



CLAWS

Red Footprints in Gilgit-Baltistan: China's Expanding Presence in PoK

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The debate around the China-Pak axis and that of the relationship between the 'all-weather friends' has drawn concern from the regional players, most significantly, India. Cementing the ties further, Chinese President Hu Jintao cast light on the decades-old strategic partnership, and characterised the relationship between Beijing and Islamabad as one that was "higher than the mountains, deeper than the oceans."

As recent reports seem to suggest, a subtle move by Pakistan to allow increased Chinese activity in the strategic area of Gilgit-Baltistan has added fuel to the fire that threatens to alter the existing security scenario in the region. According to a report published in *The New York Times* in August 2010, an estimated 7,000-11,000 soldiers of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) were reportedly deployed in the Gilgit-Baltistan region of Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK). Described as an 'influx' of PLA soldiers in the Gilgit-Baltistan region, Selig S Harrison, a noted South Asia observer, termed the development as the unfolding of "a quiet geopolitical crisis" in the Himalayan borderlands of northern Pakistan. Expressing apprehension about the fluid security situation in the region, Harrison had previously commented, "...The potential reality that an independent Kashmir could end up as another permanent sanctuary for radical extremist terrorist organisations, given the *jehadi* nature of these groups..."

Since the publication of this report, speculation has been rife in South Asia, forcing China to issue a

denial through the *Xinhua News Agency*, the official press agency of the People's Republic of China (PRC). However, Jiang Yu, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, did not provide what could be described as a 'denial' of PLA troop presence in the region, but chose to comment upon the larger dimension of attempts being made by a few to fabricate stories so as to jeopardise China-Pakistan or China-India relations. Subsequently, Pakistan stated that China had sent in a "humanitarian team" to the Gilgit-Baltistan area in order to assist in flood relief operations.

The Gilgit-Baltistan Region: Augmenting Military Preparedness?

Officially known as Gilgit-Baltistan, the region is the northernmost part of PoK and was earlier referred to as the "Northern Areas" in Pakistan. Situated between the Hindu Kush and Karakoram range of mountains in the north and western Himalayas in the south, it consists of seven districts, namely Gilgit, Skardu, Diamir, Ghizer, Astore, Ghanchi and Hunza Nagar, bordering Xinjiang in China, the Afghan Pamirs in the north, and a 480-km-long Line of Control (LoC) in the south.

In August 2009, Pakistan's government granted 'self-rule' to the region by virtue of approving the "Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self Governance Order", thereby making provisions

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for an elected legislative assembly and an elected government. However, it did not grant the region the status of the country's fifth province. It would be important to mention here that Pakistan has been in illegal occupation of the Northern Areas since 1947, given that the erstwhile Gilgit Agency forms an integral part of the undivided princely state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), which belongs to India.

In addition to the strategic importance that it has for Pakistan, PoK holds immense significance for China as well, in its aim of stretching its strategic footprint. This, in turn, can be linked to China's infrastructure development in Tibet so as to consolidate its hold over the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) by means of roads, railways, bridges, airports, waterways, energy storage, and communication networks, including wired (fibre optics) and wireless communications.

In this context, special reference should be made to the region's Lhasa-Kashgar/Aksai Chin/Xinjiang Highway, commonly referred to as China's Western Highway, in that it connects Xinjiang to Tibet, by linking Kashgar and Lhasa (3,105 km). From Quilnaldi, the road branches off to the 15,397 ft-high Khunjerab Pass and subsequently becomes the Karakoram Highway right upto Gilgit. The Khunjerab Pass straddles the border between China and PoK and is located approximately 270 km from Gilgit. Also, Beijing and Islamabad plan to link the Karakoram Highway to Gwadar in southwestern Baluchistan through the Chinese-built Gwadar-Dalbandin railway, which extends up to Rawalpindi. The 1,300-km-long Karakoram Highway connects Pakistan's Northern Areas with Kashgar in China's Xinjiang province.

The significance of the Karakoram Highway is in the fact that it cuts through the zone between Asia and the Indian subcontinent, where China, Tajikistan,

Afghanistan, India and Pakistan come within 250 km of each other. China and Pakistan have agreed to allow market access for bilateral trade in 11 service sectors as they intensify efforts to increase border trade through the Karakoram Highway. By means of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed in June 2006 between China's state-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission and the National Highway Authority of Pakistan, it was decided that the Karakoram Highway would further be widened from 10 metres to 30 metres, with its operational capacity going up three-fold. During President Asif Ali Zardari's visit to China in July 2010, an agreement was signed between the China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) and the National Highway Authority of Pakistan for upgrading and widening of the Karakoram Highway Phase-2, connecting the Thakot bridge to Sazin, and with the China Gezhouba Group International Engineering Company Ltd for widening the Jaglot-Skardu road. Constructed to accommodate heavy vehicles in extreme weather conditions, the repair and upgradation of the highway is slated to be completed in 2012.

As far as China is concerned, the Karakoram Highway is integral to keep Pakistan's military strength sustained against India. Keeping India engaged through the channel of 'spoiler state' Pakistan has been Beijing's foreign policy objective for a long time. The ongoing development projects in the Gilgit-Baltistan region, which are of strategic significance with regard to the India-China-Pakistan triangle, are testament to this intent. Indian concerns on China's growing connectivity with Pakistan by means of linkages through the occupied territory of J&K have already been placed on record in the 2008-09 Annual Report of the Ministry of Defence (tabled in the Rajya Sabha). The report states that "... enhancing connectivity with Pakistan through the territory of Jammu and Kashmir, illegally occupied by China and Pakistan, will have direct military implications for India."

