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## PAKISTAN'S "ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM" The Mysterious Case of Balochistan

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Situated between Iran, Afghanistan and the Arabian sea, Balochistan is the largest of Pakistan's four provinces. Yet, paradoxically, it is also the poorest - despite being generously endowed with natural resources that provide vast rangeland for cattle and other livestock. Its southern border makes up about two-thirds of the national coastline, giving access to a large pool of fishery resources. It has large deposits of coal, lead, copper, gold and other minerals. The province is ideally situated for trade with Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia and the Persian Gulf countries. Over the last four decades, the province supplied cheap natural gas to Pakistan's economic centres, and indeed, its Sui gas fields can be said to have fuelled Pakistan's 20<sup>th</sup> century industrialization.

However, the province continues to experience the highest levels of poverty in the country (on par with the NWFP, the province with traditionally the highest measured poverty levels in Pakistan); the lowest social indicators for education, literacy, health, water and sanitation for 2006-07;<sup>1</sup> and the weakest governance. Its geographical remoteness and difficult terrain has placed it

at the margins of both economic and social development, and has resulted in low population density and high out-migration. Balochistan culture is primarily tribal, deeply patriarchal and conservative; and its society is dominated by tribal chieftains who form its ruling elite. It has a reputation as a "backward" region, far from the economic or political hub, riddled by tribal disputes which sporadically erupt (and frequently interrupt the gas supply, when pipelines are blown up to score points by warring tribesmen).

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Semi-neglected in the federal government's distribution of national revenue, and seen as a backwater, at first glance Balochistan is not an obvious candidate for the role of key player in the next phase of the Afghan conflict and in the survival of Pakistan as a nation. However, the current situation in January 2010, at the beginning of the second decade of the new millennium, indicates otherwise.

1. World Bank, Balochistan Economic Report 2009

## Balochistan's Profound Historical Background

The area of what is now Balochistan was the site of the earliest known farming settlements in the Indus Valley Civilisation (6500 BCE), originally populated by Dravidian tribes, then invaded by Aryans from Iran. The Balochs began to appear in the area from North West Iran – (which still has a substantial Baloch population today), and there are various claims that they have Arab ancestry, having arrived in Iran from Syria at some point during the first millennium. In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the province fell under the Persian Empire and the Abbasid Caliphate's empire – (the third of the Islamic Caliphates, created in 750 CE). The 15<sup>th</sup> century brought the first independent king of Balochistan (Mir Chakar Khan Rind), though the area later became dominated by empires based in Iran, Afghanistan and subsequently the Mughal Empire based in India. Under the British "Raj" in South Asia, Balochistan had four princely states, one of which (Kalat) concluded a treaty in 1876 with the British to come under its suzerainty. Later, the Emir of Afghanistan ceded a number of

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districts in present-day Balochistan, to the British, after the Second Afghan War (1878-80). A few years later, some areas of Balochistan were declared British territory. In 1893, Sir Mortimer Durrand negotiated an agreement with the Emir of Afghanistan to fix the Durrand Line (from Chitral to Balochistan) as the boundary between the Afghan and British areas of influence. The history of Balochistan is thus intrinsically linked with the political vagaries of the "Great Game" (a term which originally referred to the 19<sup>th</sup> century political rivalry between the British and the Russians in Central Asia) as played out between Afghanistan, India, Pakistan and today's western powers, including Britain and the US.

During British colonial rule, Balochistan suffered two devastating earthquakes, in 1935, which destroyed the provincial capital, Quetta, and another in 1945. Following the Independence of the Indian Subcontinent from British rule in 1947, Balochistan's development has proceeded much more slowly than that of other parts of Pakistan. This, together with economic marginalisation has led to conflict, including over Baloch nationalism and separatism. Today, however, according to the World Bank's recent (2009) Balochistan Economic Report, it stands to gain from provincial and federal reforms in the areas of energy and trade. To overcome its development challenges, the organisation recommends that the province should pursue an agenda around generating growth, delivering services, and (generating finances for) development. Generating growth will require, among other things, leveraging Balochistan's geographical location and natural resource advantages. The province's institutional capacity and the financial sustainability of the machinery of provincial government are two critical variables in this regard. Corruption levels are reportedly high. Above all, perhaps the most critical key constraints to private sector and other forms of

growth in Balochistan are continued conflict, insecurity, and the uncertain rule of law. Added to these inherently destabilizing elements is the position of Balochistan in relation to Pakistan's current national political crisis, and linked to this, to the conflict in Afghanistan, as will be discussed below.

