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With its “Islamic” nuclear bomb, Taliban- and al-Qaeda-infested borderlands, dysfunctional cities, and feuding ethnic groups, Pakistan may well be the world’s most dangerous country, a nuclear Yugoslavia-in-the-making. One key to its fate is the future of Gwadar, a strategic port whose development will either unlock the riches of Central Asia, or plunge Pakistan into a savage, and potentially terminal, civil war.

by Robert D. Kaplan

Pakistan’s Fatal Shore

PHOTO BY REZA/WEBISTAN

THE WORD *PAKISTAN* summons up the Indian subcontinent, but the subcontinent actually begins with the Hub River, a few miles west of Karachi, near the Indus River Delta. Thus, Pakistan’s 400-mile-long Makran coast, which runs from the Iranian frontier eastward along the Arabian Sea, constitutes a vast transition zone that bears a heavy imprint of the Middle East and particularly of Arabia: directly across the Gulf of Oman is Muscat, the capital of Oman. This transition zone, which also includes the interior land adjacent to the coast, is known as Baluchistan. Through this alkaline wasteland, the 80,000-man army of Alexander the Great marched westward in its disastrous retreat from India in 325 B.C.

To travel the Makran coast is to experience the windy, liberating flatness of Yemen and Oman and their soaring, sawtooth ramparts the color of sandpaper, rising sheer off a desert floor pockmarked with thornbushes. Here, along a coast so empty that you can almost hear the echoing camel hooves of Alexander’s army, you lose yourself in geology. An exploding sea bangs against a knife-carved apricot moonscape of high sand dunes, which, in turn, gives way to crumbly badlands. Farther inland, every sandstone and limestone escarpment is the color of bone. Winds and seismic and tectonic disruptions have left their mark in tortuous folds and uplifts, deep gashes, and conical incrustations that hark back far before the age of human folly.

Drive along this landscape for hours on end and the only sign of civilization you’ll encounter is the odd teahouse: a partly charred stone hut with jute charpoys, where you can buy musty, Iranian-packaged biscuits and strongly brewed tea. Baluch tribesmen screech into these road stops driving old autos and motorcycles, wearing Arab head scarves, speaking in harsh gutturals, and playing music whose rumbling rhythms, so unlike the introspective twanging ragas of the subcontinent, reverberate with the spirit of Arabia.

But don’t be deceived by the distance that separates the Makran coast from teeming Karachi and Islamabad to the east. Pakistan exists here, too. The highway from Karachi to the Iranian border area is a good one, with only a few broken patches still to be paved. The government operates checkpoints. It is developing major air and naval bases to counter India’s projection of power into the Indian Ocean. And it has high hopes of using new ports on the Makran coast to unlock trade routes to the markets and energy supplies of Central Asia. The Pakistani government might not control the desert and mountain fastnesses of Baluchistan, with their rebellious and smuggling tribes and *dacoits*, or bandits. But it can be wherever it wants, whenever it wants: to extract minerals, to grab land, to build highways and bases. Think of the Pakistani

government's relationship to its southwestern province of Baluchistan as similar to that of Washington to the American West in the mid-19th century, when the native American Indians still moved freely, though decreasingly so, and the cavalry had strategic outposts.

Indeed, as the government builds roads and military bases, Baluch and minority Hindus are being forcibly displaced. Both groups are thought to harbor sympathy for India, and they do: in Baluch and Hindu eyes, India acts as a counterweight to an oppressive Pakistani state. The hope of these minorities is that a fissiparous Pakistan, with its history of dysfunctional civilian and military governments, will give way in the fullness of time to a sprawling Greater India, thus liberating Baluchistan to pursue its destiny as a truly autonomous region.

So: Will Pakistan, beset by internal contradictions that never befell 19th-century America, gradually disintegrate before it subjugates the Baluch? The answer to that question, which will also shape the future of Pakistan's neighbors, is bound up with the future of Gwadar, a port town of 70,000 close to the border with Iran, at the far end of the Makran coast.

