



ISSUE BRIEF

No. 275

March 2021

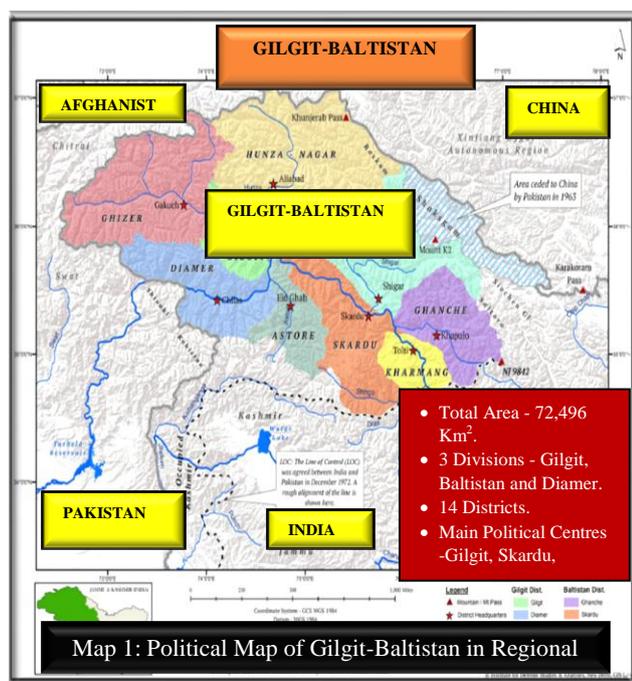
India and Gilgit-Baltistan: Insight into Journey from Historical Past to Evolving Present



Colonel Surjeet Singh Tanwar is an alumni of RIMC, NDA, Defence Services Staff College, Wellington and Manoeuvre Centre of Excellence (MCoE), Fort Benning, USA. The officer has served in High Altitude Area along LAC and was a part of Indian Contingent in UN Mission in Congo. Besides various career courses, the officer was nominated to attend UN 'Train the Trainer' course at Five Hills Training Centre, Mongolia under the aegis of US PACOM. He has been awarded GOC-in-C Commendation Card (Gallantry). The Officer Commanded a Mechanised battalion in Semi- Desert and Developed Sector and is currently attending course at Army War College, Mhow

"I am grateful to the people of Balochistan, Gilgit-Baltistan and PoJK who have thanked me in the past few days. If people of these regions thank me, they are thanking the 125 Crore Indians".¹

— Shri Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India



Source: Adapted from IDSA GIS Lab¹. Annotated by Author

Key Points

- The recent CPEC phenomenon through Gilgit-Baltistan has led to China-Pakistan relationship being projected as the most defining partnership in Asia of 21st century leading to new evolving connotation 'From Peripheral Kashmir to Geo-political Kashmir'.
- In the zero-sum game, interests of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan have little or No space.
- Khunjerab Pass is being termed as China's Khyber Pass and Gateway to India through the region of Gilgit-Baltistan. It is worth recounting General Musharraf's statement in 2006 wherein he called Karakoram Highway as the '8th Wonder of the World'.
- Nicklas Norling in one of his writing has stated that 'Pakistan to China in South Asia is like Israel to US in Middle East'.
- Regional stability hinges around two key recommended themes of 'De-Balkanisation of Erstwhile Greater Jammu and Kashmir' and 'Re-Asianisation of Asia'.
- Feasible strategy for India would require a 'whole of Nation Approach' flowing from the Kautilyan Approach to statecraft.