## Post-Independence Trouble

Since 1948 ethnic Balochs have demanded greater autonomy and more control over revenues from their gas fields. The Pakistan government has put down four insurgencies there. The fifth and current rebellion started in 2003, is led by the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), and several uprisings by Baloch nationalists have been suppressed by the Pakistan army. The Baloch nationalist movement's demands have ranged from cultural, economic and political rights, to political autonomy, to outright secession (from Pakistan, Iran or Afghanistan). The movement is secular, and influenced by Marxist ideology.

Recent analysis of the federal government's latest economic package for Balochistan by the renowned human rights campaigner and distinguished journalist I.A Rehman<sup>2</sup> considers that, overall, it frames issues well, and indicates the direction

of reform. It covers the determination of the quantum of provincial autonomy, restructuring of the National Finance Commission awards (financial allocations to each province from the federal budget, based on population numbers), release of political prisoners –reportedly, since an army operation started in late 2000, to date, nearly nine thousand people are missing from all over Balochistan including 150 women), dialogue with all major stakeholders, involuntary disappearances, construction of cantonments, role of "federal" (read intelligence) agencies, royalty formulas, mega projects, share in ownership of oil and gas companies, probe into the killing of Nawab Akbar Bugti and some other Baloch leaders, quota in Higher Education Council (HEC) scholarships and additional jobs for the people of Balochistan.

This roster of issues of governance roughly corresponds to the almost entire range of the Baloch leaders' grievances. However, the package committee has been unduly cautious in suggesting the substance of reform. For instance, it has glossed over the all-important question of constitutional reform by referring to the provisions of the constitution that are being examined by the parliamentary committee on constitutional reforms. In Rehman's view, the government could have earned the goodwill it sorely needs by announcing implementation of at least some of the reform ideas. For instance, he suggests that it could have implemented the proposal that 'the federal government, in collaboration with the provincial government, should immediately release all political workers, except those charged with heinous crimes'. The plea for the release of all persons against

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2. Dawn Newspaper December 3 2009

whom no charges have been made could have been conceded before parliament met in a joint session. The commission to probe the killing of Nawab Akbar Bugti could have been set up straight away.

Unfortunately, the episode of the package has again exposed Islamabad's inability to grasp the seriousness of the Balochistan crisis. It does not seem to realise that vague proposals for removing Balochistan's grievances accumulated over six long decades can make no impression on its "Young Turks" nor can they attract elements that are prepared to entrust their future to the Pakistan federation – which needs to have something tangible in its hands with which to negotiate. Fruitful dialogue with the estranged Baloch leaders, some of whom have chosen to stay abroad, is unlikely. What may work better in Rehman's view, is the creation of a climate in which it may be possible to promote an intra-Balochistan dialogue – that is, a dialogue between the province's political parties and ministers/parliamentarians on one side and the radicalized sections of the province's population on the other.

The federal government increases its problems by refusing to admit that it does not have the power needed to recover and release all the missing persons or to limit the activities of 'federal agencies' (the ISI?) or to give an unambiguous pledge on the construction of new cantonments (permanent military quarters of stations). What is key, is to remember that politically, Balochistan is divided into two camps – those who have set their sights on independence and those who are as yet prepared to find accommodation within the federation of Pakistan. The former are unlikely to be won over by any reform package. That leaves the government with only one option – to enable the latter group to engage the general public and convince it that suppression of the Balochistan people is history.