IF WE CAN think of great place-names of the past—Carthage, Thebes, Troy, Samarkand, Angkor Wat—and of the present—Dubai, Singapore, Tehran, Beijing, Washington—then Gwadar should qualify as a great place-name of the future.

During the military rule of Ayub Khan in the 1960s, shortly after Oman ceded the territory to Pakistan in 1958, Gwadar fired the imagination of Pakistani planners. They saw it as an alternative air-and-naval hub to Karachi that, along with the port of Pasni to the east, would make Pakistan a great Indian Ocean power athwart the whole Near East. But the Pakistani state was young, poor, and insecure, with weak infrastructure and institutions. Gwadar remained a dream.

The next people to set their sights on Gwadar were the Russians. Gwadar was the ultimate prize denied them during their decade-long occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s—the fabled warm-water outlet to the sea that formed the strategic *raison d'être* for their Afghan adventure in the first place. From Gwadar, the Soviet Union could have exported the hydrocarbon wealth of Central Asia. But Afghanistan proved to be the graveyard of Soviet imperial visions. Gwadar, still just a point on the map, a huddle of fishermen's stone houses on a spit of sand, was like a poisoned chalice.

Yet the story goes on. In the 1990s, successive democratic Pakistani governments struggled to cope with intensifying social and economic turmoil. Violence was endemic to Karachi and other cities. But even as the Pakistani political elite turned inward, it remained obsessed with the related problems of Afghanistan and energy routes. Anarchy in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal was preventing Pakistan from establishing roads and pipelines to the new oil states of Central Asia—routes that would have helped Islamabad consolidate a vast Muslim rear base for the containment of India. So obsessed was Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's government with curbing the chaos in Afghanistan that she and her interior minister, the retired general Naseerullah Babar, conceived of the newly formed Taliban as a solution. But, as Unocal and other oil firms, intrigued by the idea of building energy pipelines from the Caspian Sea across Afghanistan to Indian Ocean energy hubs like Gwadar, eventually found out, the Taliban were hardly an agent of stability.

Then, in October 1999, after years of civilian misrule, General Pervez Musharraf took power in a bloodless coup. In 2000, he asked the Chinese to fund a deepwater port at Gwadar. A few weeks before 9/11, the Chinese agreed, and their commitment to the project intensified after the U.S. invaded Afghanistan. Thus, with little fanfare, Gwadar became an example of how the world changed in the wake of the World Trade Center attacks in ways that many Americans and the Bush administration did not anticipate. The Chinese spent \$200 million on the first phase of the port project, which was completed on schedule in 2005. In 2007, Pakistan gave PSA International of Singapore a 40-year contract to run Gwadar port.

So now imagine a bustling deepwater port at the extreme southwestern tip of Pakistan, much more a part of the Middle East than of the Indian subcontinent, equipped with a highway, and oil and natural-gas pipelines, extending north all the way through some of the highest mountains in the world, the Karakoram, into China itself, where more roads and pipelines connect the flow of consumer goods and hydrocarbons to China's burgeoning middle-class markets farther east. Another branch of this road-and-pipeline network would go north from Gwadar through a stabilized Afghanistan, and on into Iran and Central Asia. Gwadar, in this way, becomes the hub of a new Silk Road, both land and maritime; a gateway to landlocked, hydrocarbon-rich Central Asia; an exotic 21st-century place-name.