Introduction

Geographical location of Gilgit-Baltistan sharing borders with Pakistan, Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan and Xinjiang Province of People's Republic of China make it geo-strategically significant for India. This geo-strategic significance has, therefore, also been at the core of its fate and trajectory. British decision to keep this Northern part under a strong tab during the pre-1947 period was guided by these geopolitical calculations and decided to administer Gilgit on lease for a span of 60 years. However, developments of 1947 and specifically Gilgit Agency Mutiny saw the unqualified inclusion² of Gilgit-Baltistan as part of the newly created Pakistan. Since then, this part of Kashmir under Pakistan's control has been completely shrouded in the debate on Kashmir and by a deliberate strategy; Pakistan has tried to keep these areas blanketed. However, post the construction of Karakoram Highway, Gilgit-Baltistan emerged as the crucial link between Pakistan and its all-weather friend, China. With evolving China Pakistan Economic Corridor, this relationship is now being projected as the most defining partnership in the Asia of 21st century³ leading to new evolving connotation 'From Peripheral Kashmir to Geopolitical Kashmir'. Today, due to the significantly altered geopolitical scenario and related drivers, make India's repositioning compelling and necessary with respect to this region. Chinese presence in Gilgit-Baltistan is a warning bell and needs diligent attention by India.

Historical Evolution of Gilgit-Baltistan

- ***Gilgit-Baltistan: Journey from Pre-Historic Times.*** Gilgit-Baltistan was originally known as Balwaristan or Boloristan. Historically, this region has been part of India and Jammu and Kashmir's political, cultural and spiritual domains since the *Mahabharata* times. These linkages visibly manifest in the Ganpatyar, Shankaracharya and Khir Bhavani Temples located in the Kashmir Valley. Emperor Ashoka introduced Buddhism in the region during 3rd Century BC. Interestingly, Mahayana School of Buddhism originated in Jammu and Kashmir and attained pre-eminence during the reign of Emperor Kanishka in 1st century AD when Fourth Buddhist Council was held here. Emperor Lalitaditya's rule from 724 to 760 AD marked the Golden Age of Kashmir and the Zenith of Hindu Karkota Empire and the Kashmiri Shaivism.⁴ Islam moved in gradually during 14th Century giving birth to a vibrant, syncretic Sufi-Rishi tradition of Kashmiriyat, influenced by Muslim saints like Sheikh Nuruddin Noorani also known as Nund Rishi.



- ***Cultural, Anthropological and Sociological Linkages.*** Throughout history, all the regions of Jammu and Kashmir including Gilgit-Baltistan have been integral part of the Kashmir Empire and continued so until the Dogra Empire of the nineteenth and the twentieth century. As a matter of fact, Rinchan, the first Muslim King was a Prince of Ladakh, who was rechristened as Sadruddin Shah on conversion to Islam and the last major independent Muslim Dynasty that ruled Kashmir, The Chak Dynasty, had migrated from Gilgit. These facts highlight close both inter and intra-regional, cultural, social and political connections. Moreover, it goes to prove that the history of the areas under present Pakistan Occupied Jammu and Kashmir including Gilgit-Baltistan have an umbilical connection to the history of Greater Jammu and Kashmir itself.⁵ With the ascension of Mughals, Kashmir became a province of Delhi Empire in 1540 AD and continued to be ruled by its Governors for the next three centuries. It was followed by six decades of Afghan rule under the Durranis. This region as a whole has evolved over the centuries with deep rooted cultural and sociological linkages.
- ***Sikh Rule and Dogra Empire.*** At the dawn of the 19th century, Kashmir came under the Sikh Rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. It is important to note that the Sikh Rule was initially confined to the Kashmir Valley. Jammu Region was given to Raja Gulab Singh as a Jagir by Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1820. After consolidating his position in the Jammu Region, Gulab Singh assisted ably by General Zorawar Singh captured Ladakh and Baltistan by 1840. In 1846, Treaty of Lahore was signed after the defeat of Sikh Army at the Battle of Sabraon in the First Anglo-Sikh War. British offered to make Raja Gulab Singh the Independent ruler of Jammu and Kashmir provided he paid the indemnity amount. British transferred the territory of Jammu and Kashmir to Raja Gulab Singh vide the Treaty of Amritsar for reduced amount of 75 Lakhs. This treaty made Gulab Singh the absolute ruler of Kashmir and a full-fledged sovereign of Jammu, Kashmir, Ladakh, as well as Gilgit and Baltistan. However, like elsewhere, Britain retained exclusive authority over Defence and Foreign Affairs. Gilgit Agency was established in 1877 with a nominated British Political agent, who was withdrawn and later reappointed in 1889 in view of the growing Afghan influence in Chitral as well as Russian activities in Central Asia. However, consequent to the Russian Revolution, the British anxieties over the Gilgit region increased and the Maharaja was forced to lease the Gilgit Agency to the British for a period of 60 years with effect from 01 April 1935.⁶ The Maharaja had no problem with the British proposal as the lease only implied the transfer of civil and military administration