However, the Balochistan National Front (BNF) a combination of pro-Independent Baloch parties, rejects the package, issuing a statement (and a call for a general strike on the day of the visit of the Prime Minister Mr Gilani to the province) saying that "Pakistani rulers have been deceiving the Baloch people from last 62 years in the name of negotiations, announcement of so called development projects and packages."<sup>3</sup>

### Exclusion from Access to Political Capital and Power

In Balochistan, in urban areas the locus of political power lies with government officials, whereas in rural areas it is the *sardar/nawab* (tribal) or religious leaders who exercise authority. The dominating, authoritative voice of the *sardar* or *nawab* results in authoritarian decision-making structures where the people do not have a voice. This can be both good and bad – good, in that the *sardars/nawabs* possess power and honour through the tribal

structure and system, but bad in that their power can be, and often is, used to keep people unaware and ignorant, and for oppressing people throughout their lifetime. There is a high correlation between large landholdings and power, though power is also derived from traditional cultural and social structures. *Sardars* have traditionally owned lands, but also mines, and have held public office, all of which are considered more lucrative forms of assets than land in a context of drought. Both caste and tribal patron-client relations influence who gets access to the benefits of development schemes.

Levels of socio-economic development in Balochistan have therefore been – and remain – abysmal, which is why a World Bank study issued in mid-November 2009 saying that it has the weakest long-term growth performance of all provinces in the country was hardly surprising. The sad part is that Balochistan's geological potential has just not been exploited for its people. One reason why there are casualties in a tsunami is that "the waves move faster than the humans can run." But is it still

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possible to run away from the crises that are brewing in Balochistan? ...and indeed in Sindh, which is also getting poorer and poorer, as was noted in the same month by the World Bank – a powder-keg that ignites sporadically: for instance, the December 2009 suicide bombing of a Shi'a Muharram procession on Ashura, the day of mourning commemorating the deaths of Hassan and Hussain, the Prophet Muhammad's grandsons?

### Is Balochistan Pakistan's poor or rich "stepsister"?

The province has not yet been able to adequately exploit its geological potential. Balochistan has more than half of the national prospective geology for minerals, yet it contributes just over one-fifth to national mining GDP and leads only in the production of coal. In 1994-95, Balochistan produced 355 billion cubic feet (bcf) of gas and accounted for nearly 56 per cent of Pakistan's total output. A decade later, the province produced 336bcf and contributed only 25 per cent to national output. As Balochistan's gas supplies are exhausting, Pakistan is also running out of usable energy, compounding its citizens' hardships in cold winters, where many rely on natural gas for both cooking and heating, and where country-wide "load shedding" (electricity cuts) brought in during the winter of 2007-08 to address energy shortages, continues to create misery (and a surge in the purchase of generators for the fortunate few) in summer and winter for up to 10h a day, even in the capital city of Islamabad.

Water is the single most important constraint to developing rural Balochistan. While some 87 per cent of Pakistan's total available water is found in the river system of the Indus basin, only

3. See [www.balochwarna.com](http://www.balochwarna.com)

five per cent of Balochistan's landmass is connected to the Indus basin and the remaining 95 per cent rely on non-perennial sources. Since 97 per cent of the province's water use is by agriculture, any strategy to deal with the water shortage has to put this sector centre stage.

Insufficient exploration has resulted in few new discoveries. Less than one-third of the reserves are left in Sui, and no more than 45 per cent of the known gas reserves in the province overall. Uch (in the Punjab) is the only field with large remaining reserves, but the gas is of lower quality than in Sui. In calorific equivalent basis, the Uch reserves are just under half of what remains in Sui. According to the report, the reserve depletion has already an impact on production. Volumes have declined since 2001 by about 3.5 per cent annually, and Balochistan's share in national production dropped from 56 per cent in 1995 to 25 per cent only in 2005. At current rates of production, the province's present reserves will be almost depleted within the next 15 years.

