

Associate Paper

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Pakistan's Fragile Periphery

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Key Points

- The relationship between its ethno-linguistic provinces and territories is a crucial determinant of the territorial integrity of Pakistan.
- Punjab is the only province of Pakistan that has both an abiding material interest in the integrity of the country and, possibly, the means to protect its interest through use of force.
- After the withdrawal of the NATO-ISAF forces from Afghanistan, unrest is likely to intensify in ethnic minority strongholds like Gilgit-Baltistan, which controls the most important sources of river water as well as access to China, and Balochistan, which accounts for more than two-fifths of Pakistan's area and most of its coastline, as well as a substantial portion of its mineral resources.
- Balochistan, which can provide a land route to Afghanistan and Central Asia that bypasses both Iran and the rest of Pakistan, is likely to emerge as the next hotspot in South Asia that will attract international interest.

Summary

Pakistan's external environment is being altered by a number of concurrent factors: the imminent withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan; the possibility of change in the governments of India and Afghanistan; the growing rapprochement between Iran and the United States; the changing international scenario in the Middle East; and China's increasing preoccupation with East Asian territorial disputes.

The 2013 election, which facilitated the first-ever peaceful change of government in Pakistan, seems to have helped the civilian government gain some ground vis-à-vis the military. But widespread disenchantment with corruption, a weak economy and unresolved ethnic conflicts at home, limit the breathing space available to the government to adapt to the changing international scenario.

In this context, it is important to examine the sources of domestic instability in Pakistan that have international ramifications. Unfortunately, the international community's obsession with Pashtun irredentism and Islamic insurgency has drawn attention away from other conflict zones in Pakistan. Consequently, this paper first discusses the relationship between different ethno-regional constituents in Pakistan and then examines the cases of Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan in greater detail. Key arguments are that after the withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan, Balochistan could emerge as a major conflict zone in South Asia and that the outcome of fresh international attention on the Baloch ethno-national movement depends on a variety of factors, whose relative strengths are difficult to judge *a priori*.

Analysis

Ethno-regional Relations

Pakistan is divided into four provinces (Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the latter formerly known as the North West Frontier Province (NWFP)), Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the national capital territory. Each province is dominated by a particular ethno-linguistic group: Punjabi, Sindhi, Baloch and Pashtun. FATA shares ethnic ties with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Pakistan also controls parts of Jammu and Kashmir, known as Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK) and Gilgit-Baltistan. The former shares ethno-linguistic ties with Punjab, while Gilgit-Baltistan is different from other constituents of Pakistan.

The relationship between ethno-linguistic provinces is a crucial determinant of the integrity and stability of Pakistan, where an imploding Islam, an imported language (i.e. Urdu, which is presented as the language of South Asian Islam) and the purported existential threat posed by India, seem to be the only binding forces even though it is now more than four decades since the linguistic secession of Bengali-speaking East Pakistan.

Punjab, the largest province, accounts for about a quarter of Pakistan's area and more than half of its population. It depends on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, AJK and Gilgit-Baltistan for river water. Without Sindh and Balochistan, Punjab would become landlocked and also almost entirely dependent on imports for supplies of minerals and energy. Without Sindh it would be deprived of access to Pakistan's commercial and financial hub, Karachi. Similarly, without Khyber Pakhtunkhwa it would find it difficult to control the strategically important territory of Gilgit-Baltistan, which controls the land access to China and is also indispensable to any plan to "liberate" Indian Kashmir.

Two other facts need to be noted here. First, Punjab is the only province of Pakistan whose main population centres are located close to the Indian border. The union with other

provinces provides Punjab with strategic depth vis-à-vis India. In fact, Punjab and AJK are the only constituents of Pakistan that depend on other provinces/territories to access countries other than India. Second, Punjab was the only province in present-day Pakistan that suffered dismemberment in 1947. This partly explains why Kashmir is an important issue in Punjab and why it would be likely to respond differently from other provinces to a fresh partition of Pakistan.



So far we have seen that material, strategic and emotional considerations all ensure that the most populous province of Pakistan has an overwhelming stake in the unity of the country. It is also worth noting that, while Punjab is overrepresented in the army, Pakistan’s military

assets are distributed across Pakistan to evade India, which indirectly expands the military footprint of Punjab. In short, Punjab is the only province that has both an abiding material interest in the integrity of Pakistan and, possibly, the means to protect that interest through the use of force.

