakistani, and the Chinese company was obliged to leave.
- 11 No representative of the provincial government was present on March 24, 2002, in Gwadar during the signing of the project agreement by President Musharraf and Vice Premier Wu Bangguo of China.
- 12 Of the twelve thousand Coast Guard officers and sailors operating along the Makran Coast, only ninety are Baluch; and only nine hundred Baluch are in the Frontier Constabulary in charge of the province's security. *The Nation*, April 11, 2005.
- 13 Taj Mohammad Breseeg, *Baloch Nationalism: Its Origin and Development* (Karachi: Royal Book Company, 2004), p. 22.
- 14 Harrison, *In Afghanistan's Shadow*, pp. 22–24.
- 15 In practice, the central government has adapted itself to the continuance of the tribal system and co-opts its chiefs to consolidate its power over the province.
- 16 Harrison, *In Afghanistan's Shadow*, p. 30.
- 17 Feroz Ahmad, *Ethnicity and Politics in Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 176.
- 18 It is in this region that the bloodiest battles took place during the 1973–1977 conflict.
- 19 He was wooed by the Communist government in Kabul and his son, Nawabzada Balaach Marri, was sent to Moscow for higher studies. It was only in 1991 that he returned to Baluchistan. The region under his control is even today the most dangerous for the Pakistani armed forces.
- 20 Siddiq Baloch, "Balochistan National Party," in A. B. S. Jafri, *The Political Parties of Pakistan* (Karachi: Royal Book Company, 2002), p. 17.
- 21 Tahir Amin, *Ethno-National Movements of Pakistan* (Islamabad: Institute of Policy Studies, 1988), pp. 199–200.
- 22 Each province is theoretically represented in the administration and the army in proportion to its population.
- 23 This is notably the case with the BPLF, which is above all a Marri party, and the Jamhoori Watan Party, which represents the Bugtis. The BNP, which tried to extend its influence in the whole province, could not penetrate the regions controlled by the two former parties.
- 24 Although he was one of the initiators of the rebellion, Akbar Bugti was supposed to have provided information to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, then prime minister, about the supply of arms from Iraq. Bhutto used this incident as a pretext to dissolve the provincial assembly and arrest Mengal, Marri, and Bizenjo. As for Bugti, he was appointed governor of Baluchistan before he in his turn was sent to prison by Bhutto. See Harrison, *In Afghanistan's Shadow*, p. 35.
- 25 *The News*, February 2, 2005.
- 26 *The Herald* (Karachi), September 2004.
- 27 *The News*, February 2, 2005.
- 28 Zia Haider, "Baluchis, Beijing and Pakistan's Gwadar Port," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (Winter/Spring 2005), p. 98.
- 29 "Indian Navy Concerned Over China's Expanding Reach," *Times of India*, May 21, 2003.
- 30 *Daily Times*, January 29, 2005.
- 31 Zia Haider, "Baluchis, Beijing and Pakistan's Gwadar Port," p. 99.

- 32 *Daily Times*, February 7, 2005.
- 33 *Daily Times*, February 5, 2005.
- 34 “US Will Not Like Significant Presence in Balochistan,” *Daily Times*, January 30, 2005.
- 35 “Balochistan and the ‘Great Power Games,’” *The News*, February 3, 2005.
- 36 This is in complicity with Afghan refugee camps (including Dalbandin, Chaman, and Quetta).
- 37 *The Nation*, April 11, 2005.
- 38 Senator Sanaullah Baloch, interview with author, Islamabad, January 30, 2005.
- 39 “Pakistani Forces May Face Lengthy Conflict on Afghan Border,” *Daily Times*, January 27, 2005.
- 40 Several young leaders of the Baluch Liberation Army are supposed to have received training in the Soviet Union before 1989.
- 41 According to Pakistan’s *Population Census Report, 1998*, the rate of literacy was 24.8 percent for the Baluch population (34 percent for men; 14.1 percent for women). The level of functional literacy (that is, the ability to not only decipher a text but also analyze it empirically) is lower than the official figures.
- 42 *The Nation*, April 11, 2005.
- 43 The population speaking Baluch dialects is currently in a minority in the areas claimed by the nationalists; see Aijaz Ahmad, “The National Question in Balochistan,” in S. Akbar Zaidi, ed., *Regional Imbalance and the National Question in Pakistan* (Lahore: Vanguard Books, 1992), p. 196.
- 44 The report of the Pakistani Senate’s subcommittee for Baluchistan contains proposals that will not have any major impact on the situation and are likely to go unheeded.

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