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Is There Light at the End of the Baloch Tunnel? Part One: Balochistan and Pakistan

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Associate Paper

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Is There Light at the End of the Baloch Tunnel? Part One: Balochistan and Pakistan

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Key Points

- The Baloch people live largely forgotten in a resource rich, strategic territory next to Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf and in the middle of Iran, Central Asia and the Indian Sub-continent.
- Among countries with large Baloch populations, Pakistan is most reliant upon the ports and resources of its insurgent Baloch province.
- Pakistan is relying on demographic engineering, harsh crackdowns, Chinese investments, and religious extremists to tackle the divided, yet persistent, Baloch insurgency that is secular in character.
- Given the structure of the Pakistani state and the division of the Baloch people across three countries, a standalone secession of Balochistan *à la* Bangladesh seems infeasible. It could only secede either when the union ceases to be beneficial for Punjab, Pakistan's core province, or when Sindh, the swing province in Pakistan, loses faith in the idea of Pakistan.

Summary

The Baloch¹ people live next to the Afghan war zone and the Persian Gulf and in the middle of Iran, Central Asia and the Indian Sub-continent, yet they manage to capture the world's

¹ "Baloch" refers to speakers of both the Balochi and Brahui languages. Balochi, like Pashto, belongs to the [Iranian](#) branch of the Indo-European family, while Brahui is a Dravidian language. These two linguistic groups have in the past, however, fused into one ethnic group that is known as Baloch.

attention only occasionally. Last year, they briefly came into the limelight after the [Indian Government](#) drew attention to human rights violations in Pakistan's Balochistan province and a few Baloch leaders sought [political asylum](#) and support for setting up a [government-in-exile](#). These developments raised expectations about India's ability to facilitate the secession of Balochistan à la Bangladesh/East Pakistan. It was an optimistic view that relied on context-independent comparisons between the Balochistan of 2016 and East Pakistan of 1971 and confounded the desirability of Baloch independence with its feasibility. The Baloch people have to be viewed as embedded within post-colonial Pakistan and the wider region, including Iran and Afghanistan.

This first part of the paper explores the location of the Baloch territories and the circumstances of the Baloch people, together with the internal structure of the Pakistani state as crucial determinants of the success or failure of the Baloch movement for independence. In Part Two, the international perspectives on, and likely responses to, any Baloch moves towards independence are assessed, including, importantly, the implications for India of deeper involvement in the Baloch cause. In both parts, the comparisons that are often drawn with the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state are critically examined.

Analysis

A Divided People²

The British Raj divided the Baloch people across Pakistan (Balochistan), Iran (Sistan and Baluchestan) and Afghanistan (Nimruz and adjoining provinces) (See Map 1, below). In each country, the Baloch people have been corralled with other communities within gerrymandered provinces (Map 2, below), which are among the least-developed areas of the respective countries.³

Incidentally, Punjabi and Sindhi, the two main languages of Pakistan, belong to the [Indo-Aryan](#) branch of the Indo-European family.

² Demographic statistics provided in the following discussion are sourced from official publications of the respective governments. The reliability and usefulness of official statistics are moot for a number of reasons. First, Pakistan has not conducted a census after [1998](#) and even that census was held after a gap of seventeen years. [Afghanistan](#) has never had a proper census. Second, the international boundary is not yet settled and forced migration has disturbed the distribution of populations. There is a large Pashtun and Hazara refugee population in Balochistan, while Baloch people have been displaced to Afghanistan and Iran. This partly explains Baloch [opposition to](#) Pakistan's forthcoming population census, the first after 1998. At the same time, Iranian Baloch have also taken refuge in Balochistan and even in Sindh. Unlike the Pashtun and Hazara refugees, we have less information about the magnitude of intra- and inter-national displacement of the Baloch people. Third, Iranian and Pakistani censuses provide very little of the ethno-linguistic information needed to piece together a better picture of their Baloch populations. Fourth, provincial averages for, say, literacy and unemployment do not convey a clear picture of Baloch deprivation because the Baloch are corralled with relatively advanced communities in multi-ethnic jurisdictions. Fifth, Baloch rights activists allege that the governments have manipulated the figures.