While Punjab needs Pakistan to remain intact, we need to ask whether the other provinces need Punjab. The fact that Punjab accounts for more than half of Pakistan's population and dominates crucial national institutions complicates its relationship with the smaller provinces. Selig Harrison adds a historical perspective to the uneasy relationship. He notes that: 'The Pakistani state that emerged from the 1947 Partition of British India, put together warring ethnic groups that had never before been united in the same polity prior to the arrival of the British. After resisting Punjabi incursions into their ancestral homelands for centuries, the Baloch, Sindhis and Pashtuns found themselves trapped in a political structure dominated by a Punjabi majority that controlled both the armed forces and key political institutions.'

Sindh is different from the other provinces with respect to dependence on Punjab. Unlike other provinces, the mostly arid Sindh, where the indigenous rural population is employed in the agricultural sector, depends largely on Punjab for river water. Also, without the Punjab-dominated army, Sindh cannot control the Mohajir and, increasingly, Pashtun-dominated Karachi.

Karachi's importance can be gauged from the fact that it accounts for as much as one-fifth of Pakistan's GDP and half of its tax revenues. Karachi is also the most important commercial and naval port, as well as having the country's main airport. There is another factor that also bears mention here: Sindh is historically and linguistically close to Punjab.

Sindh is, in fact, a swing state within the Pakistani federation, because it has close relations with both Punjab and Balochistan. It is also the only minority province that can occasionally access the centre of power within the federation, by virtue of being home to one of the country's two most important political parties. The national leadership of the Sindh-based Pakistan People's Party (PPP), has, in the past, been able to temporarily bridge the differences between Punjab and Sindh, which together account for about half of the area and more than three-quarters of the population.

The rest of the constituent provinces of Pakistan – Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, FATA, Balochistan and Pakistan-occupied Gilgit-Baltistan – occupy an ambiguous position. Pakistan-occupied Kashmir is different from these three, because of its miniscule size and historical and linguistic ties with Punjab. The following discussion also leaves out the Pashtun-dominated Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA, because insurgencies, as well as intra- and inter-national irredentism in Pashtun areas, receive disproportionate attention in most discussions on the future of Pakistan. So, the rest of this discussion will focus on Gilgit-Baltistan and Balochistan.

Gilgit-Baltistan

The dispute between India and Pakistan over the territory of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir is mostly referred to as the “Kashmir dispute”. This has cast a long shadow over Gilgit-Baltistan, an area that has a significance that is independent of Kashmir. The disputed territory controlled by Pakistan consists of AJK and Gilgit-Baltistan. AJK is about five times smaller and about ten times more densely populated than the latter. While outside attention remains largely focussed on terrorism emanating from AJK, Gilgit-Baltistan is far more important to Pakistan, for several reasons.

First, the rivers and glaciers of sparsely populated Gilgit-Baltistan are vital for Pakistan’s water, food, and energy security. The vital Indus River passes through Gilgit-Baltistan before entering Pakistan, while Siachen, a very important glacier, is also located in this region. Building dams in Gilgit-Baltistan is not politically costly, for a number of reasons: it is sparsely populated; its population is ethnically different from the rest of Pakistan; it is not represented in the Pakistani parliament; its citizens cannot approach the Supreme Court of Pakistan; and it is largely shielded from the international media. Pakistan’s dependence on Gilgit-Baltistan will only increase, because of its explosive population growth, climate change and the continued dependence of a large section of its population on agriculture.

Second, Gilgit-Baltistan provides Pakistan with road connectivity to the purportedly all-weather-friend China, whose importance will grow as the United States reduces its aid to Pakistan after withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan. Third, its vast, inhospitable territory insulates Pakistan’s Pashtun regions (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA) from India. Fourth, without Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan army and Islamic militia based in the small territory of AJK alone cannot pose a serious threat to the security of Indian Jammu and Kashmir.

