In Afghanistan's Shadow
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Policymakers in the United States have had a record of underrating the strategic importance of remote areas. In the immediate postwar period, they were caught off guard by the Soviet-backed invasion of Korea. Because of Vietnam, in 1968-1971, the United States was unable to act on the strategic implications of the impending British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf. Only after the fall of the shah of Iran in 1979 and the consolidation of Soviet positions in the Horn of Africa did Washington wake up to the threat to the West’s energy lifeline. That threat increased dramatically with the Soviet military move into Afghanistan at the end of 1979, which also took many U.S. observers by surprise.

Soviet occupation forces in Afghanistan lie within 350 miles of the Arabian Sea, although the Soviet Union’s occupation of that strife-torn country is not secure. Two tempting prizes, Gwadar in southwestern Pakistan and neighboring Chah Bahar in southwestern Iran, both on the Arabian Sea, beckon the Soviets southward to warm waters. Both are small fishing towns that have served for centuries as maritime transit points but have the potential for becoming naval bases of great strategic value. Either location would satisfy the historic Russian drive for a warm-water port and place Soviet forces close to the Strait of Hormuz at the entrance to the Persian Gulf and on the Arabian Sea. Moreover, the question of sovereignty and the fragile political situation surrounding our lease of Diego Garcia, to be discussed later, are not unlike the Falkland Islands problems and make the future of Gwadar and Chah Bahar a matter of high importance.

Gwadar, a minuscule promontory probably 12 to 15 miles in length, juts into the Arabian Sea 290 miles west of Karachi, and after more than a century and a half under Omani rule was sold to Pakistan in 1958. Its quiet harbor, if developed with modern dredging techniques and a mole a few thousand feet long, would reach out into the Arabian Sea to a depth of 600 feet and could be an extraordinarily useful deep-water facility capable of docking the largest surface combatants in the Soviet fleet—or in ours.

Similarly, Chah Bahar lies on a bay dotted by date, fig, and mango trees 60 miles west of Iran’s border with Pakistan and 170 miles northeast of Muscat, the capital of Oman, which exercised sovereignty over it for less than a century before ceding it to Persia (Iran) in 1870. In the heady days of the mid-1970s, the shah of Iran began to develop Chah Bahar as the base for his blue-water navy. Work was never completed, but Chah Bahar could still provide a significant military presence on the Arabian Sea for Soviet forces within easy reach of the richest oil fields in the Persian Gulf.

Although Gwadar and Chah Bahar lie on
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opposite sides of the frontier between Pakistan and Iran, they are actually part of the same region—Baluchistan—which extends northward from the coast of the Arabian Sea to southern Afghanistan and eastward from within Iran to western Pakistan. Baluchistan takes its name from the nomadic Baluch tribes that have called it home since the tenth century. The region as a whole is not quite as large as France, covering 207,000 square miles. Its interior alternates between vast expanses of semidesert wasteland and stark mountains. Current estimates put its population at nearly seven million.

The Baluchis have a traditional tribal society with an economy based largely on grazing, farming, and fishing. They have maintained a distinct culture and language and are Sunni Muslims but have never coalesced into a single political unit. With the exception of a few brief periods of autonomy, the Baluchis have been dominated or manipulated by outsiders. Today a small and sparsely populated slice of greater Baluchistan falls into Afghanistan. By far the larger area, however, where more than five million Baluchis live, makes up 40 percent of the total land mass of Pakistan; and, finally, more than a million Baluchis are spread further westward across southeastern Iran, and fewer than half that are in southwestern Afghanistan.

THE WEAK LINK

Since invading Afghanistan in December 1979, the Soviets potentially have more political and military leverage over Baluchistan than ever before. Should they cut a corridor through it or gain access to its Arabian seaports through political means, the setback to Western interests would be enormous. This is becoming increasingly evident because of the potentially weak link in the chain of U.S. military bases protecting the Gulf, i.e., Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. This atoll has been transformed into a key communications and logistics point for U.S. naval and air operations in the region. It is sometimes overlooked, however, that U.S. rights to Diego Garcia, which were obtained through lease from Britain in 1972, could be politically undermined because of Great Britain’s clouded title to the islands. The government of Mauritius continues to claim sovereignty over Diego Garcia, contending that Britain took illegal title to the atoll through last-minute maneuvering by British authorities before the Mauritius islands obtained their sovereignty from Great Britain in 1965. Mauritius has protested in the United Nations and in the Organization of African States against the action and the later American military presence. As a matter of note, one of the most important political issues in Mauritius is the degree to which this sovereignty should be pursued.

The clouding of Diego Garcia’s political status coincides precisely with the growth of U.S. reliance upon it for major protection in the Gulf. Against this background, I will focus on Baluchistan by highlighting its historical background and geopolitical circumstance and by examining the threats and opportunities it presents to the West.