But history is as much a series of accidents and ruined schemes as it is of great plans. And when I got to Gwadar, the pitfalls impressed me as much as the dreams. What was so fantastic about Gwadar was its present-day reality. It was every bit the majestic frontier town that I had imagined, occupying a sweeping, bone-dry peninsula set between long lines of ashen cliffs and a sea the color of rusty tap water. The cliffs, with their buttes and mesas and steep-like ridges, were a study in complexity. The town at their base could have been mistaken for the sprawling, rectilinear remains of an ancient Near Eastern city: low, scabby white stone walls separating sand drifts and mounds of rubble. People sat here and there in broken-backed kitchen chairs, sipping tea under the shade of bamboo and burlap. Everyone wore traditional clothes; there were no Western polyesters. The scene evoked a 19th-century lithograph of Jaffa, in Palestine, or Tyre, in Lebanon, by David Roberts: dhows emerging out of the white, watery miasma, laden with silvery fish and manned by fishermen dressed in filthy turbans and *shalwar kameezes*, prayer beads dripping out of their pockets.

I watched as piles of trout, snapper, tiger prawns, perch, bass, sardines, and skates were dropped into straw baskets and put ashore via an ingenious pulley system. A big shark, followed by an equally large swordfish, was dragged by ropes into a vast, stinking market shed where still-living fish slapped on a bloody cement floor beside piles of manta rays. Until the next phase of the port-and-pipeline project is in full swing, traditional fishing is everything here.

At a nearby beach, I watched as dhows were built and repaired. Some men used their fingers to smear epoxy on the wooden seams of the hulls while others, sprawled next to scrawny dogs and cats, took long smokes in the shade. There were no generators, no electric drills—just craftsmen making holes with manual drills turned by bows, as though they were playing stringed instruments. A few men working for three months can build a 40-foot fishing boat in Gwadar. The teak comes from Burma and Indonesia. Cod-liver oil, painted on the hulls, provides waterproofing. The life of a boat is 20 years. To take advantage of the high tides, new boats are launched on the first and 15th days of the lunar cycle. This was Arabia before the modern era.

As-Salem Musa, a turbaned Baluch graybeard, told me that his father and grandfather before him built boats. He fondly remembered the days of Omani control, which were “freer” because “we were able to sail all around the gulf without restrictions.” He harbored both hope for and fear of the future: change could mean even less freedom for the Baluch, as Punjabis and other urban Pakistanis sweep down to take over the city.

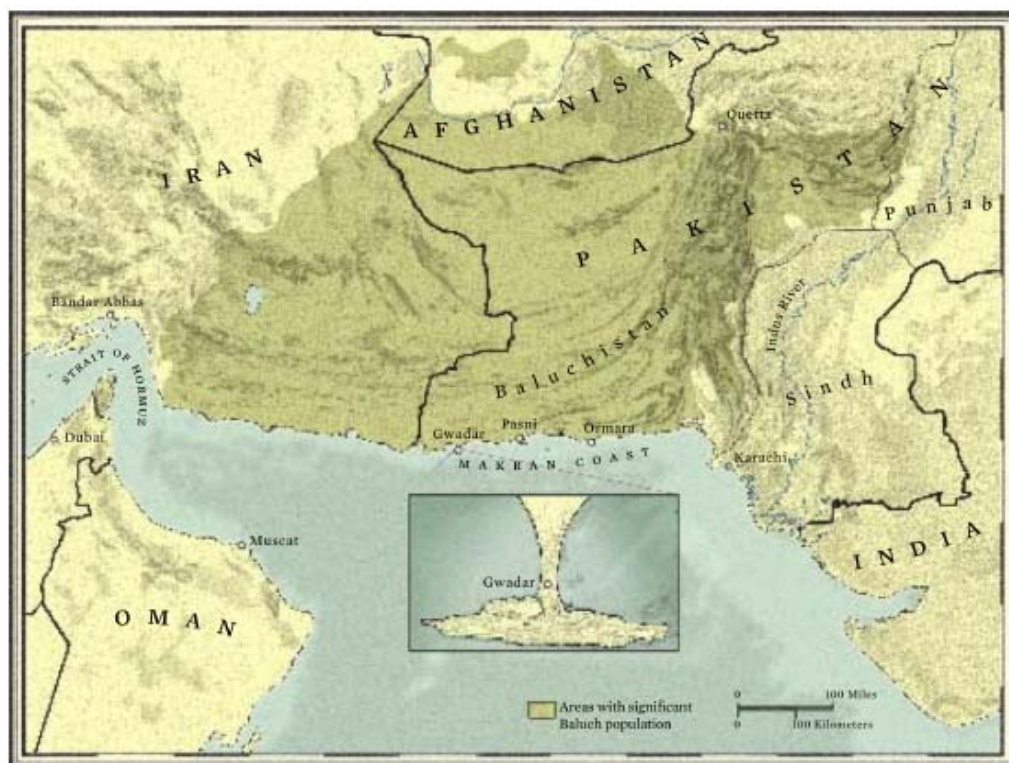
“They don't have a chance,” a Pakistani official in Islamabad told me, referring to the fishermen in Gwadar. “Modernity will wipe out their traditional life.”