But Pakistan’s control over the strategically-important Gilgit-Baltistan is tenuous. Its constitution restrains complete integration of Gilgit-Baltistan, pending resolution of the Kashmir dispute. Pakistan’s army and intelligence establishments have, however, turned this constraint into an “opportunity” to carve out an exceptional territory. This has not endeared Pakistan to the people of Gilgit-Baltistan. There is growing unrest among the long-neglected local population, which is ethnically, linguistically and culturally different from the rest of Pakistan.

Senge Sering, from the Institute for Gilgit-Baltistan Studies, who has played a role in reviving the indigenous script, argued in testimony before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, that the people of the region, who are ‘mostly Shias, Ismailis and Sufis by religious denomination, consider themselves different from predominant Pakistani groups and share strong cultural links with the Tibetans, Kashmiris, Tajiks, Uighurs and Mongols.’

Balochistan

The vast Baloch territories in Iran and Pakistan are sparsely populated and have long coastlines, very close to the strategically and economically important Persian Gulf region. The Baloch territories, in fact, extend well into Afghanistan, where the community is inconspicuous among the multitude of ethnic groups.

The Pakistani province of Balochistan, which accounts for about half of Pakistan's area but less than five per cent of its population, is an important source of energy for the rest of the country. The growing population pressure on the agricultural sector, stagnation in manufacturing sector and persistent energy shortages, will accentuate the Pakistani economy's dependence on exploitation of Balochistan's mineral and energy resources, which can also potentially attract foreign direct investment. Pakistan's nuclear and missile test sites are also located in this sparsely populated province. Moreover, access to the province would be important for the Pakistani Navy during any conflict with India.

But, on the other hand, Balochistan is not inextricably linked to the rest of country. It is not landlocked and does not depend on rivers flowing through other provinces. It is mineral-rich and has the potential to become self-sufficient in the energy sector. More importantly, historically and linguistically it is not closely related to Punjab, the core of Pakistan.

At present, the Baloch sentiment towards Islamic nationalists and extremists is best captured in the words of the legendary Baloch leader, the late Nawab Akbar Bugti, who was killed by Pakistani forces: 'I have been a Baloch for several centuries. I have been a Muslim for 1,400 years. I have been a Pakistani for just over 50.' In fact, as late as the end of the 1950s, the accession of Balochistan to Pakistan was not satisfactorily settled. There is one of the world's longest-running insurgencies, which the Pakistani army has not been able to control despite massive repression and the systematic elimination of leaders and activists. Sunni Balochs are persecuted and marginalised in neighbouring Shia Iran as well.

Chinese Interest

Pakistan has resorted to a three-pronged strategy, in addition to maintaining an extensive network of cantonments, to cement its grip over Gilgit-Baltistan and Balochistan. First, it is engineering demographic change, by encouraging settlers from other parts of the country. Second, it is encouraging Sunni extremists from Punjab and elsewhere to subdue ethnic Muslim minorities in these areas that are favourably inclined towards Shia or Sufi Islam. Third, it is encouraging China to enhance its presence in these areas; this part of the strategy has international implications and is discussed below.

Over the years, Pakistan has gradually allowed China a greater role in the area of Jammu and Kashmir under its control, beginning with its cession of a part of Gilgit-Baltistan to China in the 1960s, without consulting the local people. More recently, Pakistan allowed in the Chinese Army, under the guise of rebuilding infrastructure in the aftermath of natural disasters. A Chinese foothold in this area would prove to be crucial in any future conflict with India over Ladakh. But, in the short term, Gilgit-Baltistan is crucial to Chinese attempts to insulate Xinjiang, its restive Muslim province, from the hub of Islamic radicalism along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The Chinese Army personnel stationed in Gilgit-Baltistan can monitor Xinjiang-bound traffic. Pakistan has also recently approved the transfer of the operation of Gwadar port in Balochistan to a Chinese company, after a Singaporean company walked out.

Gilgit-Baltistan and Balochistan are sources of valuable mineral resources for Chinese companies. China has also shown interest in both Gilgit-Baltistan and Balochistan in light of

the growing Western influence in Burma/Myanmar and tensions in the South China Sea. These provinces/territories of Pakistan are crucial to China's plans to open a new energy supply route that bypasses a whole range of its territorial and economic competitors in South and East Asia. China will not be able to secure access to this alternate route unless peaceful conditions prevail in Gilgit-Baltistan and Balochistan, where the Pakistani state has tenuous control over the local population.