³ In both [Iran](#) and [Pakistan](#), the Baloch provinces have reported the lowest literacy and urbanisation rates. Additionally, Pakistan's Balochistan has also reported the highest [unemployment](#), [poverty](#) and [maternal mortality](#) rates, twice those of other provinces.

Map 1: Baloch Territories in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan



Source: Paul Titus (1998), 'Honor the Baloch, Buy the Pushtun,' *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 32, № 3, p. 659 (the darkly shaded area depicts the Baloch territories).

[Balochistan](#) hosts 4.96 per cent of Pakistan's population, but makes up 43.61 per cent of its area.⁴ While the share of [Balochi-speakers](#) in Pakistan's population is 3.57 per cent, the share of people of Baloch ethnic origin is much larger as the ethnically Baloch population of Punjab and Sindh speak local languages. The share of Balochi-speakers within Balochistan is between 55 and 60 per cent, which implies that at least 15 per cent of the speakers of the Balochi language live outside Balochistan. It will not be unreasonable to assume that as much as half of Pakistan's population of Baloch ethnic origin lives in other provinces of Pakistan.

Map 2: Baloch-Majority Provinces in Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan



Source: Wikipedia

In neighbouring Iran, [Sistan and Baluchestan](#), which is the largest province of the country, accounts for 3.37 and 11.16 per cent of its population and area, respectively. The province was earlier known as Baluchestan and then Baluchestan and Sistan before it was renamed to

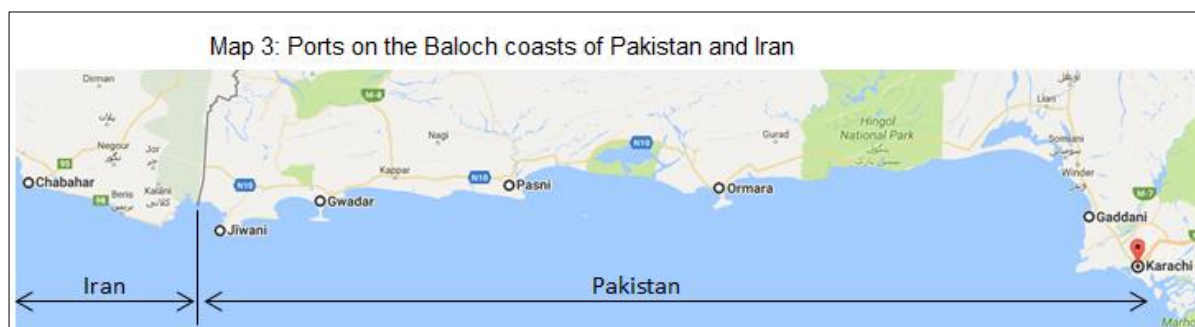
⁴ Balochistan's [population share](#) in Pakistan's population registered a sharp increase in the 1970s. Until 1972, its share was close to three-and-a-half per cent.

Sistan and Baluchestan. The speakers of Sistani, a dialect of Persian, are a minority in the province. A Baloch community is also found in Hormozgan, where Bandar Abbas port is located, and Kerman.⁵

In Afghanistan, the Baloch are an inconspicuous minority among the multitude of ethnic groups. Nimruz accounts for 6.5 per cent of Afghanistan's [area](#) and 0.61 per cent [population](#). In addition, the Baloch people are also found in Farah and to the south of the Helmand River in Helmand and Kandahar. The southern stretch of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border cuts through the Baloch territory. Also, there are Baloch communities in West Asia, particularly in Oman. Some [estimates](#) suggest that the Baloch people account for at least 15 per cent of Oman's population. The Sultan of Muscat and Oman ruled over Gwadar until 1958. Oman still [recruits](#) soldiers from a few districts of Balochistan's Makran region.

