

Indian PM Modi “plays Balochistan card” against Pakistan

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In a major and highly provocative strategic shift, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has taken to denouncing Pakistan for human rights abuses in Balochistan.

This is a calculated move, aimed at inflaming relations with India’s historic rival and under conditions where tensions between South Asia’s nuclear-armed states are already near the boiling point.

Islamabad has repeatedly accused Indian intelligence of providing logistical support to the longstanding ethno-national secessionist insurgency in Balochistan. Pakistan’s impoverished south-western province is resource-rich. But its geo-strategic importance has greatly increased, because its newly-built Arabian Sea port, Gwadar, has emerged as the linchpin of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor—a rail, road and pipeline network that will link western China with the Middle East and Africa.

Modi signaled the change in Indian strategy at an August 12 “all-parties conference” on the unrest in Jammu and Kashmir, India’s only Muslim-majority state. Modi denounced Pakistan, which has occupied northern and western sections of the former British Indian Empire princely-state of Kashmir since 1947-48 and lays claim to all of Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir, for fomenting “terrorism” in the Kashmir Valley. He then declared: “Pakistan forgets that it bombs its own citizens using fighter planes. The time has come when Pakistan shall have to answer to the world for the atrocities committed by it against people in Balochistan and PoK (Pakistan occupied Kashmir).”

Throwing further fuel on the fire, Modi called on the Indian Ministry of External Affairs to “approach the people of PoK residing in different parts of world and collect information about the miserable conditions in PoK and bring them to the knowledge of the world community.”

Modi repeated this line of attack in his August 15 Independence Day address to the nation, making clear thereby that his remarks three days before were not off the cuff, but rather the launching of a strategic offensive. He boasted of having received thanks from “the people” of Baluchistan, PoK, and Gilgit-Baltistan (the northern-most part of Pakistan-held Kashmir, which Islamabad administers separately from PoK) for having spoken out against Pakistani abuses. People “settled far across,” who “I have not seen,” “have not met,” continued

Modi, show “goodwill ... towards me ... acknowledge the Prime Minister of India, they honour him, so it is an honour of my 125 crore (1.25 billion) countrymen.”

Modi’s claims of support from Pakistani-held Kashmir and Baluchistan prompted a swift, angry retort from Sajjat Aziz, Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s chief foreign policy advisor. He said, “Prime Minister Modi’s reference to Balochistan, which is an integral part of Pakistan, only proves Pakistan’s contention that India, through its main intelligence agency RAW, has been fomenting terrorism in Balochistan.”

It is not uncommon for Indian officials, including prime ministers, to speak about Pakistan-held Kashmir, which New Delhi claims is rightfully Indian territory. References to Pakistani “atrocities” in Baluchistan, however, are virtually without precedent and were immediately recognized on both sides of the border as representing a major escalation of tensions between New Delhi and Islamabad.

“Prime ministers,” said an editorial in the Chennai-based daily *Hindu*, “have often used the Independence Day speech to answer threats and provocations from Pakistan. ... Even so, Modi’s reference to Balochistan marks a first, and deliberate, shift in India’s consistent policy of refraining from commenting on the internal affairs of another country.”

India’s military-intelligence establishment was quick to endorse Modi’s sally against Pakistan. RAW Chief Vikram Sood sent out a tweet welcoming Modi’s anti-Pakistan statements as “a qualitative shift in our policy if we sustain this approach.” An unnamed intelligence officer told the *Times of India* Modi’s overt intervention in Pakistani affairs marks “a shift from being on the back foot to coming out and claiming what’s legally right.” Hinting at the activities of Indian intelligence agencies inside Pakistan, he added, “Our agencies have been following the injustices in these regions, yet diplomatically we’ve acted with restraint.”

Modi’s ostensible Indian political opponents have supported the new hardline. The Congress Party quickly disassociated itself from a statement of former Foreign Minister Salman Kurshid expressing concern. “The Congress,” declared party spokesman Randeep Surjewala, “feels the violations in Balochistan, the way democracy and democratic dissent is being stifled, India should raise it in bilateral and international

fora.”

Modi’s claim to speak on behalf of the Balochis, and the implied threat India could support the dismemberment of Pakistan, is in the first instance a response to the growing crisis his government faces in Jammu and Kashmir. The state has been convulsed by mass protests for the past six weeks—ever since Indian troops killed Burhan Muzaffar Wani, the 22-year-old commander of the Hizbul Mujahideen (HM), a pro-Pakistani, Kashmiri separatist and Islamist group.