In the covered bazaar, amid the most derelict of tea, spice, and dry-goods shops, their dusty jars filled with stale candy, I met more old men with beards and turbans, who spoke with nostalgia about the sultan of Oman, and how Gwadar had prospered under his rule. Many of these old men had dual Omani-Pakistani nationality. They led me through somnolent, burlap-covered streets and along crumbling mud-brick facades, past half-starved cows and goats hugging the shade of collapsed walls, to a small, round, stuccoed former palace with overhanging wooden balconies. Like everything else in Gwadar, it was in an advanced stage of disintegration. The sea peeked through at every turn, now bottle-green in the midafternoon sun.

At another beach I came upon the stunning, bizarre sight of donkeys—the smallest donkeys I had ever seen—charging out of the water and onto the sand, pulling creaky carts loaded down with fish just transferred from boats bobbing in the waves and flying a black-white-yellow-and-green local flag of Baluchistan. Miniature donkeys emerging from the sea! Gwadar was a place of wonders, slipping through an hourglass.

NEARBY, THE CHINESE-BUILT deepwater port, with its neat angles, spanking-new gantry cranes, and other cargo-handling equipment, appeared charged with expectation, even as the complex stood silent and empty against the horizon, waiting for decisions from Islamabad. Just a few miles away, in the desert, a new industrial zone and other development sites had been fenced off, with migrant-labor camps spread alongside, waiting for construction to begin. “Just wait for the new airport,” another businessman from Karachi told me. “During the next building phase of the port complex, you will see the Dubai miracle taking shape.”

But everyone who spoke to me about the port as a business hub to rival Dubai (notwithstanding its current economic troubles) neglected a key fact: the Gulf sheikhdoms, and Dubai in particular, have wise, effective, and wholly legitimate governments.



Whether Gwadar becomes a new silk-route nexus or not is tied to Pakistan’s own struggle against becoming a failed state. Pakistan, with its “Islamic” nuclear bomb, Taliban- and al-Qaeda-infested northwestern borderlands, dysfunctional cities, and territorially based ethnic groups for whom Islam could never provide adequate glue, is commonly referred to as the most dangerous country in the world, a nuclear Yugoslavia-in-the-making. And so Gwadar is a litmus test, not just for roads and energy routes but for the stability of the entire Arabian Sea region. If Gwadar languishes, and remains what to a Western visitor was just a charming fishing port, it will be yet more evidence of Pakistan’s failure as a nation.

After spending a few days in Gwadar, I attracted the attention of the local police, who thereafter insisted on accompanying me everywhere with a truckload of black-clad commandos armed with AK-47s. The police said they wanted to protect me. But Gwadar had no terrorism; it was one of the safest places that I had been to in nine visits to Pakistan.

