

India's North West: The New Great Game

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Introduction

The “high roof of the world”¹, the Gilgit-Baltistan region of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir, in illegal occupation of Pakistan since 1947 and earlier referred to by them as the ‘Northern Areas’, has its geo-strategic importance steeped in history. For hundreds of years in the past, the Russian, Persian, Chinese, Tibetan and the British Indian empires, sought to control the passes of this region to dominate each other. This region lies between the high Hindu Kush and the Karakoram mountain ranges to its north and the Western Himalayas to its immediate South. It borders Pakistan’s Dir, Swat, Kohistan and Kaghan districts of Khyber Pakhtunwa in the West, the Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan in its northwest, Xinjiang province of China to its East and northeast, Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) to the southwest and, importantly, a 480 km long Line of Control (LC) running alongside India in the southeast. The region lies along “the ancient axis of Asia”² where South, Central and East Asia converge and, since time immemorial, has been the gateway for both India and China to Central Asia.

History of the Region: Post 1947

At the time of partition of India in 1947, when the princely states of the British Indian Empire were given a choice of either acceding to India or Pakistan, the then ruler of Jammu and Kashmir, Maharaja Hari Singh vacillated till he was faced with an armed invasion by a combined force of Pakistani regulars and irregulars to annex the state. Soon thereafter, the Maharaja signed the Instrument of Accession with India, but before the Indian Army landed in the state and could push back the invaders, most of the Gilgit-Baltistan region and some other portions of the state of J&K had been

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illegally occupied by the Pakistani marauders. The area of J&K which the Pakistanis occupied was around 85,793 sq km. In 1970, it was further divided by Pakistan into two separate divisions namely, Mirpur-Muzzaffarabad (referred to by Pakistan as 'Azad Kashmir') and the Federally Administered Gilgit-Baltistan, which was referred to, till 2009, as the Northern Areas.

The Gilgit division was further sub-divided into five districts, namely: Gilgit, Ghizer, Diamer, Astore and Hunza-Nagar while Baltistan comprises the two districts of Skardu and Ghanchi. Gilgit-Baltistan has a population of about two million people who belong to the Balti, Shin, Burushu, Vashkuns, Turki ethnicity. This region had around 85 per cent Shia population in 1948 which has now come down to around 50 per cent as successive Pakistani governments have systematically settled Sunni Wahabis in this region through unfair land allocations and giving employment to outsiders at the expense of the locals. The locals consider themselves very different from any Pakistani ethnic or linguistic group and share common historical links with Tibetans, Kashmiris, Ladakhis, Tajiks, Uighurs and Mongols.

In addition, this region is resource rich and substantial deposits of uranium, gold, copper and gems are located here besides the potential for production of hydro electricity is tremendous.

In an unprecedented move in 1963, the Pakistani government under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto illegally ceded an area of 5180 sq km to China in the Shaksgam Valley in the north-eastern part of the Gilgit-Baltistan region which borders the East Turkestan region of China. Pakistan's nexus with China has continued since then with its devious endeavour to bring China into the Kashmir dispute by ceding Shaksgam to them.

Strategic Significance of Gilgit-Baltistan and Karakoram Corridor

The unique strategic salience of this region, inexplicably underplayed for many years by most of the regional players, has suddenly come into limelight in the last few years with the Chinese not only establishing its footprint in this region but enlarging and consolidating its sway, both economically and militarily. The Chinese ambitions in this region are bound to have serious security

implications especially for India in the foreseeable future. In 2010, noted American analyst Selig Harrison revealed that nearly 7000 to 11000 China's People Liberation Army (PLA) personnel had been deployed in this region under the guise of engineering personnel and civilian labour. He succinctly termed this development as the unfolding of a "quiet geo-political crisis."³

The Shaksgam Valley area as ceded to China, facilitated the construction of the Karakoram Highway that links China's restive Xinjiang region through the Khunjerab Pass with Gilgit-Baltistan and thence Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunwa regions. It took nearly two decades to complete (1959-1979) and now the 1300 kms long highway connects Kashgar in China's Xinjiang province with Islamabad via Abbotabad and is an engineering marvel as it traverses extremely rugged high altitude terrain.