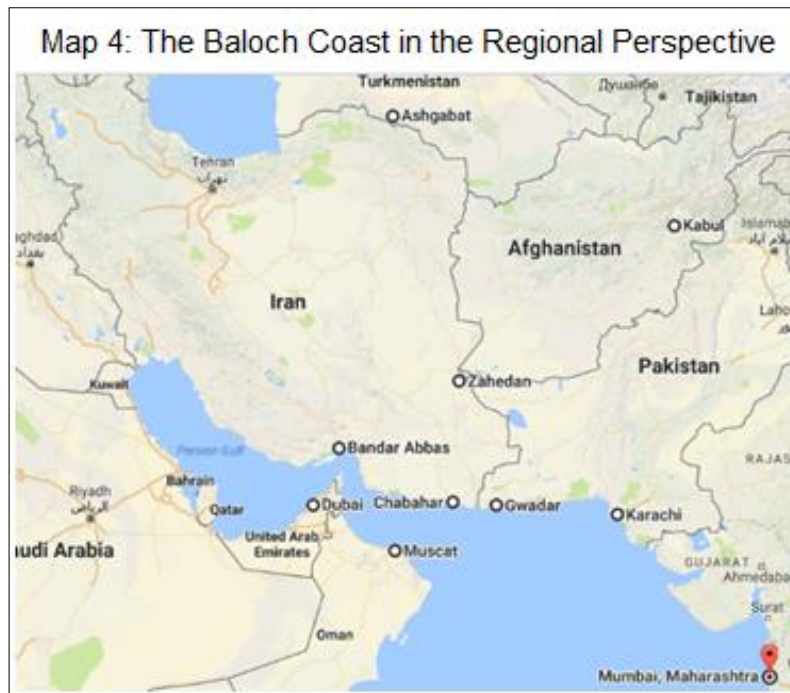
A Resource Rich, Strategic Territory

More than two-thirds of Pakistan's coast, four of its key ports (Gwadar, Ormara, Jiواني and Pasni in Gwadar district), and its largest ship-breaking yard (Gadani in Lasbela district) are located in Balochistan (Map 3). [Mineral-rich Balochistan](#) is a crucial site of Chinese investments, hosts Pakistan's nuclear and missile test sites and provides naval depth vis-à-vis India. Balochistan is strategically located vis-à-vis both the north-south (China-Pakistan) and east-west (Iran-Pakistan-India) corridors that could potentially transform the economy of Pakistan, as well as South Asia more broadly. Pakistan's dependence upon Baloch mineral resources and ports is likely to grow over the years as the agricultural sector, hit by the effects of climate change, struggles to support a growing population. Moreover, sparsely populated Balochistan, with a population density that is less than one-tenth of the rest of Pakistan, could potentially accommodate people from other over-populated provinces.



In Iran, half of the coast to the east of Hormuz lies in Sistan and Baluchestan and Chabahar port is also located in this province. Chabahar can help Iran to emerge as an outlet for mineral exports from the Central Asian republics, which are currently dependent upon Russia and China, and from Afghanistan, which is dependent upon Pakistan (Map 4, next page).

⁵ The present distribution of Baloch people suggests that, in the not-so-distant past, they must have populated most of the coast between Hormuz and Karachi.



Chabahar will also help to decongest the port of Bandar Abbas and enable Iran to handle heavier cargoes without transshipment to the UAE, while maintaining Iran's international trade in the event of a conflict in the Persian Gulf. The shortest route between Chabahar and Afghanistan passes through Nimruz. India has already built roads in Nimruz and is developing Chabahar port, while China is developing the neighbouring Gwadar port.

Among countries with large Baloch populations, Pakistan is most reliant upon its Baloch province's resources and ports. Pakistan also suffers the oldest and most intense Baloch insurgency. The sentiment of the seven-decades-old Baloch insurgency⁶ is best captured by the following observation of the [late Akbar Bugti](#):⁷ '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.' Pakistan is betting on demographic engineering (encouraging non-Baloch settlers), harsh crackdowns on insurgency, [Chinese investments](#)⁸ and religious extremist groups⁹ to deal

⁶ The insurgency dates back to 1948, when sections of Baloch people contested the annexation of their territory that had, until then, effectively functioned as an independent state. Since then, they have repeatedly rebelled with major eruptions being in 1958, 1962, 1973 and 2006.