However, many consider that the development of Gwadar's deep water port (in the south of Balochistan, adjacent to Karachi), has the potential to be the saviour of the province. Gwadar is located near the entrance of the Straits of Hormuz in the Per-

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sian Gulf, which holds close to three-fifth of the world's crude oil reserves and almost half of the world's proven gas reserves. But the debate remains wide open as to who will actually benefit – the Chinese, who have invested heavily in the port's development, the land speculators, or the people of Balochistan? If Pakistan's trade volumes continue to grow at a healthy rate over the next 10 to 15 years, the capacity constraints at Karachi and Qasim ports in Sindh, will generate substantial business for Gwadar. The development of Gwadar port, Makran coastline and mining and petroleum sectors and facilitation of cross-border trade in energy and other goods will provide a powerful impetus for stronger linkages between Balochistan's economy to that of the rest of the country. The World Bank advises the government of Pakistan to focus on activities around Balochistan's economic assets, such as minerals, gas, fisheries and coastal development, trade with Afghanistan and Iran, livestock and crops.<sup>4</sup>

Even if this were to happen, politically Balochistan is a powder keg which suffers from exclusion and powerlessness (a "stepsister" in Pakistani press parlance). The assassination of a prominent social activist Nisar Baloch in November

2009, with no apparent effort on the part of the law enforcement agencies to protect citizens whose lives are threatened and to apprehend the culprits, the killing by the army of the colorful and prominent tribal leader Nawab Akbar Bugti in August 2006 (a commission of enquiry into his death still remains to be constituted) following the armed struggle in Balochistan in 2004 are just two of the recurrent injustices faced by the population of the province.

### Acknowledging the Elephant in the Room

The situation in which Balochistan now finds itself - a combination of lack of financial resources despite possessing considerable natural ones; political powerlessness; economic poverty; under-development; and a geopolitically-significant location - is a combustible one. Added to this mixture are the destabilising effects of US policy on Afghanistan and Pakistan; the attitudes of the Pakistani people, government, the ISI (the Inter-Services Intelligence Agency - the secret service) and the military; and the positions adopted by both India and Iran, as will be shown in the following sections. If geopolitical realities should force the US to take unilateral action in Balochistan, as discussed further below, Pakistan's future will be rendered even more precarious.

In the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, most people are of two minds – they would like the Americans to leave soon, but the ruling elites in particular don't want to lose their front line status in the war on terrorism which brings in vast amounts of American aid,

and don't want to be dumped as they were in 1989 when the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> Whilst Zardari has said all the things Washington wants to hear (and is thus seen by many – including parts of the army – as unacceptably "soft" on the US), there is as yet no agreement from the Pakistani military to go after the Afghan Taliban strongholds in Balochistan (and NWFP). In the assessment of the distinguished author of "Taliban", Ahmed Rashid, the military are unlikely to act unless there is a parallel movement by the Americans to defuse Indo-Pakistani tensions over Kashmir, and unless India shows more willingness to reduce its forces on Pakistan's eastern border.

Much is said in the press about the Pakistani army facing threats from Punjab-based and Taliban militants. However, what is interesting is what has **not** been said. The "elephant in the room" in this case is Balochistan, with its strong historical ties with both Iran and Afghanistan, and where as described earlier, elements amongst the Balochis have fought a civil insurgency for decades against the hegemony of ruling state.

The ever-elusive Mullah Omar is said (by US General David

4. World Bank, op. cit.

5. See article by Ahmed Rashid, *International Herald Tribune*, Dec 12-13 2009

Petraeus amongst others) to spend most of his time in Pakistan.<sup>6</sup> Unsurprisingly, the visit of US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton to Pakistan in the autumn of 2009 focused on how the country has dealt with militants and religious extremists. Specifically, the US Secretary of State has contended that the leadership of Al Qaeda was in Pakistan. She said: “I find it hard to believe that nobody in your government knows where they are and couldn’t get them if they really wanted to”.