The southern end of the Karakoram corridor is the strategically important Gwadar Port on the Arabian Sea and the Pak naval bases of Pasni and Ormara, which lie close to Gwadar where the Chinese have built a modern deep sea port for subsequent utilisation by the Pakistani and the Chinese navies. The latter, now has an access to the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf and will be able to not only transport and guard its energy flow and other commercial supplies coming from West Asia and Africa but also monitor and intercept cargo ships and oil tankers, if required, carrying supplies to countries inimical to China. With high speed rail and road links via the Karakoram Highway, the time taken for transportation of cargo from Gwadar to the Chinese mainland will now be reduced to a mere 72 hours from the current 16 to 25 days which Chinese oil tankers take from the Gulf to Chinese ports via the circuitous sea route and the Malacca Straits choke-point. Thus the Gwadar Port and the vital Karakoram Highway 'slackens' the sea lanes of communications noose at Malacca for China, conferring immeasurable strategic dividends to it. Accordingly, the Chinese have been investing heavily in the Karakoram Highway and are now engaged in widening it from the current 10m to 30m width besides making it an all weather highway. Former Indian Naval Chief Admiral Sureesh Mehta has in relation to Gwadar candidly stated, "it will assist Pakistan to take control over the world energy jugular. This port and corridor pose a major threat to India's energy security and would have great implications in any two front war."⁴

China's Current Activities in the Region

Apart from the speedy and intensive development of the Karakoram Highway / Energy Corridor to the Gwadar Port, the overall involvement of China in the whole of POK especially in Gilgit-Baltistan has been spectacular. China is also widening the 165 km long Jaglot-Skardu road and the 135 km long Thakot-Sazin road at a cost of PKR 45 billion with China taking on 85 per cent of the expenditure.⁵ Apart from work going on the widening of the Karakoram Highway, rigorous efforts to complete the rail link from Kashgar in the remote Xinjiang province to Havelian near Rawalpindi is under progress. Along this Highway, it has been reported that 22 massive tunnels have been constructed which could also be used as storage facilities for missiles. In addition, China is heavily involved in developing massive hydel infrastructure with 15 mega projects on the anvil in this region including POK. These projects include raising of the Mangla Dam reservoir by sixty feet, the Neelum-Jhelum Hydroelectric Power Project and the Daimer-Bhasha Dam. Approximately US \$ 12.6 billion have been earmarked by China for these gigantic projects. Reportedly, China has invested US \$ 300 million in the housing and communications sector in this region. All such activities point to the simple fact that the Chinese are building this infrastructure also for their own use and they are in this region for a long haul.

Recently, an alarming development has been reported by a US based think tank, 'The Middle East Media Research Institute' that Pakistan was seriously considering handing over Gilgit-Baltistan region to China on a 50 years lease.⁶ Briefing US lawmakers, this think tank, claimed that China has already assumed de facto control of the region. It further opined that this area would end up like Tibet and East Turkistan if "China's unwarranted interventions are not challenged." A local Pakistani newspaper, Roznama Bang-e-Sahar had also reported this development in its 13 Dec 2011 edition. Well known Kashmiri researcher, Dr Shabir Choudhry has expressed that this region had the makings of a battleground between Pakistan and China on one side facing the US and India on the other side.

The Siachen Glacier Imbrolio

An analysis of the Gilgit-Baltistan region is incomplete without comprehending the subtleties of the Siachen Glacier stand-off.

The Siachen Glacier is one issue which the Pakistanis seem to be in an indecent hurry to settle, even preceding the Sir Creek and other more important issues.

During the last few years, Pakistan has been indulging in smug statements as regards the Siachen stand-off for the benefit of the world and the many ill-informed peaceniks in India. On 7 Apr 2012, at the lower western slopes of the Saltoro ridge, an avalanche and massive landslide buried nearly 135 Pakistani soldiers at its Ghyari base camp. This tragedy prompted a visit to the accident site by the Pak Army Chief, General Ashraf Kayani who, rather sanctimoniously, stated to the accompanying media teams, that both Pakistan and India should mutually vacate the glacially inhospitable Siachen Glacier area and expressed that peaceful co-existence between the two neighbours was very important. Such a statement, coming from an otherwise reticent Pak Army Chief and an ex ISI Chief, perhaps shell-shocked at the tragedy, made peaceniks on both sides of the border go on an overdrive with appeals to the Indian Government to speedily resolve the Siachen issue. Even some scholars and analysts in India have been underplaying the strategic and tactical importance of the redoubtable Saltoro Massif which India holds since 1984 when the Indian Army occupied the Siachen Glacier area, pre-empting the Pakistanis by a whisker.