while the territory continued to be part of his dominion.⁷ The announcement of independence forced the British to hand Gilgit Agency back to the Maharaja in July 1947.

- ***Dawn of Independence and Developments.*** At the time of India's Independence, the princely state was a single administrative unit under Maharaja Hari Singh. Since the Maharaja was undecided on a preferred course, he wished to sign a Standstill Agreement with both India and Pakistan. India refused to sign the agreement immediately, citing other major concerns and issues facing the country in the wake of partition. However, Pakistan readily accepted the Standstill offer, and signed it. Gilgit Agency having been restored to the Maharaja of Kashmir by British, the region was henceforth administered by Brigadier Ghansara Singh as the political Governor. Major Brown having strong leanings towards Pakistan staged a coup facilitating Gilgit-Baltistan's accession to Pakistan. The flag of Pakistan was hoisted by Major William Brown on November 1, 1947. A political agent from Pakistan, Sardar Muhammad Alam, assumed charge of the region. It is argued that the common people of Gilgit-Baltistan had not participated in the rebellion.⁸ Justifying his actions under a clandestine operation called OPERATION DATTAKHEL, as 'coup-de-etat', Major Brown had remarked, "My actions appeared to possess all the elements of high treason, yet I know in my own mind that what I had done was right".⁹ From Indian point of view, Major Brown's action indicated British complicity, various conspiracy theories and Pakistani-British connivance, which surely gets substantiated by him being awarded the *Sitara -i- Imtiaz*, the third highest honour and civilian award in Pakistan, posthumously in 1993.¹⁰
- ***Events Post-Gilgit Rebellion to Present day Gilgit-Baltistan.*** For a short period, prior to the signing of the Karachi Agreement of 1949 that abrogated AJK's authority over Gilgit-Baltistan, the region was administered by the 'AJK' government and governed under the draconian Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR).¹¹ With the passage of time, there was increasing realisation in Gilgit-Baltistan that it had been a mistake to go with Pakistan in 1947. The growing discontent was evident in the political movements that emerged as early as 1957. The Gilgit League was formed to oppose the FCR and to demand basic political and democratic rights for the people of Gilgit-Baltistan. More nationalist groups like the *Tanzeem-e-Millat* and Gilgit-Baltistan *Jamhoori Mahaz* were formed in the later years to create awareness regarding basic political and constitutional rights among the people of Gilgit-Baltistan.¹² The FCR was abolished by former Prime Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1974 and certain administrative and judicial reforms were introduced to defuse the



situation. The process of reforms ended abruptly when Zia ul Haq came to power and imposed martial law in 1977. In 1982, General Zia ul Haq made a failed attempt to effect some reforms by taking select members of the Northern Areas Council to the *Majlis-e-Shura*.¹³ When Benazir Bhutto came to power in the late 1980s, she resumed the process of reform and although most of them were inconsequential, they led to the first ever party based elections in Gilgit-Baltistan in October 1994. Till 2009, Gilgit-Baltistan was referred as the Federally Administered Northern Areas (FANA) by the government of Pakistan consisting of the former Gilgit Agency, Gilgit Wazarat, Astor Wazarat and Skardu Tehsil of Ladakh Wazarat.¹⁴ The Trans Karakoram Tract was ceded to China in 1963. The three administrative divisions of Gilgit-Baltistan have fourteen districts in all. These governance structures work under the overall control of the Federal Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit-Baltistan (KAGB).