Nonetheless, there has been no substantive action taken against the Taliban leadership in Balochistan (the same – deliberate? – “mistake” made in the 80s when there was a failure to act against the seven major mujahideen groups based in Pakistan). Some say that the war in Afghanistan is in fact organized and run out of Balochistan, with all significant meetings of the Taliban taking place there, and many of the group’s senior leaders being based in the province. Not only do Taliban fighters in Afghanistan get operational and strategic guidance from across the border, but also supplies and technical components for weapons. Seth Jones in a recent article<sup>7</sup> further notes that many Taliban have also moved their families to Balochistan, indicative of a long stay.

Indeed, in late 2009, US General Petraeus told National Public Radio in the USA, that the Afghan Taliban were located “in various locations in Pakistan... typically in Balochistan. It’s called the Quetta ‘shura’ a 15-man war council based in or around the Baloch capital and led by Mullah Muhammad Omar, his deputy Mullah Baradar and his military commander Abdullah Zakir). “I’m not sure that folks will say [the Taliban] are right inside the city [Quetta] or precisely [where] – it will move around and so forth. But... [it] has historically been centred on that city,” Petraeus said. “And when the Taliban were ejected, defeated along with Al Qaeda and other extremist elements that were located in Afghanistan prior to 9/11... they dispersed in these very rugged areas of eastern Afghanistan, the tribal areas of Pakistan and then down in the Balochistan as well”.<sup>8</sup>

In the Pakistani press, commentator Ghazi Salahuddin notes the threat of what he refers to as “rumblings that would justify a tsunami warning – that of disarray”, and in particular, insufficient attention paid to what he calls “the underground eruptions that are taking place in Balochistan”.<sup>9</sup> As the Taliban insurgency creeps across Afghanistan, NATO generals complain that the fighting is being directed from Balochistan.<sup>10</sup> In a bleak report to President Barack Obama last September, the US commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, said that the Quetta shura was dictating the pace of the war. It posed the greatest threat to western troops, and was already planning for the 2010 fighting season, according to McChrystal. “Afghanistan’s insurgency is clearly supported from Pakistan. The Quetta shura conducts a formal campaign review each winter, after which Mullah Omar announces his guidance and intent for the following year.” Yet efforts to break up the Taliban’s Pakistan sanctuary have so far been

concentrated to the east, in Waziristan. Here, CIA-led drone strikes hit Al Qaeda and Taliban hideouts, while the Pakistani army battles with the *Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan* – a militant faction that strikes Pakistani cities with suicide bombs.

**Pakistan, Afghanistan, the “Great Game” and the Role of the “Hidden Hand”**

As described previously, Balochistan is Pakistan’s largest, poorest, least-inhabited province, an expanse of rocky deserts and desolate villages, ruled by tribal law. But to

outside eyes, “Balochistan’s barren sands” glisten with hidden value in the contemporary round of the Great Game. To “the black-turbaned clerics commanding the Afghan Taliban, the desolate province offers something else: a welcoming rear base.” According to Mr Walsh’s words “Mining companies covet its natural riches (which are thought to possibly include oil). Criminals see easy pickings along the world’s heroin superhighway and a network of cross-border smuggling trails. Foreign governments consider its location: wedged between Iran and Afghanistan, and covering two-fifths of Pakistan, Balochistan occupies what has been termed ‘highly strategic real estate’”.<sup>11</sup>



Produced by: CIDOB. Source: United Nations Cartographic Section.

6. Daily Times Dec 5 2009  
 7. International Herald Tribune, December 5-6 2009 p 6  
 8. Interview with NPR, reported in the Pakistan Daily Times December 5, 2009.

