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India Plays the Balochistan Card - With China

By David Brewster
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Last week Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid down the gauntlet to Pakistan, sending a clear indication that India may be prepared to destabilise Pakistan's fractious Balochistan province in response to perceived threats. While this represents a very significant change in India's public posture towards Pakistan, it is important to understand the message was also directed at China.

In a carefully worded national Independence Day speech at Delhi's Red Fort on 15 August, Modi sent his greetings to the 'people of Balochistan, Gilgit [and] Pakistan-occupied Kashmir'. These words caused outrage in Islamabad where they were viewed as an infringement on Pakistani sovereignty, 'confirming' their long-standing claims that India had been supporting insurgencies in Balochistan and elsewhere in Pakistan.

Playing the Balochistan card represents a big shift for India. Initially, Modi's election in 2014 prompted expectations that Delhi would take a much less conciliatory line with Pakistan. But, to the surprise of some, beginning with the invitation of Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to Modi's inauguration, the Modi government appeared relatively open to exploring approaches to reconciliation.

But Delhi seems to have now concluded its efforts have generated few returns. Sharif's Pakistan Independence Day speech on 14 August, which he dedicated to the freedom of Kashmir, may have been the last straw for the Modi government, ending hopes that a detente could be reached with Pakistan's civilian government.

India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval has long argued that India should play the Balochistan card in response to Pakistan-inspired terror threats. In one memorable speech, only days before his formal appointment, Doval addresses the camera (and presumably a Pakistani audience) saying: 'You do one more Mumbai [attack], you lose Balochistan.' Doval argued that Pakistan's terror strategy against India could only be deterred by India using an asymmetric strategy of threatening to support Pakistan separatists. India's move is a risky one, potentially inflaming tensions and undermining India's high(er) moral ground.

But this development is more than just a new episode in India-Pakistan relations. Modi's message was directed almost as much to Beijing as to Islamabad. Modi's speech came just one day after Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi returned to Beijing from Delhi. Wang's visit to Delhi followed a period of growing irritation in India-China relations. India has been unusually forthright in rejecting China's claims in the South China Sea, while China recently played a pivotal role in vetoing India's application to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group, the group of countries that controls trade in nuclear technology. India sees joining the NSG as an important step towards changing its status from a de facto to a de jure nuclear weapons state. China's move to block India's application may not have been surprising, but it was regarded by Delhi as further proof, if any was needed, of China's desire to keep India down.

According to Indian analysts, Wang visited Delhi with an apparent offer that China might soften its position on the NSG if India relaxed its stance on freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. It remains to be seen whether Modi will take that bait.

But there is another important and growing dynamic in the India-China relationship that is directly related to Baluchistan. China is pushing forward with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which will involve the development of roads, railways, pipelines and other infrastructure along a corridor stretching from China's western Xinjiang province to the Chinese-built port of Gwadar on the Indian Ocean. According to its proponents, the CPEC, with a claimed price tag of some \$46 billion, has the potential to economically transform Pakistan. The project also has the potential to transform China's regional role by creating a direct transport link between western China and the Indian Ocean.

The CPEC will likely involve many thousands of Chinese engineers and workers and the development of billions of dollars of Chinese-owned infrastructure over thousands of kilometres.

While the final route of the corridor is yet to be determined, elements of the project will traverse the territories of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK), Gilgit-Baltistan and Balochistan; some of the most dangerous real estate on earth.

Pakistan has sought to address the security risks in the project by forming a special army corps of 12,000 personnel devoted to protecting the CPEC project. Overall, China seems surprisingly sanguine about the considerable security risks of the venture and its reliance on the Pakistan Army. Indeed Chinese views on the role of roads and bridges in curing religious extremism seem redolent of another era. Chinese Premier, Li Keqiang, reportedly characterised the Chinese projects as a means of 'weaning the populace from fundamentalism.'

Delhi is still formulating its views on CPEC. Indian Foreign Secretary, S. Jaishankar called China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) project: 'A [Chinese] national initiative devised with national interest, it is not incumbent on others to buy it.' If the CPEC succeeds as advertised, it could be a boon for Pakistan's economic development. On balance, this would likely be a good thing for India to the extent it stabilises Pakistan. But CPEC also has the potential to enmesh China much more closely in Pakistan, making it a key player in the country's internal political and security affairs. According to recent reports, Beijing is already pushing for the Pakistan Army to be given a leading role in CPEC, over civilian authorities. There is a real possibility that China could become a major target of Pakistani extremists and separatists. But one aspect that absolutely infuriates Delhi is China's plans to build infrastructure in POK and Gilgit, territory claimed by India. India has repeatedly made its strong objections about this clear to China, without any apparent response. China seems intent on moving ahead with the OBOR initiative in these and other highly sensitive areas with little if any regard for India's views.

Modi's greeting to the people of Pakistan's restive territories was a reminder to both Islamabad and Beijing that India has some powerful cards to play.