

Modi's Baloch Move Spotlights Pak as a Failing Client State

The Needle's Eye



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On September 18, a young racehorse won a scorching victory at the Sha Tin racecourse in Hong Kong. After loitering the entire race, the horse rocketed through the final 400 metres in 21.44 seconds, the fastest time in 7,000 races. He made his rags-to-riches owner Kerm Din famous.

The name of the three-year-old gelding was Pakistan Star. It was the only good thing that happened to anything with 'Pakistan' attached to it that Sunday, just about when four terrorists attacked an Indian Army camp at Uri, near the Line of Control in Kashmir, killing 19 soldiers.

Since Uri, and especially since September 29 when India announced its 'surgical strikes' across the LoC, we have drowned in war talk. Every few weeks we have a new definition of sedition and disloyalty. From FOKs

(friends of Kanhaiya) we moved to anybody who did not shout 'Bharat Mata ki Jai', and now to be labelled a peacenik is to wear a scarlet letter. The level of abuse and hysteria and the demands for evidentiary video of the Indian raids reminded me about the movie 'Wag the Dog' on how to concoct a war: If you haven't seen it yet, now is the time.

Let's step back and look at the very porous LoC. In 1998, a few months after India and Pakistan detonated their nuclear devices, I travelled to Nambla, just 4.5 km from the LoC near Uri, to talk to villagers who were coping with incessant Pakistani bombardment. I wrote that the LoC meanders across lush hills and walnut and pear groves and across the Jhelum. The LoC is porous in both directions.

"Gaping holes, roofs turned into colanders by shrapnel, and blackened craters dotting the fields testify to the ferocity of the Pakistani gunners," I reported from Nambla. "It is a game of roulette in which one never knows which shell will land close enough to kill or maim."

This is not the first time India has crossed the ceasefire line to attack terrorist lairs in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and it will not be the last. The traffic is nearly always one-way, into Kashmir. Every year, in the weeks before snow blocks the mountain pass-

es, infiltration from Pakistan rises sharply. Just three days after the Indian raid, authorities said six terrorists had attacked a Border Security Force camp and an Army post on the banks of the Jhelum in Baramulla. One paramilitary soldier died; the attackers escaped. It was nearly business as usual in the Kashmir Valley.

What has changed? After 12 weeks of unrest, about 90 people have died, thousands are injured, including about 3,500 security personnel, and hundreds have been detained under the Public Safety Act, which allows for imprisonment for up to six months without trial. Everybody is exhausted. The violence has died down. The chief minister has been in New Delhi to beg tourists to come back.

What has not changed is that Pakistan looks even more like a failing state. The Modi government's diplomatic muscle-flexing has helped. It outflanked Nawaz Sharif at the UN, and the cancellation of the SAARC summit has underlined Islamabad's isolation in South Asia. But it was PM Modi's outing of the Balochistan situation in his Independence Day speech that set the cat among the Pakistani pigeons.

To put things in perspective, Balochistan is Pakistan's biggest province; it comprises 40% of land area but only 7% of the population. It is mineral-rich and borders Iran and

Afghanistan. Several Baloch groups have been waging sporadic rebellions since 1948, when Pakistan annexed the southwestern region in the post-Partition chaos. Brahmdagh Bugti, the head of the rebel Baloch Republican Party and currently hiding out in Switzerland, is said to be seeking asylum in India. It is not certain that will happen.

Modi said Balochs, as well as people from Gilgit and PoK had written to

him thanking him for his support. Now that was masterful, coming as it did seven years after the BJP tore into former PM Manmohan Singh for issuing a joint declaration with then Pakistan PM Yousaf Raza Gilani that seemed to tacitly acknowledge an Indian interest in Balochistan. The BJP's Yashwant Sinha said all the waters of the seven seas could not wash away the shame of Manmohan Singh's appeasement.

At bottom, it is all about economic empire-building. Modi signed a major accord with Iran and Afghanistan last May to develop the Chabahar port in Iran's southeast. Although Chabahar is meant to take advantage of the Zaranj-Delaram road that India built in Afghanistan and that could connect Iran to key Afghan cities as well as give India valuable land access to

Central Asia, progress has been slow. Chabahar is only 100 km from the Pakistani port of Gwadar in Balochistan that China is developing and Gwadar is key to the \$52-b China Pakistan Economic Corridor that will give China access to the Arabian Sea. Beijing is building 2,000 km of road and rail infrastructure. Gwadar will also handle gas from Iran.

India sees the CPEC, which will connect Gwadar to China's westernmost city of Kashgar, as a major strategic threat because it cuts through Gilgit-Baltistan and PoK. Alarmed by the unrest in Balochistan, China has diverted the CPEC through Pakistan's Punjab. But the CPEC will cement Pakistan, whose economy is struggling, as a client state of China's.

In the Great Game, however, the Baloch unrest suits none of the players. Baloch irredentism, an Indian diplomat told me, is the last thing desired by either Iran, which is home to a Baloch diaspora in its restive Sistan-Balochestan region, or by Afghanistan which also has a Baloch minority.

None of this takes away from the horrific violence perpetrated by terrorists in Balochistan an Pakistan's wild west. Some examples:

- **Sept 16** - 25 killed and 30 injured in a suicide bombing at a mosque in Payee Khan, a village in Mohmand

Agency that is part of the lawless Federally Administered Tribal Areas bordering Afghanistan. The attack was claimed by Jamaat-ur-Ahrar, a breakaway faction of the Pakistani Taliban.

- **Sept 2** - Two bombs kill at least 12 and wound 52 outside a court complex in Mardan, Peshawar, hours after militants killed two people in a Christian neighbourhood in the same region. Both attacks claimed by Jamaat-ur-Ahrar.

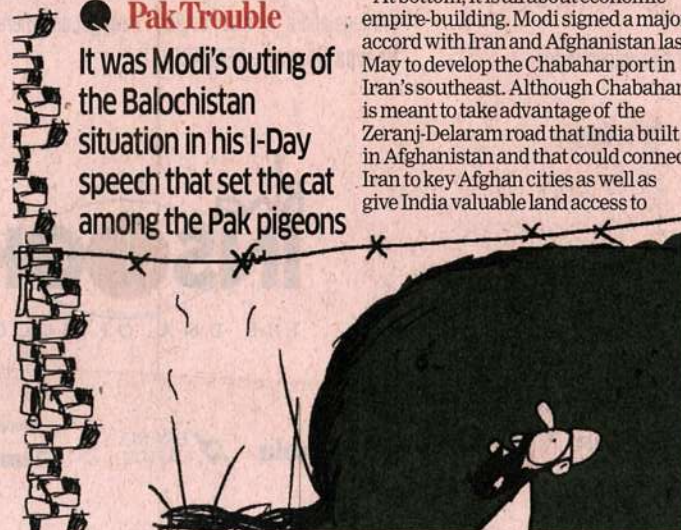
- **Aug 8** - At least 74 people, mostly lawyers, die in a suicide attack at the Civil Hospital in Quetta where they had gathered to mourn the head of the Balochistan Bar Association who had been killed by militants. The attack is claimed by both Jamaat-ur-Ahrar and the Islamic State.

- **Jan 20** - 22 killed in attack by four terrorists at Bacha Khan University in Charsadda, Peshawar. Pakistani military says the attack was masterminded by Taliban leader Umar Mansoor, based across the border in Afghanistan. Mansoor is also held responsible for the December 2014 massacre of 134 schoolchildren in Peshawar.

Pakistanis may not be able to bet on horse races, but they can wager on one thing: their country is in serious trouble.

Pak Trouble

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ANIRBAN BORA