

Chinese consulate in Pakistan attacked by Balochi separatists

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Heavily armed Balochi separatist insurgents, including at least one suicide bomber, attacked the Chinese consulate in Karachi last Friday morning. The targeting of the Chinese consulate comes amid a concerted campaign by the United States against deepening China-Pakistan strategic ties.

The three attackers reportedly died in a firefight with Pakistani security forces before entering the consulate, leaving the staff unharmed. Two policemen and two civilians waiting to enter the consulate, all Pakistani nationals, were killed as well. Weapons, explosives, food and medicine supplies recovered from the slain gunmen suggests they planned to take hostages within the consulate.

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan condemned the attack on the consulate as well as a sectarian suicide bomb blast on the same day in the northwest Pakistan. The latter attack resulted in the deaths of over 35 people, with Khan vowing to “crush the terrorists.”

However, he took especial exception to the “failed” attack on the consulate. Khan claimed it is “part of conspiracy against Pak[istan] and China economic and strategic cooperation.” Such incidents will “never be able to undermine” the relationship between the two countries that is “mightier than Himalaya and deeper than Arabian sea.”

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang, in a statement, strongly condemned the attack and urged Pakistan to take “practical measures to ensure the safety of Chinese citizens and institutions in the country.” Since the launch of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project in 2014, Pakistan has already created a 15,000-strong security force to protect Chinese investment projects and personnel—in particular, to counter Balochi secessionist attacks.

The selection of the Chinese consulate and a target outside Balochistan province are significant. The Balochi nationalists have demonstrated not only that they are willing to intensify attacks on Chinese interests, but also their ability to penetrate and carry out attacks inside a high security zone in Karachi.

The Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), a separatist Balochi-nationalist militant outfit fighting the government security forces in Balochistan, claimed responsibility for the attack. “The objective of this attack is clear: we will not tolerate any Chinese military expansionist endeavors on Baloch soil,” the

BLA stated. It contacted Qatar-based Al Jazeera while the attack was still ongoing and later the German state broadcaster Deutsche Welle.

The BLA released photos purportedly of the men who died in the attack. The BLA claimed that these men belonged to its Fidayeen Majeed Brigade, exclusively formed to carry out suicide attacks against Pakistani security forces and Chinese targets, according to its spokesperson Jihand Baloch, who spoke with Al Jazeera.

The Karachi attack is not the first time the BLA has targeted Chinese interests, but this attack is perhaps the boldest. It marks a new stage in the efforts of the BLA and the Balochi separatist movement as a whole to secure the backing and patronage of New Delhi, and above all Washington, by showing that they can serve as a useful and deadly tool in disrupting the China-Pakistan strategic partnership.

The Arabian Sea port Gwadar, in southwestern Balochistan, is at the center of the CPEC project that involves a sophisticated network of highway, pipeline and rail infrastructure involving over \$60 billion in Chinese investment. The CPEC is, in part, Beijing’s response to the US move to heavily militarize the Asia-Pacific region, including the South China Sea, in order to threaten China’s trade routes at a series of “choke points” in the event of war. The CPEC initiative will connect Gwadar to the Chinese mainland over land routes allowing China to, at least partially, bypass a US blockade of sea lanes.

Washington has publicly declared its opposition to the CPEC and has recently condemned Chinese investment as “debt trap diplomacy.” When Pakistan announced its intentions to seek International Monetary Fund assistance to alleviate a balance of payments crisis, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned in July that Washington would oppose money going to “bail out Chinese bondholders or China itself.”

However, Washington has maintained that it supports the “territorial integrity” of Pakistan, including in relation to Balochistan. Despite its official position, there is a section of the American political establishment that advocates US support for Balochi secessionist demands—as shown in 2012, when three Republicans in the US House of Representatives sponsored a non-binding resolution advocating “self-

determination” for Balochistan.

In contrast, India, as part of its adoption of an ever more aggressive stand against Pakistan, announced a major and highly provocative strategic shift in the summer of 2016, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi criticized human rights violations in Balochistan. The underlying threat was to support the Balochi nationalists and dismember Pakistan.

The Modi government’s hawkish attitude toward Islamabad was shown by Ajit Doval, who, shortly before becoming Modi’s national security adviser, threatened Pakistan: “You do one more Mumbai [a reference to the 2008 Mumbai terror attack], and you lose Balochistan.” New Delhi sees the CPEC as cutting across its aim of politically isolating and economically crushing Pakistan. It opposed the initiative from the outset, on the pretext that some of the highways cross Gilgit-Baltistan, which India claims as its own.

Both countries, however, promptly issued statements condemning the attack on the consulate. The US State Department condemned the two attacks on Friday “in the strongest terms” and said it is seeking “opportunities to cooperate with the Pakistani government to combat these threats in the region.” India’s Ministry of External Affairs in its statement said, “The perpetrators of this heinous attack should be brought to justice expeditiously.”

However, the language the BLA used in justifying its attack was clearly borrowed from the intensifying propaganda emanating from Washington. The US has condemned China’s land reclamation activities in the South China Sea—in the face of provocative measures by the US and its allies, aimed at asserting the Pentagon’s “right” to park an armada off China’s coast—as “expansionist” and “militaristic.”

The Pentagon’s annual report to the US Congress in 2017, titled “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China,” claimed, “China most likely will seek to establish additional military bases in countries with which it has a longstanding friendly relationship and similar strategic interests, such as Pakistan.” The report, however, did not provide any evidence.

The BLA is probably the most prominent of the Balochi-nationalist separatist militant groups, alongside the Baloch Liberation Front. Balochistan is Pakistan’s largest, most resource rich and strategically located province, and simultaneously its poorest. The severe poverty in the province is a result of decades of negligence by Islamabad. The latest insurgency in Balochistan has been raging since 2004.

Not willing to offer anything other than violence, successive governments in Islamabad, and the military, instead respond with methods of enforced disappearances, torture and extra-judicial killings to all forms of opposition emerging in the province. The contempt with which Islamabad deals with the legitimate grievances of the impoverished population has fueled the growth of numerous Balochi nationalist militant groups.

However, the BLA’s move to build a suicide squad is a

strong indication of the bankruptcy and crisis within the Balochi nationalist movement. It represents sections of the local bourgeois elite who hope to carve out a separate state so as to make their own deals with imperialism at the expense of the workers and toilers.

Balochistan’s workers and toilers cannot gain anything from the reactionary perspective of Balochi nationalism advanced by the BLA and other such organizations. Indeed, the violence carried out against Pashtun workers and other non-Balochi residents in Balochistan by the ethno-nationalist separatists is a clear expression of the anti-working class nature of the movement.

The attack on the consulate, however, is an ominous sign that CPEC will increasingly face the challenge of the Balochi nationalists.

While dramatically downgrading ties with Pakistan, Washington has showered India with strategic favors to entice it to transform itself into a frontline state against China. Finding itself increasingly politically and strategically isolated, Islamabad has responded by deepening ties with Beijing, especially in the face of the increasingly bellicose attitude of its rival, India. Islamabad is well aware that the CPEC is a cornerstone for its relations with China and has been ruthless in protecting it.

At the same time, Washington has made clear that it is only intensifying its offensive against Beijing, which was the message that US Vice President Mike Pence had for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit this month. Pakistan will no doubt come under increasing pressure to shut down the CPEC and distance itself from China. Under intense pressure from Washington, Khan said in November, prior to his trip to China that he would renegotiate the terms of CPEC, especially to move its focus from strategic issues to economic ones.

The CPEC, and along with it Balochistan, is increasingly dragged into US imperialism’s rivalry against China with disastrous consequences for the entire region.



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