- **GBRO (Gilgit-Baltistan Reforms Order) 2018.** In view of the persisting demands for absorption of the region as the fifth province of Pakistan, the then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif announced a Central Committee headed by Sartaj Aziz on October 29, 2015. Pakistan raised the hopes to the people of Gilgit-Baltistan by indirectly assuring them to change the political status of the region by turning it into a province of Pakistan. Reports from Pakistan held that the decision to incorporate Gilgit-Baltistan as a new province was taken following pressure from China to bring clarity to the legal status of Gilgit-Baltistan, especially because India called it a disputed territory and objected to any CPEC related investments in this region. The nationalist groups including Balawaristan National Front, Karakoram National Movement, Gilgit-Baltistan Democratic Alliance, Gilgit-Baltistan United Movement etc. have been fighting with the government either for autonomy or independence and thus, were lukewarm to the demands for inclusion of Gilgit-Baltistan as the fifth province of Pakistan. The Supreme Court of Pakistan in August 2018 restored the Gilgit-Baltistan Order 2018 which was suspended by Supreme Appellate Court on June 20, 2018.¹⁵ Government of Pakistan conducted elections for Gilgit-Baltistan Assembly on November 20, 2020. The Government of India conveyed its strongest protest to the Pakistani counterpart and reiterated that Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh, including the so-called Gilgit-Baltistan, are an integral part of India.¹⁶



“India Shares 106 Km Land Border with Afghanistan” —referring to the area along Wakhan Corridor in the Badakhshan Province, Afghanistan and Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir (PoJK).¹⁷

—Shri Amit Shah, Home Minister of India

Impact of Gilgit-Baltistan as Fifth Province of Pakistan

Pakistan is set to make Gilgit-Baltistan as its fifth province in the disputed region.¹⁸ India has strongly condemned and denounced this decision with Pakistan having no *locus standi* to alter the status of this ‘illegally and forcibly’ occupied region. Interestingly, in this zero-sum game, interests of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan have little or no space. Local populace has resented the Pakistani control and a sense of neglect, exploitation and discrimination prevails. This abrupt decision by Pakistan to amend the status of Gilgit-Baltistan is likely to have been made in response to India’s 05 August 2019 constitutional change in the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir. It also seems to be taken under the pressure of Chinese.

Strategic Component

Evolving Heartland Geo-politics of 21st Century passes through the region of Gilgit-Baltistan. This region lies on the periphery of the erstwhile princely state, and touches the borders of important countries as mentioned earlier; its strategic significance has been immense. This strategic significance has, therefore, also been at the core of their fate and trajectory.¹⁹ It was predominantly geopolitical calculations that guided the British decision to keep the Northern part under a strong tab during the pre-1947 period. Today, Gilgit-Baltistan forms the crucial link between Pakistan and its all-weather friend, the People’s Republic of China. It is difficult to imagine how their bilateral ties would have flourished had the region, rightfully so, would have been under India’s control. In the present context, China is seeking to leverage this territorial link to fulfil its ambitious multi-pronged trans-national connectivity project, China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Khunjerab Pass is being termed as China’s Khyber Pass and Gateway to India through the region of Gilgit-Baltistan. In this context, it is worth recounting General P Musharraf’s statement in 2006 as President of Pakistan wherein he called Karakoram Highway as the ‘8th Wonder of the World’ created by Himalayan effort of China and Pakistan. He also said that upcoming Railway Line through Khunjerab Pass will be 9th and Fibre Optics connect as the 10th Wonder of the World. Many experts have started calling Xinjiang as the China’s Bridgehead to Central Asia and is



central to its so called Highway Diplomacy. One of the unknown and lesser spoken fact about the region is Soviet plan to attack Gilgit-Baltistan and interdict KKH in 1979 with an aim to destroy militant training camps and interdict illegal weapons flow along this route and region. Possibility of secret missile storage facilities of China in this region cannot be ruled out. Pakistan in a sense has become the security outpost of China and 'Gwadar Port as China's Gibraltar of 21st Century'. Nicklas Norling in one of his writing has stated that 'Pakistan to China in South Asia is like Israel to US in Middle East'²⁰ and hence, crucial lynchpin to China's connect with this region. Possibilities of NATO forces supply route through China or hypothetically, through India via Gilgit-Baltistan to Afghanistan would have actually nullified the strategic importance of Pakistan to US and NATO.