⁷ [Akbar Bugti](#) (1927-2006) was the *Tumandar* (hereditary chief), of the Bugtis, a major Baloch tribe of Pakistan. The important Sui gas field is located in the territory of the Bugti tribe. Akbar Bugti served as Balochistan's Governor (15 February to 31 December 1973) and Chief Minister (5 February 1989 to 7 August 1990). He was killed along with a number of his family members and followers on 26 August 2006 by the Pakistani armed forces. It bears emphasising that, initially, the Bugti tribe, along with others based in the Baloch territory to the east of the Bolan Pass, was relatively open to integration with Pakistan.

⁸ Over the past few years, Pakistan has allowed China to take a significant stake in its economy, with the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) occupying the centre stage. While the share of Balochistan in CPEC projects is a meagre [0.5 per cent](#), the province is also attracting Chinese investments in the mining sector that are not accounted under the Corridor.

⁹ The Pakistan Government is giving a free hand to Deobandi and other Sunni extremist organisations in Balochistan and is exacerbating sectarian tensions by tolerating attacks on Shias, Sufis and other

with the challenge posed by the divided, yet persistent, Baloch insurgency that is secular in character.

Politically-restive Balochistan and Pashtun areas make up about two-thirds of Pakistan's territory. While the insurgency's territorial footprint and Pakistan's economic and strategic dependence upon disturbed territories is unprecedented, this does not guarantee a repeat of 1971. The feasibility of Baloch secession has to be assessed vis-à-vis Balochistan's position within Pakistan, the Pakistani state's present structure, and the regional situation.

Balochistan in Pakistan

Unlike most other parts of Pakistan, Balochistan is not landlocked, a feature it shares with the erstwhile East Pakistan (Sindh is also not landlocked but, unlike Balochistan, it depends on Punjab for water.) Balochistan resembles East Pakistan in another respect: it is a net exporter of resources to other provinces. The similarities between Balochistan and East Pakistan end there, though. Unlike East Pakistanis, the Baloch people have been able to some extent to access economic opportunities in other provinces.

Ethno-linguistically homogenous and densely-populated East Pakistan was home to about half of Pakistan's population. It was surrounded by India on three sides, except for a very short border with Myanmar, and was united under one movement. Distance between the two parts of Pakistan ensured that there were not many East Pakistanis in West Pakistan or vice-versa. In contrast, sparsely-populated Balochistan does not border India and is internally divided along tribal and regional lines. More often than not, the relationship of a Baloch tribe with the Pakistani establishment and insurgent camp depends upon how its competing tribes are aligned. The growth of an educated middle class seems to have reduced the salience of tribal divisions, though.

The Afghan War and demographic engineering have drawn Pashtuns, Hazaras and Punjabis into Balochistan and eroded the numerical dominance of the Baloch people. On the other hand, economic stagnation and military oppression have pushed many Baloch into other provinces (particularly Sindh), and to Afghanistan, Iran and the Middle East.

