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## Balochistan is the ultimate prize

By Pepe Escobar

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It's a classic case of calm before the storm. The AfPak chapter of [Obama's](#) brand new OCO ("Overseas Contingency Operations"), formerly GWOT ("global war on terror") does not imply only a surge in the Pashtun Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). A surge in Balochistan as well may be virtually inevitable.

Balochistan is totally under the radar of Western corporate media. But not the Pentagon's. An immense desert comprising almost 48% of Pakistan's area, rich in uranium and copper, potentially very rich in oil, and producing more than one-third of Pakistan's natural gas, it accounts for less than 4% of Pakistan's 173 million citizens. Balochs are the majority, followed by Pashtuns. Quetta, the provincial capital, is considered Taliban Central by the Pentagon, which for all its high-tech wizardry mysteriously has not been able to locate Quetta resident "The Shadow", historic Taliban emir Mullah Omar himself.

Strategically, Balochistan is mouth-watering: east of Iran, south of Afghanistan, and boasting three Arabian sea ports, including Gwadar, practically at the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz.

Gwadar - a port built by China - is the absolute key. It is the essential node in the crucial, ongoing, and still virtual Pipelineistan war between IPI and TAPI. IPI is the Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline, also known as the "peace pipeline", which is planned to cross from Iranian to Pakistani Balochistan - an anathema to Washington. TAPI is the perennially troubled, US-backed Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline, which is planned to cross western Afghanistan via Herat and branch out to Kandahar and Gwadar.

Washington's dream scenario is Gwadar as the new Dubai - while China would need Gwadar as a port and also as a base for pumping gas via a long pipeline to China. One way or another, it will all depend on local grievances being taken very seriously. Islamabad pays a pittance in royalties for the Balochis, and development aid is negligible; Balochistan is treated as a backwater. Gwadar as the new Dubai would not necessarily mean local Balochis benefiting

from the boom; in many cases they could even be stripped of their local land.

To top it all, there's the New Great Game in Eurasia fact that Pakistan is a key pivot to both NATO and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), of which Pakistan is an observer. So whoever "wins" Balochistan incorporates Pakistan as a key transit corridor to either Iranian gas from the monster South Pars field or a great deal of the Caspian wealth of "gas republic" Turkmenistan.

### **The cavalry to the rescue**

Now imagine thousands of mobile US troops - backed by supreme air power and hardcore artillery - pouring into this desert across the immense, 800-kilometer-long, empty southern Afghanistan-Balochistan border. These are Obama's surge troops who will be in theory destroying opium crops in Helmand province in Afghanistan. They will also try to establish a meaningful presence in the ultra-remote, southwest Afghanistan, Baloch-majority province of Nimruz. It would take nothing for them to hit Pakistani Balochistan in hot pursuit of Taliban bands. And this would certainly be a prelude for a de facto US invasion of Balochistan.

What would the Balochis do? That's a very complex question.

Balochistan is of course tribal - just as the FATA. Local tribal chiefs can be as backward as Islamabad is neglectful (and they are not exactly paragons of [human rights](#) either). A parallel could be made with the Swat valley.

Most Baloch tribes bow to Islamabad's authority - except, first and foremost, the Bugti. And then there's the Balochistan Liberation [Army](#) (BLA) - which both Washington and London brand as a terrorist group. Its leader is Brahamdagh Bugti, operating out of Kandahar (only two hours away from Quetta). In a recent Pakistani TV interview he could not be more sectarian, stressing the BLA is getting ready to attack non-Balochis. The Balochis are inclined to consider the BLA as a resistance group. But Islamabad denies it, saying their support is not beyond 10% of the provincial population.

It does not help that Islamabad tends to be not only neglectful but heavy-handed; in August 2006, Musharraf's troops killed ultra-respected [local leader](#) Nawab Akbar Bugti, a former provincial governor.

There's ample controversy on whether the BLA is being hijacked by foreign intelligence agencies - everyone from the CIA and the British MI6 to the Israeli Mossad. In a 2006 visit to Iran, I was prevented from going to Sistan-Balochistan in southeast Iran because, according to Tehran's version, infiltrated CIA from Pakistani Balochistan were involved in covert, cross-border attacks. And it's no secret to anyone in the region that since 9/11 the US virtually controls the Baloch air bases in Dalbandin and Panjgur.

In October 2001, while I was waiting for an opening to cross to Kandahar from Quetta, and apart from tracking the whereabouts of President [Hamid Karzai](#) and his brother, I spent quite some time with a number of BLA associates and sympathizers. They described themselves as "progressive, nationalist, anti-imperialist" (and that makes them difficult to be co-opted by the US). They were heavily critical of "Punjabi chauvinism", and always insisted the region's resources belong to Balochis first; that was the rationale for attacks on gas pipelines.

Stressing an atrocious, provincial literacy rate of only 16% ("It's government policy to keep

Balochistan backward"), they resented the fact that most people still lacked drinking water. They claimed support from at least 70% of the Baloch population ("Whenever the BLA fires a rocket, it's the talk of the bazaars"). They also claimed to be united, and in coordination with Iranian Balochis. And they insisted that "Pakistan had turned Balochistan into a US cantonment, which affected a lot the relationship between the Afghan and Baloch peoples".

As a whole, not only BLA sympathizers but the Balochis in general are adamant: although prepared to remain within a Pakistani confederation, they want infinitely more autonomy.

### **Game on**

How crucial Balochistan is to Washington can be assessed by the study "Baloch Nationalism and the [Politics](#) of Energy Resources: the Changing Context of Separatism in Pakistan" by Robert Wirsing of the [US Army](#) think-tank Strategic Studies Institute. Predictably, it all revolves around Pipelineistan.

China - which built Gwadar and needs gas from Iran - must be sidelined by all means necessary. The added paranoid Pentagon component is that China could turn Gwadar into a naval base and thus "threaten" the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean.

The only acceptable scenario for the Pentagon would be for the US to take over Gwadar. Once again, that would be a prime confluence of Pipelineistan and the US empire of bases.

Not only in terms of blocking the IPI pipeline and using Gwadar for TAPI, control of Gwadar would open the mouth-watering opportunity of a long land route across Balochistan into Helmand, Nimruz, Kandahar or, better yet, all of these three provinces in southwest Afghanistan. From a Pentagon/NATO perspective, after the "loss" of the Khyber Pass, that would be the ideal supply route for Western troops in the perennial, now rebranded, GWOT ("global war on terror").

During the Asif Ali Zardari administration in Islamabad the BLA, though still a fringe group with a political wing and a military wing, has been regrouping and rearming, while the current chief minister of Balochistan, Nawab Raisani, is suspected of being a CIA asset (there's no conclusive proof). There's fear in Islamabad that the [government](#) has taken its eye off the Balochistan ball - and that the BLA may be effectively used by the US for balkanization purposes. But Islamabad still seems not to have listened to the key Baloch grievance: we want to profit from our natural wealth, and we want autonomy.

So what's gonna be the future of "Dubai" Gwadar? IPI or TAPI? The die is cast. Under the radar of the Obama/Karzai/Zardari photo-op in Washington, all's still to play in this crucial front in the New Great Game in Eurasia.