

US Congress to debate motion on “self-determination” for Pakistani Balochistan

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Pakistan’s political establishment has reacted furiously to a proposed US House of Representatives’ resolution advocating “self-determination” for Balochistan, Pakistan’s poorest province and the scene of an increasingly deadly nationalist-separatist insurgency. Introduced last week, the non-binding resolution is sponsored by three Republicans, Dana Rohrabacher, Louie Gohmert, and Steve King.

Last Saturday, Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani condemned the resolution, describing it as an infringement of Pakistani sovereignty. The resolution has also been condemned by Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar. “Such acts of foolhardy global-vigilantism could only aggravate Pakistan’s already estranged ties with US. It would distance the two allies even further,” she said on Tuesday.

In response to the uproar, the American embassy in Islamabad issued a statement insisting that the US respects Pakistan’s sovereignty and does not support independence for Balochistan.

The Obama administration has moved quickly to distance itself from the resolution, for it is anxious for Pakistan to resume full and open support for the US occupation of Afghanistan, in defiance of the wishes of the vast majority of the Pakistani people. However, the resolution is clearly meant and has been taken as a warning to Islamabad from sections of the US political and security establishment: if Pakistan does not fall into line with US imperialism’s geopolitical agenda, it could find itself the target of yet another politically-motivated human rights outcry.

Balochistan is a sparsely populated province strategically located between Iran and Afghanistan. It is Pakistan’s poorest and least developed province. While it contains Pakistan’s richest natural resource deposits, the majority of Balochi workers and toilers lack basic services like clean drinking water, health care, and education. The appalling

social conditions in the province have long fuelled resentment among Balochi workers and stirred up nationalist sentiment among the Balochi elite.

Congressman Rohrabacher, who leads the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, has a history of supporting aggressive anti-Pakistan measures in the US House of Representatives. “They’ve constantly been a two-faced enemy of the United States,” he said in an interview with the *New York Times* on Tuesday.

Rohrabacher introduced the resolution just a week after convening a congressional hearing on Balochistan that included “expert” testimony on human rights abuses committed by Pakistani authorities and a call from Ralph Peters, a retired US military officer, for the US to break ties with Pakistan and support the creation of an independent Balochistan.

The Congressional resolution is a cynical piece of imperialist *realpolitik*. It feigns support for the Balochi people, declaring that they “have the right to self-determination and to their own sovereign country” and “should be afforded the opportunity to choose their own status.” In making the case for a sovereign Baloch state, the resolution’s sponsors—all enthusiasts for the US’s wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—note that Balochi people are subject to violence and extrajudicial killings at the hands of Pakistan’s security services: “The political and ethnic discrimination they suffer is tragic and made more so because America is financing and selling arms to their oppressors in Islamabad.”

The Pakistani bourgeoisie and its US-backed military have a long and bloody history of repression in Balochistan. Thousands of Balochs were killed during a four-year long rebellion between 1973 and 1977. The latest insurgency has been raging in the province since 2004. Pakistan’s military and intelligence agencies have responded with savage repression, using methods initially aimed at Taliban-aligned

militants in the northwest tribal areas: kidnappings, torture and extrajudicial killings.

While the grievances of the Baloch people are real and deep-rooted, the various nationalist groups in no way represent their interests. Rather they represent privileged groups, including the semi-feudal *sardars*, whose principal grievance is that the Pakistani state denies them a “just share” of natural gas and mineral revenue. Groups such as the Baloch Republican Party (BRP) and Baloch National Party (BNP) have repeatedly carried out ethnically-motivated killings, targeting Punjabi and Pashtun workers, and increasingly turn to US imperialism for support.

Congressman Rohrabacher’s resolution received strong backing from Baloch nationalists. “This is a very big achievement,” said Suleman Daud, an exiled Baloch tribal leader who reportedly assisted Rohrabacher in drafting the resolution. In an article published by the *Longview*, Texas *News-Journal*, on Tuesday, Gohmert boasts that he and the resolution’s two other sponsors met with Balochi nationalist leaders in Germany last month.

Fighting between Balochi separatists and Pakistan’s security forces has intensified over the past year, with increased casualties on both sides: 218 members of the paramilitary Frontier Corps were killed last year in skirmishes with the nationalist insurgents.

The bullet-riddled bodies of 231 Baloch nationalists were found by roadsides in Balochistan in 2011, according to the Centre for Research and Security Studies. Recently, several high-profile killings of Baloch politicians have sparked strikes and demonstrations throughout Balochistan. On January 31, the wife and daughter of Mir Bakhtiar Domki, a member of the Pakistan Assembly from Balochistan, were shot dead in Karachi on their way home from a wedding.

The insurgency in Balochistan was a cause of mounting concern within the Pakistani elite well before the Republican Congressmen’s introduction of their provocative resolution, with repeated warnings from the press and politicians that events in the province are spinning out of control.

Pakistani political leaders, from both the PPP-led coalition government and the opposition, have taken turns in condemning the resolution, while, the media has accused Rohrabacher of seeking to “balkanize” Pakistan.

The Congressional resolution has been taken as a warning by the Pakistani ruling class that Washington may cynically

exploit human rights abuses committed in Balochistan to bully Islamabad into compliance with Washington’s agenda in Pakistan and Afghanistan—or even to use the issue as a pretext to intervene in the strategically important province.

Washington has long resisted Pakistani pressure for the US to add Balochi nationalist groups to its terrorism list. In recent years, the CIA has developed extensive ties to Jundallah, a Sunni Islamist group fighting to separate Iran’s Baloch region.

Washington is very interested in Balochistan for its geopolitical significance. It contains the Gwadar deep-sea port, which Beijing is developing as part of its strategy to project power overseas and protect its access to Middle East energy. Washington fears that China and Pakistan could eventually develop a land route bypassing the Indian Ocean choke-points critical to US strategy to contain China.

Both the Obama administration and Pakistan’s military and civilian government are determined to mend relations, which plunged into crisis following a NATO airstrike in November that killed 24 Pakistani soldiers. And neither side wants the Balochistan issue to interfere with the larger goal of resuming cooperation in the neo-colonial Afghan war.

In another sign of improving relations, Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar meet Thursday with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on the sidelines of a conference in London—the most senior meeting between the two countries since the November airstrike.

Officials in Pakistan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs say that they expect US-Pakistan relations to be fully normalized in March. Pakistan has already softened its stance on NATO supplies to occupying forces in Afghanistan, with an air supply route back in full operation. Pakistan has also been facilitating US-Taliban talks in Qatar, according to media reports.



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