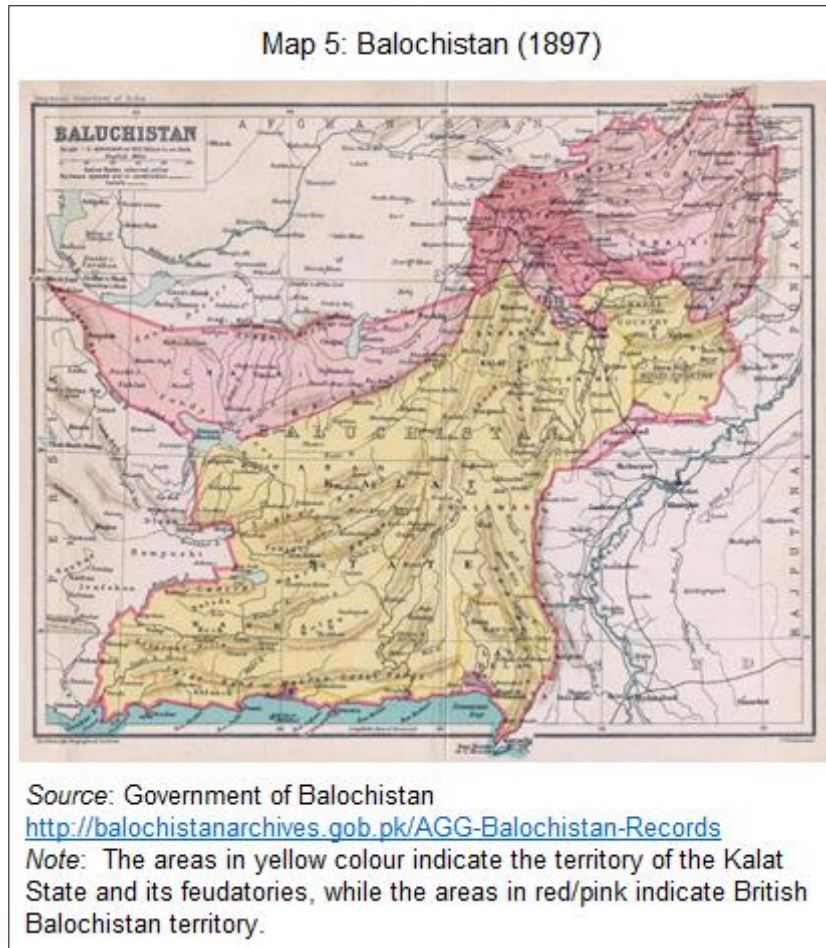
The Baloch presence in other provinces has a longer history, though. The Baloch tribes have been settling in the territory around the Indus River that constitutes the present Punjab and Sindh provinces for at least five centuries. In fact, some settled as far as the plains of northern India. Asif Ali Zardari and Farooq Leghari, former Pakistani presidents, belonged to Baloch tribes of Sindh and Punjab, respectively. Baloch of [Sindh](#) and [Punjab](#), mostly from the families of chieftains, have also served as governors, chief ministers, and High Court judges (and, in some cases, subsequently Supreme Court judges) of those provinces. In contrast, the Baloch of Balochistan have been massively underrepresented in civilian employment, military positions and political offices.

In the late nineteenth century, the British compounded the historical process when they transferred sizeable Baloch territories to the adjoining provinces of British India, including

heterodox groups. It has also allowed the Taliban leadership to operate from Balochistan's capital, Quetta, a heavily militarised town near the Afghan border.

the present Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (Dera Ismail Khan), Punjab (Dera Ghazi Khan), and Sindh (Jacobabad);¹⁰ the character of these areas has changed due to demographic pressure from larger neighbouring communities. As a result, the Baloch people are spread across the provinces of Pakistan, yet constitute only a slender majority within Balochistan itself.¹¹

The British also contributed to the international division of the Baloch people by demarcating the borders along the Persian (Goldsmid Line) and Afghan (Durand Line) frontiers to secure their crown jewel, India, from potential Russian incursions. Parts of the Baloch territory were assigned to Afghanistan and Iran. In the process, a sizeable territory, which has a large native Pashtun population, was also appended to the north of the Baloch areas of Pakistan (Map 5).



So, unlike Bangladesh, an independent Balochistan would leave behind a substantial Baloch population in the remaining provinces of Pakistan and include a large Pashtun (and Punjabi) population, even if the Durand Line were erased. The exchange of territories will, however,

¹⁰ The Baloch experience is not unique, however. A similar story can be told about the Pashtuns. The restive Pashtuns of Pakistan have similar complaints against the colonial and post-colonial states insofar as they were divided across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan and Federally Administered Areas (FATA) and also between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Pashtuns, however, are better represented in government jobs (particularly in the army) and political offices. This can be explained by a combination of factors, including their substantial population share (about one-fifth of Pakistan's population is of Pashtun origin), and closer historical ties with the plains dwellers of Punjab.