In fact, over the years, Chinese engineers and workers have faced attacks in both these regions, particularly in Balochistan. There are two reasons for this. First, the locals suspect that they are undercover intelligence and military personnel helping Pakistan cement its control over restive areas. Second, natural resources are being handed over to China to the detriment of the local people, who are excluded from the benefits of Chinese projects.

Indeed, the presence of a very strong state and permanent Security Council member like China, with no human rights concerns of its own, will limit the capacity of local groups to damage Pakistan's economic enterprises in their areas, which will, in turn, reduce their bargaining power. In other words, the beleaguered government of Pakistan will receive a boost if China develops deep economic interests in these areas. The situation is reminiscent of the experience of Sri Lankan Tamils.

International Interest

We have so far argued that Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan have reasons to be disenchanting, both with Pakistan and also China, its external sponsor. But without international support these regions cannot successfully achieve autonomy/independence, let alone resist even the already over-stretched Pakistan Army. So, the more important question is why outside powers might get involved in supporting these regions in their struggle against the Pakistani state. We will discuss below the factors that could attract external intervention.

Gilgit-Baltistan's importance for regional stability is related to the fact that it is a crucial component of the Kashmir dispute. But it is important to the international community for other reasons as well. For instance, better management of its water resources is indispensable for securing livelihoods in rural Pakistan, which, in turn, could help to restrict the flow of manpower to Islamic extremists, as well as to meet the challenges posed by climate change.

While the importance of landlocked Gilgit-Baltistan to the rest of the world may not be obvious, Balochistan's importance is quite well-known. An independent Balochistan would provide a shorter route to Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing both Iran and Pakistan. This would weaken the stranglehold of Russia and China on Central Asia. India's desperation to bypass the roadblock posed by Pakistan can be gauged from the fact that, even before the onset of US-Iran rapprochement, it began to develop the Chabahar port in Iranian Balochistan. Incidentally, Chabahar is closer to the Persian Gulf than the port of Gwadar. Afghanistan is also interested in Chabahar, to reduce its dependence on Pakistan. With Indian help, it hopes to develop a transport network connecting its Baloch province to Iran's road and rail network, extending to Chabahar.

Furthermore, both these regions are crucial for checking Chinese influence in Pakistan and, by implication, Afghanistan and even, more generally, Central Asia. Also, engagement with these regions will enhance the international community's degrees of freedom vis-à-vis Pakistan, which will continue to be an epicentre of international Islamic extremism.

In short, Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan are restive and the international community has reasons to be interested in these areas. But the conditions under which international interest could translate into active engagement with the groups operating on the ground, remain to be explored. Such an engagement is more likely after the completion of the NATO-ISAF withdrawal, when the West will no longer need to keep Pakistan in good humour to achieve any immediate goal.

Citing the Syrian example, however, one could argue that cost considerations would deter Western countries from intervening in the region again, so soon after spending a tortuous decade in Afghanistan. That might be true of landlocked and remote Gilgit-Baltistan, where direct Indian and Afghan support is indispensable for any external intervention. But Balochistan, with its poorly guarded and long coastline, is different from landlocked Afghanistan. So, Balochistan could find itself at the centre of the action; much would depend on the Saudi, Iranian, Afghan, Turkish, and Indian responses to any fresh Baloch rebellion in Pakistan.

The response of Balochistan's immediate neighbours, Afghanistan and Iran, will be driven by two opposing goals: weakening Pakistan and resisting Baloch irredentism. Likewise, the position of Saudi Arabia is ambiguous, because an independent Balochistan would definitely weaken Pakistan, a Sunni nuclear power, as well as redirect Shia Iran's attention away from West Asia by potentially threatening its territorial integrity. So, Iran's interest in the Baloch problem will in turn be influenced by the Saudi response. Iran will also need to assess the impact of an independent Balochistan on its own position as a crucial Indian Ocean gateway to Central Asia.