The formidable Saltoro Ridge which the Indian Army holds and thus controls the major passes on this ridge, namely Turkistan La (connecting Shaksgam Valley with Siachen), Indra Col, Sia La, Bilafond La and its positions completely dominates Pak deployments on the lower western slopes. If it is ever vacated and the Pakistanis occupy the Ridge, it will be virtually impossible to recapture it – as all soldiers who have served in this region unanimously acknowledge. More importantly, the Saltoro/Siachen region provides essential depth in the east to our Sub Sector North deployments from the Aksai Chin region as also through the Karakoram Pass. The Saltoro Ridge as a strategic fulcrum also provides much needed depth to our Turtuk, Leh and Kargil garrisons and also prevents the possibility of convergence between the Chinese from the Aksai Chin areas in the East, Karakoram Highway and Shaksgam Valley from the North and northeast, and Pakistan from the Gilgit Baltistan areas in the West and northwest, should a conflict situation arise. Vacating Siachen will be nothing

short of a monumental military blunder. Pakistan's unwillingness to even ratify current deployments of both sides, as part of any Siachen demilitarisation programme, clearly indicates its future perfidious intentions.

The Indian Army is well entrenched in this region and years of experience in operating in these high altitude snow clad areas has drastically brought down weather and terrain related casualties to acceptable levels. On the other hand, in case the Pak Army, for its own problems, wishes to vacate this region, can do so and the Indian Army can give them an iron clad assurance that it would not violate the Actual Ground Position Line, except if Pakistan commits an act of war. The inalienable fact remains that while in occupation of the Saltoro Ridge, India is essentially occupying its own territory and hence the Indian and Pakistani stated stands cannot be equated. Siachen is a part of J&K and as and when the J&K issue finally gets resolved, this issue will also automatically get settled.

Sectarian Strife in Gilgit- Baltistan

Sectarian strife developed in this region especially since the 1980s accentuating the Shia-Sunni divide. At the time of Independence, though Gilgit-Baltistan was predominantly Shia, under the Maharaja of J&K, there were virtually no Shia-Sunni clashes. The Chairman of the Balwaristan National Front, an organisation which is fighting for the independence of Gilgit-Baltistan, Abdul Hamid Khan has unequivocally stated that ".....before the treacherous occupation of our land by Pakistan, inter-communal harmony in our region was exemplary even during the Sikh and Dogra rule."⁷

The communal problem got exacerbated during the Zia ul Haq regime as Sunni violence was introduced into this region and elsewhere to serve Pakistan's larger goals. General Zia ul Haq followed a policy of Sunni Islamisation wherein Sunnis were given preferential treatment all over Pakistan and in the Gilgit-Baltistan region, Sunnis were settled from the hinterland to change the demographic character of this region. The drive to subdue the Shias in this region was spearheaded by none other than, then Brigadier Pervez Mushharraf (later the architect of the Kargil mischief and President of Pakistan), who was especially selected by General Zia ul Haq for this region. Since then, there have been Shia-Sunni riots off and on. The political yearnings of the locals

have been given a go-by. Political and economic deprivation and the insensitivity of the Pakistani establishment has given rise to the locals demanding autonomy and demands for this region to seek independence from Pakistan have also erupted.

2012, in particular, saw a surge in violence directed against the Shias. February 2012 witnessed the gruesome killing of 18 Shia pilgrims in Kohistan on the Karakoram Highway when they were returning from Iran by bus. This led to clashes between the two communities and once again, dozens of Shias were brutally massacred on 3 April 2012 at Chilas. In mid August 2012, 18 Shia bus passengers were massacred in the region while returning from Rawalpindi. The Sunni militant organisation Ahle-e-Sunnat-Wal-Jamat has been suspected for these sectarian killings.

It is pertinent to mention the shabby treatment meted out to troops of the Northern Light Infantry (NLI) who hail from this region. Post Kargil, having used these troops to the hilt, General Pervez Musharraf, then Pak Army COAS, refused to accept the dead bodies of the NLI's Shia soldiers who were subsequently buried with full Islamic rites by the Indian Army. This blatant discrimination by the Pak Army against their own Shia soldiers was deeply resented by locals of this region. The composition of the NLI is 49 per cent Shias, 18 per cent Sunnis, 23 per cent are Ismailis(followers of Aga Khan) and 10 per cent Nurbakshis while the officers are mostly Pathan, Baloch and Punjabis. The Pakistan Army has been deliberately using troops from this region as cannon fodder in their half-hearted operations against the Tehrik-e-Taliban elements in the badlands of the Khyber Pakhtunwa belt.