Historically, the strategic value of Baluchistan to outsiders has never been intrinsic but always based on its being a crossroads between the Arabian peninsula, Persia, central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. Alexander the Great crossed the area as early as 325 B.C. on his return from India. When the Portuguese opened up the Orient to Europe in the sixteenth century, they attacked and burned villages along the coastline of the Arabian Sea.

The modern history of foreign incursions into Baluchistan can be traced to the end of the eighteenth century, when Oman gained footholds at Gwadar and Chah Bahar. At that time, Oman was an important local maritime power with possessions and leases that stretched from the Persian coast of the Gulf southward along the Arabian peninsula and into east Africa. Omani objectives in Baluchistan were to retain the two ports and their immediate hinterlands as bases for maritime operations and trade. Altogether the two enclaves amounted to less than 750
square miles of territory. Oman made no effort to penetrate Baluchistan politically or economically. Its interest lay in securing seaports and bases to hold together its far-flung provinces.

Oman held these enclaves, sometimes precariously, for less than three-quarters of a century until they became caught up in a conflict between Persia and Britain in the 1860s. By then, Britain had come to dominate almost all the Indian subcontinent and was beginning to consolidate its position in the Persian Gulf. From the perspective of imperial Britain, the ports along the northern coastline of the Arabian Sea had to be secured as transit points on the way to India. Their strategic role was highlighted after 1858, when Britain abolished the East India Company, took direct responsibility for Indian administration, and decided to construct a telegraphic link from England to the subcontinent.

The tightening of Britain’s imperial infrastructure through the telegraph to India had lasting effects on Baluchistan. The first important segment was built overland from Karachi westward through the Baluch interior to Gwadar (then still held by Oman). Once this section was completed in 1863, London decided to drop its original plans for an overland continuation. Instead, the director general, taking advantage of new technology, advised extending the project by undersea cables along the Arabian Sea coastline and into the Persian Gulf as a less costly, more secure alternative. It was the laying of these cables that led to clashes between Britain and Persia, which announced longstanding claims over western Baluchistan and resisted British extension of the right of way. In the course of the British-Persian dispute over transit rights, Britain supported Oman’s claim to Gwadar, and Persia won possession of Chah Bahar. A negotiated line of demarcation was agreed upon in 1871, settling the eastern boundary of Persia. The attendant division of Baluchistan came to mark the frontier between present-day Iran and Pakistan.

Baluchistan served a second function in British imperial strategy that finds a current parallel: namely, in the containment of Russian power. Britain feared Russian expansion in central Asia as a continuing threat to India. As a counter, the British organized a buffer zone with the establishment in the early 1880s of Afghanistan. Some Baluchis were included in Afghanistan when its border with India was eventually drawn in 1893. In the meantime, Britain also had to secure Baluch areas south of Afghanistan. The British played tribal chiefs off against one another with subsidies and promises of autonomy in exchange for treaty rights to station troops. For the Baluchis, the British colonial legacy was one that reinforced fragmentation and discouraged modernization.

The end of British colonial rule of the subcontinent in 1947 left the future of the Baluchis to be sorted out in a new political framework. As noted above, Oman finally sold the Gwadar enclave to Pakistan in 1958, and the Baluch areas that had been administered by Britain were incorporated into the newly established state of Pakistan.

From the outset, the interests of the Baluch minority were subordinated to those of the ruling Punjabis. This situation fueled a Baluch separatists’ movement, which finally won concessions in 1970 when East Pakistan was on the verge of separating from West Pakistan to become Bangladesh. President Ali Bhutto then proposed the creation of a separate Baluch province with its own assembly. Bhutto’s annulment of this formula in 1973 and the arrest of several key Baluch leaders triggered an insurgency that wound down into an uneasy truce in 1977. Since then, the military government in Islamabad has declared amnesty for Baluch guerrillas but rejected demands for autonomy within a restructured Pakistani political framework.

The Baluchis in Iran, mostly Sunnis, have been kept in check by policies even more restrictive than those in Pakistan. The shah set a pattern of much tighter limits on Baluch political and cultural identity as well as economic growth. Baluch dissidents, having been driven underground for years, came to the surface with the collapse of the shah.
They soon found themselves at odds, however, with the Shi'ite Khomeini regime, which also sought to foster centralization.

In short, the Baluchis have emerged as a nagging preoccupation for Pakistan and Iran—regardless of the government in power. They remain numerically small minorities occupying a disproportionally large but resource-poor territory in both nations. They are widely viewed as a backward group that has not been drawn into the political or economic mainstream. Often divided among themselves, the Baluchis do not seem to have a clear vision of what they want. Is it greater autonomy within Pakistan and Iran? Is it a new state? Whatever their aspirations, the Baluchis have become an increasingly volatile and, if they ever unite, a potentially explosive political force.

It is a paradox that, although the strategic weaknesses surrounding the Persian Gulf are now universally accepted, its political and military vulnerability through Baluchistan is still rarely discussed.