9. Ghazi Salahuddin in Dawn Newspaper November 15 2009  
 10. Declan Walsh, The Guardian Newspaper December 21 2009  
 11. Report by Declan Walsh, The Guardian Newspaper December 21 2009

Across the border in Afghanistan, it will likely be in Kandahar city – a mere 200 km from Quetta – that Obama’s new strategy of phased troop withdrawal combined with an interim troop surge will be tested. Kandahar’s its close geographical proximity to Quetta, Balochistan’s provincial capital, and its longstanding cross-border tribal ties (reportedly the former governor of the province, Gul Agha Sherzai, “a very effective fighter against the Taliban” prior to the Karzai regime being installed, had a brother living and working in Quetta) mean that whilst NATO may well be fretting about Kandahar being insidiously taken over by the Taliban<sup>12</sup> – apparently very few people are fretting sufficiently about Balochistan.

If this situation is well known enough to be acknowledged by two US generals, and repeatedly reported in the domestic as well as international press, why is it that both Pakistan and the US have consistently failed to target the Taliban in Balochistan systematically?

Time is running out, and public opinion in the West (including America) is turning against the war in Afghanistan. Many in Pakistan are just waiting for what is perceived there as a panacea for all the country’s ills – the departure of the US from Afghanistan. However, that could just be the end of the beginning.....

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### The Other Player in the Game: India

After the division of the Indian Subcontinent by Partition in 1947, India closed itself off, eliminated its feudal system and developed its economy. In contrast, Pakistan kept a corrosive system of feudal privilege and went through decades of political upheaval, and India still looms large in Pakistan’s collective imagination, quite frequently playing the role of the “hidden hand” – the media and political euphemism for interference in the country’s affairs, which usually is taken to refer to India specifically. Therefore, it is understandable that Pakistan’s security concerns focus primarily on its eastern border with India, where the problem of Kashmir continues to fester, and less on its western border with Afghanistan, as a smaller, weaker country that Pakistan has traditionally been able to influence.

This is the security imbalance that Americans now insist that Pakistan must change, and it is not irrational that Pakistanis are resisting. Pakistan and India have fought four wars since Partition: (three major in 1947, 1965, 1971 and one minor in 1999, all over Kashmir, other than the 1971 war which was over East Pakistan). India maintains a large force along its border, has also poured money into Afghanistan and is reported to have a large physical presence of Indian nationals in the country.

Is the Pakistan government and ISI’s strategy to hold Balochistan “in reserve” to be used as a counterweight to Indian interests in Afghanistan “when the time is ripe”? India is known to be strongly linked to the Northern Alliance. The British army is said to complain that the Taliban are supplied out of Balochistan, but diplomats are loth to voice criticism that could jeopardize counter-terrorism cooperation with Pakistan.

This is however a dangerous game, and in the meantime, beleaguered Balochistan continues in its role of “the elephant in the room” – a known but not acknowledged ticking clock, in a countdown to potential disaster.

### The Tough Neighbour - Iran

Selig Harrison, the former Washington Post bureau chief in South Asia,<sup>13</sup> in a report titled *Pakistan: the State of the Union*, which studies ethnic tensions in the country, considers that

US policy and army action in Swat could lead Pakistan to an ethnic crisis that would be difficult to control. One of his recommendations for action is earmarking aid for Balochistan (and for the adjacent province of Sindh).<sup>14</sup> He also makes the related point that the biggest threat to the ruling ayatollahs and generals in multi-ethnic Iran does not come from the embat-

tled democratic opposition movement struggling to reform the Islamic Republic. It comes from increasingly aggressive separatist groups in Kurdish, Baloch, Azeri and Arab ethnic minority regions that collectively make up some 44 % of Persian-dominated Iran’s population. Iranian Balochistan has a loose border with Pakistani (and Afghan) Balochistan, and the area was a single administrative entity under the British empire.

