

Gwadar conundrum

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Militarising Gwadar and imposing apartheid-like measures is not something random but is part of a systematic policy to ensure that the Baloch are thoroughly disenfranchised in every way

Gwadar seems to be an exceptionally strong magnet attracting so many different forces towards it. China seems to have the most affinity and fascination for it. It is a new contender to superpower status and does not let an opportunity go by to spread its footprint however it can. Here it has found a willing accomplice in the form of the Pakistani establishment that also aspires to become at least a regional power. They think that Gwadar has all the characteristics that will help them further their respective goals. The common trait of these two is their abhorrence of diversity and greed for profits and land. China, despite its large landmass, is busy reclaiming land in the South China Sea in disputed areas and is building runways for possible military use on the Spratly Islands; Obama recently warned the country over this reclamation. For China, Gwadar is a Godsend as it is getting it all simply by investing. Yes, investing \$ 46 billion to reap profits. This is not the mind-boggling sum it is shown to be because Exxon Oil company's profits in 2008 alone were \$ 46 billion.

Apart from easy trade routes and accessible corridors for its energy needs, China needs bases to protect these vital installations and routes, and it will not trust others to shoulder that responsibility. Gwadar is one such strategic point for China and it matters not to them how much Baloch blood is shed or of what magnitude Baloch suffering is. Having found a willing ally here, it is certainly not going to relinquish any such opportunity for altruistic reasons alone. China is bent upon making the highest profits possible and it has threatened the government that it will quit the cherished China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) if the tariff rates for its solar project are cut.

Gwadar airport has long been seen as a venue for a military and air force base. If this were not the case why disregard normal procedure when the 6,600 acres for the new Gwadar airport were being purchased? It was the Military Estates Officer (MEO) in Quetta instead of the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) that bought the land for Rs.1.05 billion. Any land acquired by the Military Lands and Cantonments (MLC) makes it the property of the Pakistan Army and this fact alone thoroughly exposes the claims that Gwadar is an exclusively commercial project. Moreover, in a January 26, 2007 Senate debate, Senator Raza Rabbani — then a dove probably — said that the airport in Gwadar was a “civil-military” airbase and that was why the MLC had acquired thousands of acres of land. Interestingly, also in this report, Senator Dr Abdul Malik (the present Balochistan chief minister) told the house that the government had purchased 150,000 acres of land through the MLC for Gwadar airport and not all people had been paid. There was uproar over the price paid as well: Pakistan Railways paid Rs 55,000 per acre while the MLC paid Rs 157,000 per acre.

Hartsfield-Jackson Airport Atlanta has been the world's busiest airport since 1998 and attracts more travellers than any other airport in the world with 96,178,899 passengers passing through in 2014. It also manages more aircraft movements (takeoffs and landings) than any other airport in the world with 881,933 in 2014 and is built only on 4,700 acres. Gwadar airport is twice the size of London's Heathrow (2,965 acres) where a plane lands or takes off every 46 seconds at peak time, handling 73,408,442 passengers and 472,817 aircraft movements in 2014. This oversized place is obviously required for objectives other than

what is publicised. China needs a base and needs it pronto; it has to compete with US bases to make its mark as the new kid on the superpower block and the Pakistani government has allocated Rs 26 billion for the purpose.

Militarising Gwadar and imposing apartheid-like measures of residence passes for the residents of Gwadar is not something random but is part of a systematic policy to ensure that the Baloch are thoroughly disenfranchised in every way and are pushed into a corner from which they find themselves unable to resist whatever indignities and injustices are heaped upon them. This viciously inhuman policy stems not only from the desire of fulfilling their economic and strategic requirements but also from visceral vindictiveness aimed at punishing the Baloch for their resistance to the Pakistani establishment's aim of exploiting Balochistan's resources and utilising its 347,190 km² landmass for purposes that would deprive the Baloch but benefit their chosen ones as has been seen with natural gas, copper, gold and onyx.

The United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID) visited Pakistan in September 2013 but was accorded minimum of cooperation. This group visited Sri Lanka recently, inspected a former illegal prison complex in the island's northeast during its visit, and urged Sri Lanka to speed up probes into suspected secret detention centres. Since the CPEC signing, the number of missing persons has jumped. The WGEID should also probe secret prisons, which are black holes here in which thousands of Baloch have disappeared. The impunity and the scale with which disappearances have continued in Balochistan verges on genocide and the UN body should be allowed unhindered access to these black holes to see for itself the plight of the missing Baloch.

This vindictive repression and systematic disenfranchisement of the Baloch is being helped and spurred on by disunity among the Baloch. The parable of the trees and axe is apt here. The trees complained that the axe was committing atrocities against them and something must be done to stop axe-perpetrated excesses. They were told if it were not for those of them that became the axe's handle, the axe would be pretty much harmless. The festering and malignant disunity among the Baloch on every level is certainly not helping the Baloch in any way and is on the contrary spurring the establishment on. The latter realises how this destructive and noxious disunity weakens all Baloch, and encourages it towards more harsh and unjust measures in order to weaken them beyond recovery point. The responsibility for salvaging and protecting Baloch rights lies squarely on the shoulders of those who claim to be leaders. Without unity there is danger that the Baloch struggle for rights will become a forgotten chapter.

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