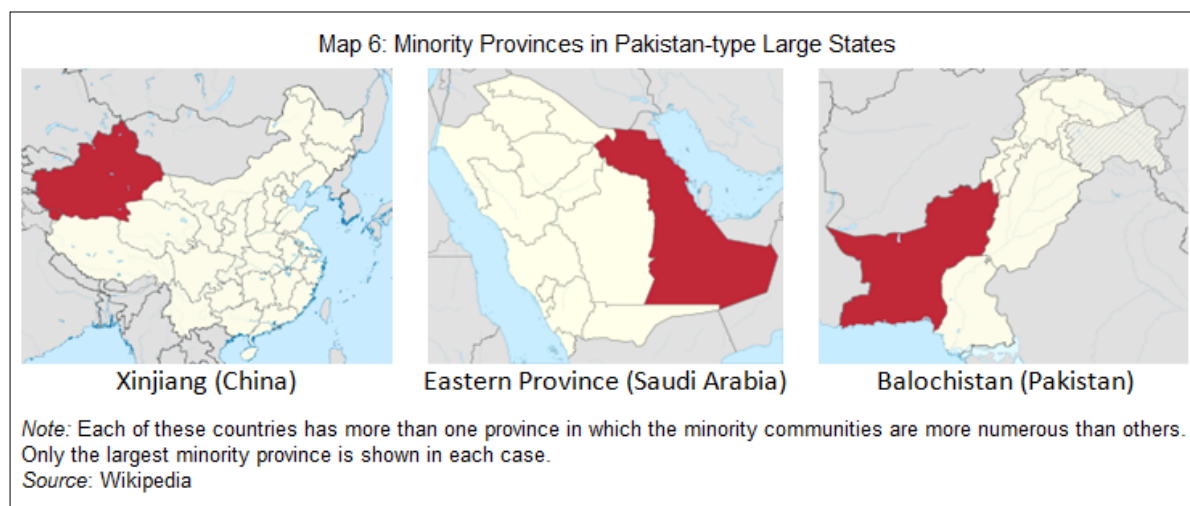
¹¹ This information is based on the 1998 Census. It is not clear if the Baloch people continue to enjoy majority status in their province. The present state of Balochistan consists of the former Kalat state and its feudatories (Kharan, Lasbela and Makran) and the Gwadar port and its surrounding areas, that were held by the Sultan of Muscat and Oman until 1958, and former British territories including entirely Pashtun areas in the north, entirely Baloch areas in the west and east, and mixed population areas to the north and east of Quetta.

not remain a bilateral matter between Balochistan and Afghanistan. Even if Pakistan does not lay claim over Pashtun districts in the event of the Balochistan's independence, it will be quickly drawn into the mess. Longstanding irredentist rhetoric notwithstanding, it is not clear if the Pashtuns of Balochistan want to merge with Afghanistan or remain within Pakistan, or, if Afghanistan (particularly, the non-Pashtun communities of that country) is ready to accept them. The non-Pashtuns of Afghanistan would be wary of any boundary realignments that might add to the numerical strength of the Pashtuns, who are already the single largest group, way ahead of the Tajiks, the second-largest group. Likewise, it is not clear if the Baloch of Afghanistan would like to join an independent Balochistan due to uncertainty over their ability to adjust in a new political set-up. Moreover, reworking the Durand Line could potentially trigger similar demands along the Goldsmit (Iran-Pakistan boundary) and McMahon (part of the Iran-Afghanistan boundary) Lines. In short, changing any boundary will quickly engage the whole region. The world community is wary of messy secessions that necessitate the division of provinces and the exchange of populations and territories involving multiple countries.

In short, unlike East Pakistan, Balochistan is not only internally divided but is also enmeshed in Pakistan's political economy and does not have a support base in its immediate neighbourhood. As a result, the internal structure of the Pakistani state will be a crucial determinant of the success or failure of the Baloch movement for independence.

Structure of the Pakistani State

There are two types of large countries irrespective of whether we use area or population as the measure. In Pakistan-type large countries, which include Saudi Arabia, China and Russia, sparsely populated ethno-linguistic/religious minority provinces account for a very large share of the country's overall area (Map 6). Minority provinces, however, account for a small share of overall area in India-type large countries, a category which includes Bangladesh.