Legal Status : Gilgit-Baltistan

The illegal occupation of Gilgit-Baltistan region by force by Pakistan has been questioned by some locals and their leaders many times in the past. In the legislative assembly of the region, local legislators have been clamouring for an end to their ambiguous political status. They have demanded a legal cover for the currently enforced Gilgit Baltistan Self Governance and Empowerment Ordinance 2009 or a set-up similar to the so-called "Azad Kashmir". Meanwhile, in a major embarrassment recently to the Pakistan government, their Supreme Court while hearing a petition filed by Dr Ghulam Abbas, Chairman of the Gilgit-Baltistan National Movement, has questioned the legality of Pakistani President's

authority to issue appointment orders regarding judges for the region as Gilgit does not even find a mention in the Pakistan constitution! ⁸ Even in 1994, the High Court of the so called 'Azad Kashmir' had opined that this region was essentially a part of the former princely state of J&K in 1947 and should be treated as such.

Suggested Indian Response

The massive infrastructure being developed in this region has primarily two objectives. First, China is creating an energy corridor linking its hinterland to the Gwadar port and thus ensuring its energy security. Secondly, enlarging its footprint in India's northwest regions is another 'pearl' in China's string of pearls strategy vis-à-vis India. From all indications, in keeping with its growing assertiveness in South Asia, China is shifting the centre of gravity of its future land operations to J&K in concert with Pakistan. As China awaits the final exit of a battle weary USA from Afghanistan in 2014, it is determinedly preparing itself to take the lead role in this troubled region with Pakistan in tandem and is speedily readying the wherewithal for it. It would, therefore, be prudent for the Indian Armed Forces to factor in the China-Pak operational nexus now from a newer front. Additional formations, both for defensive and offensive roles, to undertake operations in these high altitude areas will have to be raised.

The Chinese People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF), opposite our J&K sector, suffers from the drawback of having just two major airbases at Kashgar and Khotan which are 800 and 600 km away respectively from the nearest Indian air bases.⁹ However, if the PLAAF utilises the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) bases in this region namely Gilgit, Skardu, Chilas, Chitral and Muzaffarabad – a distinct possibility now – the overall air threat to India becomes far more acute than existing and the Indian Air Force will have to factor such ominous developments in its operational preparedness. Meanwhile, Indian intelligence agencies will have to keep a strict watch on the infrastructural developments taking place at these POK air bases to analyse the possibility of any PLAAF-PAF nexus taking shape.

Apart from upgrading the operational preparedness of the Army and its Air Force to thwart any collusive threat from China and Pakistan, India must become politically proactive in this region

in the pursuit of its national interests. Since, by all accounts, Gilgit-Baltistan formed a part of the state of J&K at Independence, India through its Parliamentary resolution in 1994, is committed to regain the entire state of J&K back to the Union of India which also includes this region. This will only be possible if India stops accepting the current status-quo as regards either, the POK or the Gilgit-Baltistan region. The populace of this region and its diaspora, the world over, always wonder as to why the Government of India does not take proactive measures to support their cause for independence from Pakistani rule and sensitises the UN and other nations in the world about Pak oppression in this region. India has much at stake strategically especially with the ever growing Pak-China nexus in this region and at strategic level. It will be in India's interest to factor in these developments and take appropriate political, diplomatic and military measures to safeguard its national interests.

Endnotes

1. Book : "Where Three Empires Meet" by EF Knight, by Longmans, Green and Co, first published 1896.
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3. New York Times dated 27 August 2010: Article by Selig Harrison.
4. Quoted by Rear Adm S Kulshreshta (retd) in Defence and Security Alert journal, July 2012 issue (page44), New Delhi.
5. "Unfolding Great Game" by Dr A Gupta and Dr A Behuria, Defence and Security Alert journal, July 2012 issue (page 9), New Delhi.
6. Extensively quoted in Pakistani press. The Economic Times, 11 Feb 2012.
7. Outlook India; Interview of Chairman Balwaristan National Front by Y Sikand. 28 Jan 2002.
8. IDSA Comment: Gilgit - Baltistan: By Priyanka Singh, March 6, 2012, New Delhi.
9. "PLAAF-PAF Nexus" by Air Vice Marshal AK Tewary, Defence and Security Journal, July 2012 issue, New Delhi.