Policy Recommendations for Regional Stability

The proposed policy recommendations for regional stability hinge around two key themes of 'De-Balkanisation of Erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir' and 'Re-Asianisation of Asia'. Feasible strategy could call for a 'whole of Nation Approach', bold policy with continuity, discarding self-restraint and spread over a period of 12-15 years with campaign conducted over multiple and parallel lines of operations simultaneously. These recommendations flow from the Kautilyan Approach to statecraft to include important decisions as part of the domestic tier, weaken China-Pakistan nexus, be part of regional and international alliances, leveraging international stakeholders in the region, Afghanistan and Central Asia centric, and International policy statement. Since the region of Gilgit-Baltistan is currently not under the control of India, accordingly five out of the six recommendations are directed towards attaining this as part of the overall Grand Strategy.

"There is a Parliamentary Resolution of 1994, that entire Jammu and Kashmir region is a part of India. If Parliament wants it, then that area (PoJK including Gilgit-Baltistan) also should belong to us. When we get orders to that effect, we will take appropriate action".²¹

—General M M Naravane, COAS

Conclusion

All these geo-political developments in the region of Gilgit-Baltistan combined with Karakoram and Aksai Chin Highways are clear pointers to geographical and militarily encirclement of Jammu and Kashmir from three sides with Gilgit-Baltistan as the most crucial strand. This makes Gilgit-Baltistan as the 'crucial nerve centre' of the often spoken and evolving collusivity between China and Pakistan. Both countries derive strength of their



collusion through this region and recent Pakistan declaration of making it the provisional fifth province flows from the pressures of China. Hence, India needs to get proactive to re-establish its historic hold over Gilgit-Baltistan and break the encirclement of this region by the collusive effort of both Pakistan and China.

*“Above the snowline, somewhere amidst the peaks and glaciers that wall in the Gilgit Valley, the long and jealously guarded frontiers of India, China, Russia, Afghanistan and Pakistan meet. It is the hub, the crow’s nest, the fulcrum of Asia”.*²²

— John Keay, British Historian

End Notes

¹India.com News Desk (15 August 2020), *narendra-modi-independence-day-speech-2016-full-video-from-inflation-to-terrorism-heres-what-prime-minister-said-in-his-address-1408737*, india.com, accessed on 18 September 20.

²Sisir Gupta (1967), *Kashmir: A Study in India-Pakistan Relations*, Asia Publishing House, p.109', accessed on 18 September 20.

³Andrew Small (2015), *The China Pakistan Axis: Asia’s New Geopolitics*, Hurst Publishers, accessed on 19 September 20.

⁴Sham Misri (2018), *Kashmir - A Concise History: Mahabharata Epoch 3067 BCE to Modi Era 2016 A.D.*, independently published, accessed on 21 September 20.

⁵Sham Misri, *ibid*.

⁶Alok Bansal and NidhiBahuguna (2020), *Occupied Territories of Bharat*, Pentagon Press LLP, accessed on 02 October 20.

⁷Ahmad HasanDani (2001), *History of the Northern Areas of Pakistan*, Sange Meel Publications, Lahore, Pakistan, p. 294, accessed on 18 September 20.

⁸‘Subroto Roy (June 5, 2006), *Pakistan’s Allies*, at [Http://Independentindian.Com/2006/06/05/Pakistans-Allies/](http://Independentindian.Com/2006/06/05/Pakistans-Allies/), accessed on 26 September 20.

⁹Alok Bansal and Virendera Gupta (2013), *Pakistan Occupied Kashmir: The Untold Story*, Manas Publications, accessed on 18 September 20.

¹⁰Karthick Nambi (05 May 2020), *how-due-to-a-scout-revolt-india-lost-half-of-kashmir-and-access-to-central-asia-c275c7b4f9cd*, medium.com, accessed on 18 September 20.