**THE BALUCH CARD**

Politically, the Soviets have several options within which to exploit the Baluch minority problem. First, Moscow might back the creation of an independent greater Baluchistan. The Russians are viewed favorably by some Baluch nationalist leaders, not only because of their anti-Westernism, but because Moscow is not linked to the repressive central governments in Teheran or Islamabad. Should the Soviets foster a successful independence movement, they would be well positioned to gain access as guardians of the new state. Such a strategy, however, not only involves great uncertainties, but also runs counter to the longstanding Soviet practice of seeking to penetrate central governments through nationally based communist parties. Thus the Soviets so far have shied away from the concept of a greater Baluchistan.

Second, Moscow could play a Baluch card to destabilize Iran even though at the moment the Soviets seem more supportive than otherwise. In the turbulent initial period after the fall of the shah, there was much speculation that Moscow might encourage Baluch dissidents as part of a larger effort to weaken central authority and thereby ease the way for the Soviet-backed Tudeh party to take power in Iran. In fact, however, Moscow does not seem to have waged a concerted campaign to weaken the Khomeini regime. Instead, the Soviets have sought a *modus vivendi*—perhaps viewing the replacement of the shah by a fervently anti-American government as a sufficient plus in itself for the short term. Nevertheless, Moscow can hardly be expected to welcome a militantly Muslim regime on its borders in the long term. Should the Soviets opt for a strategy of destabilization in Iran, the Baluch option remains at hand.

Third, the Soviets can use the Baluch to bring pressure to bear on Pakistan. There the danger of Soviet meddling is more immediate since the Baluch minority in Pakistan is larger and more sophisticated than that in Iran. Moreover, the Soviets have compelling reasons to coerce, if not undermine, the Zia regime, which has aligned itself with China, accepted U.S. military assistance, and served as a haven for Afghan rebel forces. The Soviets have actively cultivated support among the Baluch to increase their leverage against the beleaguered regime in Islamabad. While stopping short of supporting an independence movement, Moscow has encouraged demands for autonomy within Pakistan.

Looking beyond these political considerations, the danger of Soviet use of military force must be considered. One must assume that closer proximity and accessibility to the Arabian Sea were among the Soviet incentives that lay behind the occupation of Afghanistan. Moscow, if successful in its present occupation policies, could develop the capabilities to strike southward to the coast from its bases only about 300 miles away in Afghanistan. Thus, should any of the multiple sources of instability in the Persian Gulf lead to a superpower confrontation, the United States might be well advised to be clearly prepared for such a possible eventu-
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ality and therefore should keep these thoughts in mind in completing the infras­
structure for the Rapid Deployment Force and the associated naval presence in the Indian
Ocean. Depending on developments in Iran, Chah Bahar might be a Soviet objective
rather than Gwadar, since Pakistan still has security links to the United States. Occupa­
tion of Gwadar, however, cannot be ruled out, whether done directly or shielded by a
local nationalist movement. To be sure, the Soviets would run high risks in attacking
through Baluchistan, but that option stands out as viable from a Soviet military planning
perspective.

How are the United States and its allies to respond to this geopolitical situation? The
most promising opportunities for U.S. policy are likely to be found in Pakistan. Although
bilateral relations were strained during the Carter years by disagreements over arms
sales and nuclear issues, the change of American administration and shared concern
over Soviet expansionism have drawn Washington and Islamabad closer together.
U.S. policy should be to assist the Zia govern­
ment to greater liberalization and to a
reinforcement of its pro-Western orientation.
Prospects for a healthier society might be
improved if the Baluch minority problem
could be defused and, in a broader sense, if
the central government could become more politically and economically responsive to
Pakistan’s diverse ethnic groups. Carefully
managed U.S. diplomacy may assure progres­s
along these lines through a combination of timely pressure and substantial, well­
targeted foreign assistance. A truly bold and
innovative Western strategy might be to gain
access to military facilities along the Arabian Sea coastline, particularly in view of the
problems surrounding Diego Garcia. The
development of such facilities at Gwadar
would certainly provide a major strategic
asset for the protection of Western interests
in the Gulf and might prove to be a necessary alternative should the status of Diego Garcia
become even more uncertain.

The U.S.S.R. and its East European al­
lies, which are only just entering the auto­
mobile age, will have a pressing need to ob­
tain oil to supplement present production and
probably to supplant the highly capital-inten­sive and expensive oil fields in northern Si­beria. Thus, it was inevitable that the major thrust of Soviet policy toward the Middle
East since 1945 has been to achieve in this
region a status of political parity with the
United States. Obviously the Soviet Union
wishes to have a role in presiding over the
area to assure itself access to the planet’s
largest exportable petroleum reserve. This
interest may also be fueled by a desire to
deny access to the West, should this coincide
with other Soviet objectives.

Resolution of this problem may very well
have to wait upon an overall global under­
standing between the two superpowers.
Meanwhile, it is necessary to cope with the
military and political aspects of the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf areas, so that our ac­
cess to these reserves is not threatened and
the ultimate negotiation can be carried out by
the West from a position of strength. TWO