Pakistan is divided into four provinces (Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan), Islamabad, and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. In addition, Pakistan occupies Gilgit-Baltistan and parts of Kashmir and Jammu. Pakistan differs from Saudi

Arabia, China and Russia as one of its provinces alone accounts for about half of the country's population. In this regard it resembles the USSR, in which one republic accounted for more than half of the population. The balance of power between these ethno-linguistic provinces is crucial to Pakistan's integrity. [Akhtar Hassan Khan](#), Commissioner for the 1981 Census of Pakistan, noted that 'no government was prepared to face census results which sharply changed inter-provincial ratios or rural-urban ratios, as these would have resulted in altering the seats allocated to different provinces in the National Assembly as well as the allocation of development funds allocated on the basis of population.' Unsurprisingly, Pakistan has not conducted (or been able to conduct), a [census](#) after 1998.

Pakistan is held together by an imploding Islam, an imported language ([Urdu](#), that is, the mother tongue of a minority), the [perceived existential threat](#) posed by India, and the world community's fear of the balkanisation of a nuclear Pakistan. The USSR, which was structurally akin to Pakistan insofar as it had one province that clearly dominated the Union, collapsed after its core province, Russia, found the cost of maintaining the Union unbearable. Likewise, a sufficient condition for Pakistan's disintegration is that the union ceases to be beneficial for Punjab, but, as discussed below, the latter will continue to need Pakistan.

Punjab is the only province that suffered dismemberment in 1947 and that has its main population centres close to the Indian border. It accounts for about one-quarter of Pakistan's area and more than half of its population. Union with the other provinces provides Punjab with strategic depth vis-à-vis India and access to the outer world. Punjab would be landlocked without Sindh and Balochistan. Punjab depends on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and Jammu (PoK), and Gilgit-Baltistan for water and on Sindh and Balochistan for [minerals](#), [coal](#) and [gas](#). Without Sindh, it would be deprived of access to Karachi, Pakistan's commercial and international air and maritime transport hub. Similarly, without Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab would find it difficult to control the strategically important territory of Gilgit-Baltistan that borders China and is indispensable to any plan to "liberate" Kashmir. Finally, the union as a whole is useful for Punjab insofar as it enjoys the lion's share of government jobs across provinces.

Pakistan's military assets are distributed across the provinces to evade India. This expands the reach of the Punjabi-dominated military. In short, Punjab is the only province that has an *abiding* material, strategic and emotional interest in Pakistan's integrity and also the means to protect its interests militarily.

Given Balochistan's small population and Punjab's abiding interest and military capability to contest secession, the Baloch people can become independent only if their insurgent and tribal factions unite and Sindh loses faith in the idea of Pakistan. Sindh is a swing state because it is the largest minority province and the only province other than Punjab whose inclusion in Pakistan is not legally/historically questionable. Equally important, it has close relations with both Punjab and Balochistan. A substantial fraction of Sindh's population and its élite is of Baloch ethnic origin.

The position of Sindh within the union is complicated, though. Dependence on the Indus River, occasional access to power in Islamabad through the Pakistan Peoples Party, and

dependence upon the Punjabi-dominated army to control Karachi tie semi-arid Sindh to Punjab. Mohajir- (Muslim refugees from northern India) and, increasingly, Pashtun-dominated [Karachi](#) accounts for one-fifth of Pakistan's GDP, more than half of its tax revenue and is the most important hub for international air and maritime transport. The Punjabi-dominated Pakistani state can easily exploit the fears of Mohajirs and Pashtuns vis-à-vis an independent or even more autonomous Sindh. On the other hand, Sindh is likely to find autonomy, or even independence, sans Karachi unattractive; the Baloch people face a related dilemma vis-à-vis Quetta, the capital of Balochistan that has a significant Pashtun, Hazara and Punjabi population. In short, the barriers to successful external intervention in Sindh are higher. Moreover, Balochistan and Sindh face a chicken-and-egg situation. Balochistan cannot seriously bid for independence unless Sindh reconsiders its future within the union, but Sindh would not be forced to think in that regard until Balochistan reaches the precipice.

Part Two of this paper will assess the international perspectives on, and likely responses to, any Baloch moves towards independence including, importantly, the implications for India of deeper involvement in the Baloch cause.

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