Talking to people became nearly impossible; the locals clearly feared the police. “We Baluch only want to be free,” I was told whenever out of earshot of my security detail. You might think that economic development would give the Baluch the freedom they craved. But that’s not how they saw it. More development, I was told, meant more Chinese, Singaporeans, Punjabis, and other outsiders. Indeed, evidence indicated that the Baluch would not only fail to benefit from rising real-estate prices, but in many cases would lose their land altogether—and they knew it.

In June 2008, *The Herald*, a respected Karachi-based investigative magazine, published a cover story, “The Great Land Robbery,” alleging that the Gwadar project had “led to one of the biggest land scams in Pakistan’s history.” The magazine detailed a system in which revenue clerks had been bribed by elites to register land in their names; the land was then resold at rock-bottom prices to developers from Karachi, Lahore, and other major cities for residential and industrial schemes. Hundreds of thousands of acres of land were said to have been illegally allotted to civilian and military bureaucrats living elsewhere. In this way, the poor and uneducated Baluch population had been shut out of Gwadar’s future prosperity. And so, Gwadar became a lightning rod for Baluch hatred of Punjabi-ruled Pakistan. Indeed, Gwadar’s very promise as an Indian Ocean–Central Asian hub threatened to sunder the country.

PAKISTAN’S ARABIAN SEA coast has long been rife with separatist rebellion: both Baluchistan and Sind have rich, venerable histories as self-contained entities. In recent decades, the Baluch, who number 6 million, have mounted four insurgencies against the Pakistani military to protest economic and political discrimination. The fiercest of these wars, from 1973 to 1977, embroiled some 80,000 Pakistani troops and 55,000 Baluch warriors. Baluch memories of the time are bitter. In 1974, writes the South Asia expert Selig S. Harrison, “Pakistani forces, frustrated by their inability to find Baluch guerrilla units hiding in the mountains, bombed, strafed and burned the encampments of some 15,000 Baluch families ... forcing the guerrillas to come out from their hideouts to defend their women and children.”

What Harrison calls a “slow-motion genocide” has continued. In 2006, thousands of Baluch fled villages attacked by Pakistani F-16 fighter jets and Cobra helicopter gunships. Large-scale, government-organized kidnappings and disappearances followed. That year, the Pakistani army killed the Baluch leader Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti. But as government tactics have grown more brutal, a new and better-armed generation of Baluch warriors has hardened into an authentic national movement. Emerging from a literate middle class in the capital of Quetta and elsewhere, and financed by compatriots in the Persian Gulf, these Baluch have surmounted the age-old weakness of feuding tribes, which outsiders like the Punjabis in the Pakistani military once played against each other. According to the International Crisis Group, “The insurgency now crosses regional, ethnic, tribal and class lines.” Helping the Baluch, the Pakistanis say, have been the Indian intelligence services, which clearly benefit from the Pakistani armed forces’ being tied down by separatist rebellions. The Pakistani military has countered by pitting radical Islamic parties against the secular Baluch. As one activist mournfully told the International Crisis Group, “Baluchistan is the only secular region between Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan and has no previous record of religious extremism.”

The Baluch amount to less than 4 percent of Pakistan’s 173 million people, but Pakistan’s natural resources, including copper, uranium, potentially rich oil reserves, and natural gas, are mostly found in Baluchistan. The province produces more than a third of the country’s natural gas, yet it consumes only a tiny amount. Moreover, as Harrison explains, the central government has paid meager royalties for the gas and denied the province development aid.

Thus, the real-estate scandal in Gwadar, combined with fears of a Punjabi takeover there, taps into a bitter history of subjugation. To taste the emotions behind all of this, I met with Baluch nationalist leaders in Karachi.

THE SETTING FOR the first meeting was a KFC in the Karachi neighborhood of Clifton. Inside were young people wearing Western clothes or pressed white *shalwar kameezes*, the men with freshly shaven chins or long beards.