In Harrison’s view, working together, the (Iranian) democratic reform movement and the ethnic insurgents could seriously undermine the republic. But the reform movement, like most of the clerical, military and business establishment, is dominated by an entrenched Persian elite and has so far refused to support minority demands. What the minorities want in Iran – strikingly similar to what the Pakistani Baloch are struggling

12. See *The Economist*, “The Beginning or the End”, December 5 2009

13. Currently director of the Asia program at the Center for International Policy.  
14. [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/28/opi...8iht-edharrison.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/28/opi...8iht-edharrison.html?_r=1)

for – is greatly increased economic development spending in the non-Persian regions, a bigger share of the profits from oil and other natural resources in their areas, the unfettered use of non-Persian languages in education and politics and freedom from religious persecution. Some minority leaders believe these goals can be achieved through regional autonomy under the existing Constitution, but most of them want to reconstitute Iran as a loose confederation or to declare independence –again, a resonance with Baloch nationalist demands in Pakistan.

### The Elephant and the Hobson's Choice<sup>15</sup>

Analysts say that those who really rule Pakistan are playing a complicated strategic game –fighting the *bad* Taliban in Waziristan, but secretly allying with the *good* militants attacking Afghanistan. “I can imagine the Pakistanis symbolically allowing the Americans to take out a few guys from the Quetta shura,” said Rifaat Hussain, a defence studies professor at Islamabad’s Quaid-i-Azam University.<sup>16</sup> “But I can’t see them entirely turning the tables. Pakistan’s main concern is not to burn its boats with all shades of the Taliban.” The reason, of course, is as usual, the “Hidden Hand”. Fearing Indian influence in Afghanistan, Pakistani military planners see the Taliban as their ticket to influence once western forces depart, seeing them as their allies in the post-US scenario, and as a strategic asset to be used when power is up for grabs in Afghanistan.

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American officials are becoming aware of Pakistani concerns. “Increasing Indian influence in Afghanistan,” according to General McChrystal, “is likely to exacerbate regional tensions and encourage Pakistani countermeasures.”<sup>17</sup> Should drones start hitting Balochistan, there will be a severe backlash – something apparently recognized by the Americans. But, Walsh’s US source added, there is a growing recognition that “if we are serious about going after targets in Balochistan, particularly Quetta, then we’ll have to do it ourselves”. And, he added, should military casualties continue

to rise across the border, drones could be sent in regardless of what Pakistan’s government says.

“We’ve already established that precedent with the Pakistanis,” he said. “We told them: ‘We want you to do this. But if you won’t, we will. So get out of our way.’”

Pakistan thus now faces a “Hobson’s Choice” over whether or not to act on the presence of the Taliban in Balochistan.

It can either – despite the misgivings about burning its own boats – go along with what seems to be the inevitable upcoming US action in the province, risking its own internal strategy, further deepening the unpopularity of “pro-US” elements in the government and the army and potentially further dividing the country, and destabilizing its democratic government.

Or, it can go on pretending that the “elephant” is not there, hoping that it will just go away and that the problem will resolve itself if it is ignored. As discussed earlier, maintenance of front line status for Pakistan brings its rulers large amounts of US financial assistance – but, at a price. The question is, will Pakistan’s rulers continue to be willing to pay that price, in the face of increasingly negative public opinion over support for US strategy in the region? And what will happen if the US just go it alone, ignoring the views of some elements of their allies? Time will tell. If action is indeed taken in Balochistan, there will be testing times ahead for Pakistan’s rulers, and for the province itself.

However, simply assuming that the distribution of federal resources, and increased investment in economic, social and institutional development will yield positive results sufficiently quickly, and in a sufficient critical mass, that will address the real needs of the people of Balochistan, that will quiet the underground rumblings of Baloch nationalism and that

will dampen receptivity to the presence of the Taliban there, is likely to be a case of too little, too late.

Elephant, watch out – and take cover.

15. A “Hobson’s” choice is a “free” choice in which only one option is offered, and one may refuse to take that option. The choice is therefore between taking the option or not – “take it or leave it.” The phrase is said to originate from Thomas Hobson (1544–1631), a livery stable owner in Cambridge, England. To rotate the use of his horses he offered customers the choice of either taking the horse in the stall nearest the door or taking none at all.

16. Report by Declan Walsh December 21 2009 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/...chistan-strategy-pakistan>

17. Walsh, op cit