¹¹‘Full Text of the Frontier Crimes Regulation (1901) Available at [Http://Www.Pakistansocietyofcriminology.Com/Laws/THEFRONTIERCRIME_SREGULATION1901.Doc](http://Www.Pakistansocietyofcriminology.Com/Laws/THEFRONTIERCRIME_SREGULATION1901.Doc)’, accessed on 29 September 20.

¹²Altaf Hussain (2009), *The Gilgit Baltistan Reforms 2009, Report by the Forum of Federations Project*, December 2009 at <http://Www.Forumfed.Org/En/Pubs/Pakistan/Gilgitbaltistan%20Reforms%20AHussain%20FinalDec09.Doc>, p. 6’, accessed on 18 September 20.



¹³Northern Areas of Pakistan-Facts, Problems and Recommendations, Policy Perspectives, Vlm 1, No.1 at [Http://Www.lps.Org.Pk/Pakistan-and-Its-Neighbours/1118-Northern-Areas-of-Pakistan-Facts-Problems-and-Recommendations.Html](http://www.lps.org.pk/Pakistan-and-Its-Neighbours/1118-Northern-Areas-of-Pakistan-Facts-Problems-and-Recommendations.html), accessed on 18 September 20.

¹⁴P Stobdan (1995), *North West under the Maharaja in Jasjit Singh(Ed), Pakistan Occupied Kashmir: Under the Jackboot*, Siddhi Books, Cosmo Publications,p. 47, accessed on 18 September 20.

¹⁵Haseeb Bhatti (2018), ‘SC Restores GB Order 2018, Tells Govt to Ensure Equal Rights for Region’s People’, *DAWN.COM*, 8 August 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1425749>, accessed on 18 September 20.

¹⁶ WION (2020) ‘India Protests Announcement of Elections in “Gilgit-Baltistan’’, <https://www.wionews.com/india-news/india-protests-announcement-of-elections-in-gilgit-baltistan-331114>, accessed 29 September 2020.

¹⁷Sh Amit Shah, Home Minister of India in Indian Parliament on 06 August 2019, Post Abrogation of Article 370’, accessed on 22 October 20.

¹⁸ Deepak Saini (19 November 2020), *gilgit-baltistan-as-pakistans-new-province-could-be-a-gamechanger-in-indo-pacific-geopolitics*, futuredirections.org.au, accessed on 18 September 20.

¹⁹Priyanka Singh (2017), ‘IDSA Monograph Series No. 62 October 2017 RE-POSITIONING PAKISTAN OCCUPIED KASHMIR ON INDIA’S POLICY MAP GEOPOLITICAL DRIVERS, STRATEGIC IMPACT’, accessed on 18 September 20.

²⁰ Reginald J. McClam (2016), *Balancing on the Pivot: How China’s Rise and Offshore Balancing Affect Japan’s and India’s Roles as Balancers in the Twenty-First Century*, Drew Paper, No. 22, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama: Air University Press, Air Force Research Institute, accessed on 18 September 20.

²¹The Economic Times (2020), ‘Will Take Action to Reclaim PoJK If Ordered, Says Army Chief General Naravane’, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/will-take-action-to-reclaim-pok-if-ordered-says-army-chief-mukund-naravane/articleshow/73201632.cms>, accessed 08 November 2020.

²²Abbas, R. A. (07 November 2020), *Why Gilgit-Baltistan is about to become a geo-strategic jewel once again Part 1. Tribune Pakistan*, pg 1, accessed on 18 November 20.

The views expressed and suggestions made in the article are solely of the author in his personal capacity and do not have any official endorsement. Attributability of the contents lies purely with author.



CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES (CLAWS)

RPSO Complex, Parade Road, Delhi Cantt, New Delhi 110010

Tel.: +91-11-25691308, Fax: +91-11-25692347, CLAWS Army No. 33098; Email: landwarfare@gmail.com

Website: www.claws.in