Further, there is a large number of lateral roads leading to passes on the Indian border. The PLA troops are speculated to be providing crucial assistance to as

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many as 767 development projects funded by China in the Gilgit-Baltistan region, which include construction of dams, bridges, roads (including the construction, maintenance and expansion of the Karakoram Highway). This, in turn, would facilitate Beijing to transport cargo and oil tankers from eastern China to Pakistan's ports at Gwadar, Pasni and Ormara in Baluchistan just east of the Persian Gulf in 48 hours – thus, lessening the dependence and vulnerability of the oil supply by way of tankers from the Gulf through the Strait of Malacca.

China's Infrastructure Projects in Gilgit-Baltistan

Infrastructure development is considered to be the foundation of a nation's economic rise and a determining factor as far as competing in a globalised world is concerned. China seeks to facilitate migration from rural to urban life not just within its territory, but beyond. According to a study conducted by *Morgan Stanley* in February 2009, corroborating a 2005 *World Bank* study, China is expected to account for approximately 80 percent of total infrastructure spending in the entire East Asian region from 2006 to 2010, which translates to approximately nine percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) – or nearly \$350 billion annually.

Beijing's noteworthy investments in the infrastructure projects in the Gilgit-Baltistan region include the construction of a dry port at Sost, water-diversion channels and telecommunication facilities. The port at Sost, on the Pakistan-China border, is connected by the Karakoram Highway to Karimabad, Gilgit and Chilas in the south and the Chinese cities of Tashkurgan, Upal and Kashgar in the north. The port at Sost holds the potential to serve as a key channel of trading activity for the Central Asian states.

China has also chosen to focus on the power sector to exploit the huge hydro-electric power potential of the region. The construction of a hydro-power station at Bunji, in the Astore district of the Gilgit-Baltistan region of PoK, holds special significance, given that it was included in the MoU signed between Pakistan

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and China during President Zardari's visit to China in August 2009. The estimated cost of the proposed Bunji Dam is \$7 billion with a purported capacity to generate 7,000 megawatts (MW) of electricity. The deal has been undertaken on a build-operate-transfer basis, with the entire investment made available by China. Significantly, the Bunji project is just one of the eight hydel projects that are to be constructed.

Moreover, Islamabad is also undertaking construction on the \$12.6 billion Diamer-Bhasha Dam, which will have the capacity to generate 4,500 MW of electricity per day. Work on the dam is already underway and is slated for completion in 2016. The dam is proposed on the Indus river – 165 km downstream of Gilgit and 40 km downstream of Chilas. China has agreed to grant Pakistan \$121 million supplier credit to establish a link line between the Karakoram Highway and the Bhasha Dam site to help transport heavy machinery needed for its construction. China is also putting in an 85 percent investment in the construction of the 165 km-long Jaglot-Skardu road and 135 km-long Thakot-Sazin road in the region.

In addition, Chinese companies have been signed on to construct bridges in PoK. CWE, a Chinese firm, will build a bridge on the Jhelum river in Mirpur, costing \$22 million, and another five permanent bridges are being constructed by the Xinjiang Road and Bridge Construction Company. Mineral exploration is being undertaken in a major way in the Satpara district in PoK, in addition to another mining proposal made by Xinjiang Surpass Mining Company Ltd, worth \$6 million.

According to a July 2010 report published in the *Gilgit-Baltistan Tribune*, the proposal for the construction of a railway line between Xinjiang and

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the Arabian Sea through Gilgit-Baltistan has been under discussion for many years. For this purpose, Chinese companies have supposedly completed a pre-feasibility study on the engineering and financial aspects of the project. However, no open source confirmation is available that could indicate the exact status of this proposed project.

Viewing China's larger game plan of consolidating its hold over Tibet and Xinjiang, it is manifest that Beijing is pursuing a well-orchestrated and devious strategy of positioning itself in a situation of advantage in Tibet and far beyond. The Qinghai-Tibet Railway (QTR) line has contributed vitally towards reducing the military expenditure in terms of movement of men and materials to/from the frontiers. The QTR will also permit easier movement of larger and more capable ballistic missiles into the TAR. Given that approximately 2.18 percent of the 1,118-km-long railway is made up of tunnels, it was surprising that once the construction of these tunnels was completed, they were kept unused for several months, thus inducing speculation that some of the tunnels were being used as missile bases. In this reference, all the supposed infrastructure projects being reported in the Gilgit-Baltistan region could be inclusive of the reported clandestine and surreptitious network of 22 tunnels, which then could be used as missile storage facilities.

Conclusion

As China and Pakistan strengthen their strategic partnership, vying for superior

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strategic rating in the South Asian region and beyond, the Chinese position on the Kashmir issue and its involvement in the same was indicative in October 2009, when the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi began issuing visas to Indian passport holders hailing from J&K on a separate sheet of paper, rather than stamping the visas on their passports, as is the norm with other Indian citizens. This could be construed as a crass new move to question the status of J&K vis-à-vis the Indian Union. All these incidents, coupled with the growing Chinese footprint in the Gilgit-Baltistan region, stand witness to China's aggressive engagement strategy in the region. Given China's aim of expanding its reach in the region, Pakistan's occupation of PoK and the string of political and administrative reforms coupled with a wide array of infrastructure projects in PoK undertaken by China need to be taken cognisance of. In due course of time, Beijing aims at enhancing consolidation of the area tacitly, especially in light of the reality that its geo-strategic interests and ambitions in the region are certainly on the ascent.



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