Yet despite the clash of styles, they all had a slick, suburban demeanor. Over trays of chicken and Pepsi, they were texting and talking on their cell phones. Drum music blasted from loudspeakers: Punjabi bhangra. Into this upscale tableaux strode five Baluch men in soiled and unpressed *shalwar kameezes*, wearing turbans and topees, with stacks of papers under their arms, including the issue of *The Herald* with the cover story on Gwadar.

Nisar Baluch, the general secretary of a Baluch nationalist organization, was the group's leader. He had unruly black hair and a thick moustache. His fingertips tapped on the table as he lectured me, staring into the middle distance. "The Pakistani army is the biggest land grabber," he began. "It is giving away the coast of Baluchistan for peanuts to the Punjabis.

"The Punjabi army wears uniforms, but the soldiers are actually terrorists," he continued. "In Gwadar, the army is operating as a mafia, falsifying land records. They say we don't have papers to prove our ownership of the land, though we've been there for centuries." Baluch told me he was not against development, and supported dialogue with the Pakistani authorities. "But when we talk about our rights, they accuse us of being Taliban.

"We're an oppressed nation," he said, never raising his voice, even as his finger-tapping grew in intensity. "There is no other choice but to fight. The whole world is now talking about Gwadar. The entire political establishment in this country is involved in the crime being perpetrated there."

Then came this warning:

"No matter how hard they try to turn Gwadar into Dubai, it won't work. There will be resistance. The pipelines going to China will not be safe. They will have to cross through Baluch territory, and if our rights are violated, nothing will be secure." In 2004, in fact, a car bomb killed three Chinese engineers on their way to Gwadar. Other nationalists have said that Baluch insurgents would eventually kill more Chinese workers, bringing further uncertainty to Gwadar.

Nisar Baluch was the warm-up to Nawab Khair Bakhsh Marri, the chief of the Marri tribe of Baluch, a man who had been engaged in combat with government forces off and on for 50 years, and whose son had recently been killed by Pakistani troops. Marri greeted me in his Karachi villa, with massive exterior walls, giant plants, and ornate furniture. He was old and wizened, and walked with a cane. Marri spoke a precise, hesitant, whispering English that, combined with his robe and beige topee and the setting, gave him a certain charisma.

"If we keep fighting," he told me gently, "we will ignite an intifada like the Palestinians'. It is the cause of my optimism that the young generation of Baluch will sustain a guerrilla war. Pakistan is not eternal. It is not likely to last. The British Empire, Pakistan, Burma—these have all been temporary creations.

"After Bangladesh left Pakistan," Marri continued, in his mild and lecturing tone, "the only dynamic left within this country was the imperialist power of the Punjabi army. East Bengal was the most important element in Pakistan. The Bengalis were numerous enough to take on the Punjabis, but they seceded. Now the only option left for the Baluch is to fight." He liked and trusted no one in Pakistan who was not Baluch, he told me.

And what about Punjabi overtures to make amends with the Baluch?, I asked.

"We say to these Punjabis"—still in his sweet, regal voice—"Leave us alone. Get lost. We don't need your direction, your brotherliness.' If Punjab continues to occupy us with the help of the American imperialists, then eventually our name will be nowhere in the soil."

Marri explained that Baluchistan overlaps three countries—Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan—and would eventually triumph, as the central governments of all those lands weakened. Gwadar, in his view, was just the latest Punjabi plot that would prove

temporary. The Baluch would bomb the roads and pipelines leading out of the town.

Leaving his villa, I realized the development of Gwadar depended on how the government in Islamabad behaved. If it did not make a grand bargain with the Baluch, of a scope that would isolate embittered men like Marri and Nisar Baluch, then indeed the giant project near the Iranian border would become another lost city in the sand, beset by local rebellion. If the government did make such a bargain, allowing Baluchistan to emerge as a region-state under the larger rubric of a democratic and decentralized Pakistan, then the traditional fishing village that I saw could well give way to a Rotterdam of the Arabian Sea, its highways and pipelines stretching northward to Samarkand.

But nothing was destiny.

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