Afghanistan's response will be further governed by its need to diversify its access to the Indian Ocean. India will be driven by Indo-Pakistan balance of power considerations, the need to stabilise Afghanistan and the need to access both Afghanistan and Central Asia, without the intermediation of Pakistan or Iran. The interests of Afghanistan and India therefore seem to coincide, except in the case of Afghan concerns about potential Baloch irredentism. These concerns could be readily addressed if the Balochs agreed to transfer the Pashtun-dominated northern districts, in exchange for Baloch territories in Afghanistan's south that lie to the west of those districts. Turkey also stands to benefit from the opening of a fresh route to Central Asia, as it would decrease Chinese and Russian influence in the region, which is mainly inhabited by Turkic communities.

The responses of China, Russia and the United States would be very important. Russia and China will favour the status quo, despite having suffered due to terrorist havens in Pakistan. Russia, with its soft Caucasian underbelly, and China, with serious problems in its western minority provinces, have no appetite for secessionist movements anywhere in the world. Moreover, anything that improves the outside options for the Central Asian republics is not in the interests of Russia; its political élite has still not reconciled to the disintegration of the

USSR (its annexation of Crimea is a case in point). China, for its part, hopes to convert the whole of the region into a cheap supplier of energy and minerals for its rapidly expanding economy.

China also has a number of other reasons to oppose a fresh partition of Pakistan, which would be a major setback, insofar as it would swing the balance of power between India and Pakistan entirely in the favour of India. It would also reduce the degree of freedom enjoyed by China in any future military conflict with India. Moreover, China has made massive investments in Pakistan, which would be jeopardised, both directly by partition and indirectly due to the disturbance that follows.

Whether the United States would directly aid Baloch nationalists is not clear. But this time the Americans are very unlikely to stand in the way of the Balochs and support the Pakistani military, which has systematically frustrated efforts to stabilise Afghanistan over the last decade. In any case, any development that opens a new route to Central Asia definitely helps the United States, which is not oblivious to this advantage and its related benefits.

A report by Selig Harrison, in 2009, drew attention to the benefits of a secular, friendly, independent Balochistan. As mentioned earlier, in 2011 Tom Lantos invited Senge Sering to testify on human rights violations in Gilgit-Baltistan; Balochistan also seems to have received a little more attention recently. In 2012, California's representative Dana Rohrabacher raised the issue of Baloch self-determination in the US Congress. Both Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan are also members of The Hague-based Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), an essentially harmless advertisement organisation for people seeking independence. Rohrabacher, incidentally, also attended a UNPO event on Balochistan.

Concluding Remarks

While most discussions on Pakistan are focussed on the territory adjoining Afghan-Pakistan border, there are other parts of Pakistan with the potential to attract fresh international interest, in the aftermath of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. This paper has drawn attention to two such areas, namely, Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan. These restive areas are crucial to Pakistan's energy, food and water security as well as its strategic stability. They are also crucial to Chinese plans to access the Indian Ocean without the threat of interception by potentially hostile countries.

The paper has argued that countries opposed to Pakistan and China have reasons to intervene in events on the periphery of Pakistan after the withdrawal of US forces this year. Certain sections within the US establishment have already shown a limited interest in the unrest in Balochistan, as well as in Gilgit-Baltistan. If such isolated instances of interest help in the development of a more coherent policy, then it seems that favourable conditions are more likely to be obtained in Balochistan. It is an area endowed with a long coastline and where a longstanding home-grown insurgency is already underway. But, as noted above, most countries that stand to benefit from Baloch independence are guided by mutually incompatible objectives. This may result in temporary support to the Balochs, until limited objectives of those countries have been met and other policy objectives restrain further engagement. It remains to be seen whether the hitherto divided Balochs can make the best

out of such fleeting engagements and, as a result, encourage these countries to extend their engagement.

Two things have been ignored in this discussion. First, the communities that have settled in Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan as a result of instability in Afghanistan, or as part of the Pakistani state's demographic engineering, can play a crucial role in favour of the status quo. The Balochs could possibly settle the Pashtun problem by ceding territory, but it is not clear how they could deal with recent settlers in their heartland and coastal areas. Second, the reaction of the Sindhis to possible Baloch independence carries a lot of weight. The two could potentially jointly form a new coastal country, as they have a history of close relations. That new coastal country could, among other things, support overland pipelines connecting energy consumers in India with producers in the Persian Gulf and Central Asia. But those are stories for another day.

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