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Pakistan waging dirty war on its Balochs

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While Baloch people want azadi from atrocities committed by Pakistani authorities, the federal Government has unleashed State and non-State forces against them

Today, Balochistan is bleeding. Pakistan is fighting its “other war”. Its military and security establishments are continuously at war either with the Baloch nationalists or with the separatists. It is an unending war since 1947 when the Pakistan Army forcefully annexed the province to the country. Pakistan’s Baloch puzzle has its own negative repercussions for the country which is fighting for its survival since its independence. Balochistan needs immediate attention. To be honest, the people of Balochistan have suffered both at the hands of the Federal and provincial Governments as well as their own dear chieftains and sardars for decades. At times the Baloch sub-nationalists try to thwart developmental efforts made by the Federal Government because these do not serve their agenda. But then who will take the responsibility of the ordinary Baloch people? It would be really sad if the province remains a permanent fault line, as it seems today; its people will have to suffer both for the mistakes of the Pakistani establishment and for their own leadership.

Why has Pakistan so far ignored the welfare and development of Balochistan? Being the largest province of the country and having rich reservoir of natural resources, Pakistan should have taken the task of developing the province even long back. The Baloch nationalists blame the Federal Government for its sheer negligence of their mineral rich province and the Pakistani establishment holds the insurgents responsible for its underdevelopment. But how long will this blame game continue? Who is suffering at the end? When the entire world is moving beyond its borders, there are only a few places like Afghanistan, Pakistan, North Korea, and a host of African nations which are still stuck with their war-mongering spree and purposefully thwart the welfare of their own people. To be precise, these countries are simply ruining their own futures and making generations handicap for the greed of a few individuals or a section of elite who always wish to cling on to power forever. When it comes to Balochistan, it is Pakistan’s Army which is controlling its affairs and designing the future strategies for containing the Baloch separatists. Sadly, the Army is viewing it as a simple law and order problem. Thus, the conflict in the province is dragging on and on. Simultaneously, the local leaders must think about their own people who are just sandwiched in the fight between the Pakistan Army and the nationalists. It is no one else, only the ordinary civilians who are caught in the quagmire and laying their lives with a hope of a better living. But when will they be allowed to lead a life of their own choice?

Most of the insurgents demand autonomy from Islamabad. They also put forward their continued desire to have a larger share of the oil and gas revenue generated locally which is purely a genuine demand. However, some other insurgent outfits like that of the Baloch Liberation Front and the Balochistan Liberation Army prefer to have a separate land outside the ambit of Pakistan. Beyond this, a section of some ambitious Balochs want to form a greater political union of all their people living across Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan. It seems that such an idea of forming a larger union of all the Baloch people will definitely work at cross purposes and it will rather complicate the entire issue. If we closely observe the fate of the Kurds, who are spread across three countries — Iraq, Syria and Turkey — and having the power of one of the best of the ethnic fighting forces, they too have failed to achieve their dream of a united homeland for decades now. Today, many of them will prefer to have their own autonomous regions in the respective countries and this will serve them much better than fighting for an independent nation. They are already having an autonomous Government in Iraq. From this perspective, the Baloch

nationalists and insurgents who are mostly in exile, unlike the powerful Kurd leaders, may always consider demanding an autonomous Government than gunning for an independent land comprising their people. It is not a viable solution to have a larger political union which may finally end up having internal squabbles among different shades of leaders and will lead to nothing but more bloodshed only. Hence they must think about a pragmatic solution.

Fighting an endless war with the Pakistani establishment may not yield them much as it has been observed so far. As Balochistan is strategically located on the southwestern part of Pakistan bordering Iran, it can no more be allowed to go out of the country any time soon. Unless the Baloch leaders gather the support of vital nations like that of America, Russia, China and Saudi Arabia, its fight with Pakistan will continue. In all likelihood, Baloch leaders may not have that diplomatic reach to convince a larger group of international players who could well influence the course of action in Pakistan's power corridors any time soon. Balochistan may remain problematic, as there is rare hope that Pakistan will leave the province one fine day.

