

# India must remember that Balochistan is not Bangladesh

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Following Prime Minister Modi's comments about Balochistan in his independence day speech, **Ashok Swain** warns that open support for Baloch separatists will not solve the Kashmir conflict. What is more, he writes that by threatening its neighbour's territorial integrity India risks alienating key allies, and in the worst case scenario intervention could result in a nuclear conflict which would threaten the lives and livelihoods of millions.



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his Independence Day Speech on 15 August 2016 raised the issue of Pakistan's human rights violations in Balochistan. This has brought a new excitement in New Delhi, particularly among the [right wing commentators](#) as if India has finally found a solution to the Kashmir issue.

Since the death of a charismatic militant [Burhan Wani](#) in the hands of the security agencies on 8 July 2016, Kashmir is witnessing [unprecedented violent protest](#). Modi and his advisors hope that Kashmir unrest will come to an end if India starts spreading the fire in Balochistan. If Modi and his advisors really believe that the Balochistan threat will dissuade Pakistani agencies to stay out of Kashmir and the contested state will be peaceful forever, they are living in a cloud-cuckoo land. History shows that Pakistani military establishment does not succumb to Indian threats. Instead, it uses this threat to accumulate more power for itself. India's direct support to the East Pakistan liberation movement, which resulted in the creation of Bangladesh, did not succeed in changing the perception of Pakistani agencies. It only exacerbated their paranoia towards India further.

In the last decade, while Western attention has been mostly on the Taliban, the separatist struggle is turning quite violent in this scarcely populated but mineral-rich province in the south west of Pakistan. The Baloch have waged two major violent 'freedom' struggles against the state: an uprising from 1973 to 1977, which was crushed by the Pakistani Army using brute force. The second [ongoing struggle started in 2005](#).

It is no secret that India has been supporting the separatists in Balochistan in their fight against Pakistani military without openly admitting it. Baloch activists have repeatedly admitted of receiving India's 'moral' support and a representative of Balochistan Liberation Organization (BLO) has been [living in New Delhi since 2009](#). Pakistan has been regularly accusing India for using its consulates in Jalalabad and Kandahar to fund, train and arm Baloch militants. A decade back, senior officials of Pakistan had even alleged that [600 Baloch tribals were being trained by India's Research and Analysis Wing \(RAW\)](#) in Afghanistan to handle explosives, engineer bomb blasts, and use sophisticated weapons.

Pakistan has failed to provide much proof about Indian involvement, however, according to 2010 WikiLeaks cables, US and British intelligence [cautiously agrees with the Pakistani accusations](#). Last year, Pakistan had handed over a dossier to the UN Secretary General containing 'evidence' of Indian support to violence in Balochistan. In March this year, Pakistan claimed to arrest an alleged RAW operative from Balochistan. India has been always denied these accusations, but has continued to remain engaged unofficially. However, by openly committing India to Balochistan's cause in his speech, Modi is likely to expose India's geo-strategic limitations without gaining any additional advantage, and there is a lot to lose.

It is important to keep in mind that the Balochistan issue is not a straightforward one for India to directly engage in, as was the case with East Pakistan. India does not share a common border with Balochistan and is therefore dependent upon Afghanistan to provide more support to Baloch separatists. This is not as easy as some hawks in India tend to believe, especially as India is struggling to get enough security cover [even to protect its own assets](#) in a fast-deteriorating environment in Afghanistan.

India's expanded engagement in Balochistan might also bring Iran on Pakistan's side because Baloch nationalists have not only pitched themselves against Pakistan but against Iran as well. Balochs form a majority in Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan provinces and, like the Kurds, they are Sunni Muslims. It is not hard to imagine an Iran-Pakistan axis developing rapidly to prevent Baloch aspirations for independence. So getting bogged down in Balochistan risks turning Iran to an enemy of India.

When India went to war with Pakistan over Bangladesh in 1971 it had the blanket support of the Soviet Union, one of the two superpowers in the Cold War. If India picks a fight over Balochistan, Pakistan [will receive support from China](#) whose \$46 billion USD CPEC investment in the region is at stake, and it is unlikely that any global or regional power will come out openly on India's side. Both its old friend Russia, and new ally the USA have tried their best to stay out of the Balochistan imbroglio to date. There is no reason to expect that they will change their stance now.

Not only is Balochistan not East Pakistan, the Pakistani Military has moved on since the early 1970s. In 1971 their most prized possessions were the Patton tanks, but today it is their tactical nuclear weapons. After the country split, Pakistan did not just sulk and accept Indian domination, it decided to acquire a large nuclear arsenal by hook or crook. Unlike India, Pakistan has always been very clear about its purpose in acquiring nuclear weapons: to defend itself against Indian aggression. And unlike India, Pakistan also refuses to commit to a 'no first use' of their weapons.

Based on the amount of fissile material Pakistan has produced, it is [estimated](#) to have 110-130 nuclear warheads compared to India's 100-120. Both now possess ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and sea-based nuclear delivery systems. Most importantly, Pakistan's recent deployment of tactical nuclear weapons for its artillery arsenal has [taken away any advantage India had previously](#) in the case of a conventional war. This seriously limits India's manoeuvrability to intervene militarily in Pakistani territory, whether to retaliate against any terror group or support any 'separatist struggle'.

Provoking Pakistan to an armed conflict now is like playing with fire. If India threatens the territorial integrity of Pakistan as it did in 1971 there is a real possibility of that the Pakistani military will retaliate with its prized weapons. It has the capacity to launch a nuclear strike against India within 8 seconds and could strike Delhi in five minutes.

Even the Indian policy of massive retaliation against the first use would not reduce the ability Pakistani nuclear missiles have to reach several Indian cities in minutes. Even a limited nuclear confrontation could therefore potentially kill millions in India. So unless Narendra Modi is prepared to sacrifice half of his country's population to win against his nuclear-armed adversary, he should tread carefully. Pakistan understands well that India cannot openly engage in Balochistan conflict as it did in the case of Bangladesh. It is too much of a risk for India to gamble on. A self-assured Pakistan has already called Modi's bluff, and is even using Modi's speech to blame India for [the domestic insurgency that it has created in Kashmir](#).

So contrary to the claim of certain Indian commentators, Modi's bravado from the Red Fort on Balochistan will not deter Pakistani meddling in Kashmir now or in the future. Instead, it threatens to embolden Pakistan further in its desire to maintain its campaign and retaliate in India's other soft spots like Punjab and Assam.

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