India’s government, led by Modi’s Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party, insists the unrest in Jammu and Kashmir is solely a product of Pakistani subversion. But the continuation of mass protests in the face of brutal repression by Indian military and para-military forces that has left more than 60 people dead attests to a deep sense of alienation among Kashmir’s Muslims.

Pakistan, for its part, has sought to exploit the protests to whip up animosity against India and advance the reactionary strategic rivalry it has pursued against India since the two states were created in 1947 through the bloody communal partition of the subcontinent. Sharif dedicated his August 14 Pakistan independence speech “to the freedom of Kashmir.”

While there is an element of tit-for-tat in New Delhi choosing to counter Pakistani propaganda about India’s human rights violations in Kashmir with denunciations of Pakistani “atrocities” in Balochistan, the intensification of the Indo-Pakistani strategic rivalry is above all rooted in the US’s anti-China “Pivot to Asia.”

The US drive to harness India to its military-strategic offensive against China has overturned the tenuous balance of power in South Asia. Emboldened by the US’s elevation of India to the status of “global strategic partner,” its offers of advanced military equipment and co-development of weapons systems, and its support for New Delhi’s ambitions to become an Indian Ocean power and expand economic and strategic ties with East Asia, the Modi government has pushed aggressively against Pakistan. This has included instructing military commanders to take a more belligerent stance in exchanges of cross-border firing and vowing not to pursue peace talks until Islamabad demonstrably bows to its demands for the suppression of anti-Indian Kashmiri separatists and Islamist groups in Pakistan.

Facing the common threat of an ever-more explicit Indo-US military-strategic alliance, Pakistan and China have significantly enhanced their own ties over the past two years. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is being backed by \$46 billion in Chinese investment, is a key element in this. A huge boost to the beleaguered Pakistani economy, the CPEC also has major strategic implications for China as it would allow Beijing to partially offset the US plans to impose an economic blockade on China by seizing Indian Ocean and South China Sea chokepoints in the event of a war or war-crisis.

The Modi government has vociferously condemned the CPEC on the grounds that it would pass through “Indian territory,” that is Gilgit and other parts of Pakistan-held Kashmir. Its real concerns are the shot-in-the arm the CPEC constitutes for the economy of its arch-rival Pakistan and its role in underpinning strategic ties between Islamabad and Beijing.

It is no coincidence that the areas where New Delhi has chosen to highlight Pakistani human rights abuses, Gilgit, PoK and, above all, Balochistan, are all slated to play an important role in the CPEC.

There are real grievances in Balochistan rooted in the abuse and neglect to which the population has been subjected by the Pakistan state. During the past decade, the military has mounted a brutal counter-insurgency war against the Balochi separatists, involving carpet-bombing, illegal detentions, and summary executions.

The Balochi nationalists offer no way forward, however. They represent sections of the local bourgeois elite who hope to carve out a separate state so they can make their own deals with imperialism at the expense of the workers and toilers. Their selfish class aims find expression in their violent attacks on Pashtun workers and other non-Balochis resident in Balochistan.

The Balochi nationalists have long hoped to secure the patronage of the Indian bourgeoisie and above all US imperialism. Writing in the *Indian Express* this week the head of the Washington-based Balochistan Institute, Malik Siraj Akbar, warmly welcomed Modi’s “recognition” of the “Balochi nation.” Making clear the Balochi nationalists’ readiness to enlist in Washington’s strategic offensive against China drive, Akbar declared, “Given Balochistan’s geostrategic location and increasing Chinese involvement there, the Baloch will have no option but to search for allies in the region to protect their land and resources.”

There are some Indian press commentators who have voiced concern at the incendiary implications of Modi’s “playing of the Balochistan card.” They argue it could redound against India by weakening international support for its claim to Jammu and Kashmir, lending legitimacy to ethno-nationalist secessionist movements inside India, and further complicating New Delhi’s already explosive relationship with Pakistan. But these arguments are being drowned out by the chorus of voices from the military-intelligence establishment and corporate media that are cheering Modi on in this reckless gambit—a gambit that could quickly spiral out of control and plunge the region into a war with incalculable consequences.



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