Balochistan is rich not only in oil and gas reserves, but also the region boasts gold, coal, copper, iron ore, titanium and uranium deposits. Therefore, Pakistan cannot afford to lose the province which may hurt its national economy sooner or later. Besides, the province has a six hundred mile coastline that provides easy access to the Persian Gulf, the world's one of the most significant oil shipping centres. As energy experts say Pakistan has more than 25.1 trillion cubic feet gas reserves, and around 19 trillion cubic feet are scattered across Balochistan. Thus the Pakistan Government had taken strategic steps to develop the deep sea port of Gwadar in collaboration with China. Pakistan's aim is to develop the Gwadar port and transform it into a key oil shipping hub between the nearby Strait of Hormuz and the far east of Asia. But today, the Baloch leaders feel that the Chinese and the Pakistanis are the partners in the crimes against its people. To them, the Gwadar project is not aimed at bring about the welfare of locals, rather China has conspired with Pakistan to have a base in this part of the world. It is all because of China's strategic interests, the country is quietly moving closer to this region while keeping the economic agenda in the forefront. China being an old ally of Pakistan, its engagement in Gwadar is seen by many with suspicion and this is definitely a very calculated move by the middle kingdom.

Balochistan plays a potential role in the much controversial multi-billion dollar Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline. If the 2,775 kilometre-long pipeline ever becomes a reality, the province can become one of the economic powerhouses of the nation. With the lifting of sanctions over Iran by the US and the European Union, the prospect of completing the gas pipeline by 2018 is giving another signal to the economic rejuvenation of Balochistan. Even this pipeline had witnessed a lot of power play by the US and Saudi Arabia as both the countries were not in favour of giving an outlet of economic prosperity to Iran. But with the changing dynamics of nuclear politics, Iran President Hassan Rouhani with the full blessings of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei signed a historic deal with the US, which formally helped the country come out of years of isolation and stagnation. This will go a long way in completing the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline and finally how this boosts the economic fortunes of Baloch people need to be seen in the coming days.

The most disheartening saga of the Baloch people's struggle is very much connected to the rising number of "enforced disappearances" which is wreaking havoc across the province. Pakistani

military and its intelligence agencies are playing a significant role in killing, maiming and forced leaving of the Baloch political workers for years now. As the Voice for Baloch Missing Persons (VBMP) claims that the number of missing people recorded by the Federal Government is far lesser than what it exactly stands at. It is more like a genocide committed by the Pakistani State against the citizens of the province. The prominent human rights organisations like the Human Rights Watch and the Amnesty International time and again highlight the atrocities on the Baloch people. It's Pakistan's dirty war. Its security forces are engaging in an abusive free for all in Balochistan as Baloch nationalists and suspected militants continuously disappear and in many cases they are simply executed.

Another tactic which Pakistan normally follows is to directly blame India, Iran and Afghanistan for fomenting unrest in Balochistan. On its own, Islamabad repeatedly deny accusations of atrocities occurring in the province and simply label these as propaganda by the separatists who are allegedly fueled by India's Intelligence agencies. Recently when Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi openly talked about Balochistan in his Independence Day speech and asked Pakistan a few days ago to come up with responsibility for the plight of the Baloch people, it has created ripples across the border. But at the same time, Pakistan must stop funding and sheltering the Islamists against India for sure before asking the latter not to intervene in its internal affairs.

The continued slaughtering of the minority Hazaras, Shias and currently the Punjabis, either by the Taliban or by the extreme sectarian groups like the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), is further complicating the situation in Balochistan. Indeed the outfits like the LeJ are committed to eliminating the minorities like the Hazaras from the face of the country and the Pakistani State is a mute spectator. Some in Pakistan believe that Hazaras are acting as spies for Iran and perhaps conspiring to engineer a Shia revolution in overwhelmingly Sunni Pakistan. It is an old sectarian battle which has no end unless both their religious leaders come for an agreement soon. Though the Army is hardening its battle against the Baloch separatists and trying to bring back the people to its favour, the Pakistan Government has been unable to address the core problems faced by the locals.

Seemingly ceaseless violence scarring Balochistan may gradually engulf and spread to the rest of Pakistan as the country is at war with its own people since its independence. Baloch people live in utter poverty and despair. They need breathing space. The Baloch nationalists must think about their people and come to the negotiating table as early as possible. Else the people, for whom they are fighting for, will only be abandoning the hope on them, one fine day.