

Letter to the Editor

India's North West : The New Great Game

Dear Editor

Please refer to the article 'India's North West : The New Great Game' in July-September 2012 issue of the USI Journal. The author a former Director General, Defence Intelligence Agency has done well in explaining why the general area of Gilgit- Baltistan is so important for India strategically, the Chinese overtures and also our likely response. The appreciation of adversary's capabilities should be realistic to ensure that no over or under estimation is made. I wish to add a few points so that we have a different perspective in understanding the intricate issue more intensely.

The Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) area is being further divided into three divisions as per the wishes of the people of the area to ensure so called better administration. The Gilgit division would comprise of Gilgit, Hunza-Nagar and Ghizer districts while Astore and Diamer districts would be included in the Diamer division. Similarly, Baltistan would comprise Skardu and Ghanche which has already been notified.¹ The Bill has been approved by the GB Legislative Assembly and sent to the Pakistan cabinet for approval.²

The Selig Harrison article³ quoted has not been verified by any other agency so far. In fact, it has been contradicted by most agencies. Most of the facts quoted on page 410 and 411 are from this article. They are exaggerated and not consistent with what satellite imagery and other open sources are suggesting. Here are some inconsistencies in the Selig Harrison's article :-

- (a) A large group of 7000-11000 PLA personnel would require massive administrative support at high altitudes. It cannot be kept a secret.
- (b) Karakoram Highway does not slacken the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) noose for China but has tightened it further as it is closed since 04 Jan 2010. Almost 30 kms of it from Attabad to Hussaini is under water for the last 34

months. A new Hunza lake has been formed which Pakistan is unable to drain.⁴

(c) The cargo transportation time from Kashgar or Khotan or Rikaze to mainland China itself takes more than 72 hours. Hence, it would take at least 144 hours from mainland China to Gwadar.

(d) Even the best of motorways in Pakistan are less than 30 m wide. The widening of Karakoram Highway to 30 m and maintaining it would be next to impossible.

(e) The supposedly massive 22 tunnels have not been observed by anybody else and seem to remain elusive till date.

The Gwadar port as of date (07 Nov 2012)⁵ has a berthing space of only 600 m, suggesting it can handle only two or three large vessels at a time. It has a total of nine cranes out of which only two are large gantry cranes. The road to Gwadar port is through the town of Gwadar and is only 5 m wide. Thus, as of date, the cargo handling capacity of the multi-purpose terminal is limited. The status of Roll On – Roll Off (RO-RO) and container terminal has reverted to that of 2005 status. The progress of work on the port facilities has almost come to a standstill.

The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) is neither considered reliable nor a think tank in the US. In fact, it is accused of inaccurate translations, bias and propaganda by many a noted journalists including Brian Whitaker of the Guardian.⁶ The founder and President of MEMRI is Colonel (Retd) Yigal Carmon who has served in the Israeli Military Intelligence from 1968-1988. Anything that MEMRI says needs to be taken with a fistful of salt.

The airbases at Kashgar and Khotan are 620 and 390 kms respectively from Leh. However, we can't afford to be complacent as the PLA Air Force has enough refuellers and AWACs to provide support to its fighter aircraft operations well within India.

The entire area of GB still reverts its master the Hazir Imam, the Aga Khan. He takes keen interest in socio-cultural and politico-economic improvement of the people of GB. The areas of Hunza and Gojal have shot in prominence since 04 January 2010 after closure of Karakoram Highway due to a massive landslide at

Attabad. The efforts by Pakistan government and the Pakistan Army have not yielded results in lowering water level of Hunza Lake.⁷ The MLAs of this area Mehdi Shah and Mutabiat Shah have always played sectarian cards to gain political clout. It should not be perceived as a major divide any more than what is generally seen in the rest of Pakistan.

There are two major issues which need to be considered while estimating Chinese capabilities in this area. Firstly, a new airport with a runway length of 5 kms has been constructed at Ngari Gunsa which is just 320 kms from Leh. It is closer than Kashgar and Khotan. Most of the aircraft on PLAAF inventory today have a combat radius of more than 500 kms. Secondly, PLA's Second Artillery has prepared at least two locations with underground storage facilities and launching of strategic missiles very close to the Line of Actual Control. They are located at Saitula in Xinjiang and Haji Langar in Aksai Chin. Both these locations are barely 240 kms from Leh. Although, no deployment has been observed through open source imageries at these three locations but, construction of these facilities makes the intentions of PRC extremely clear.

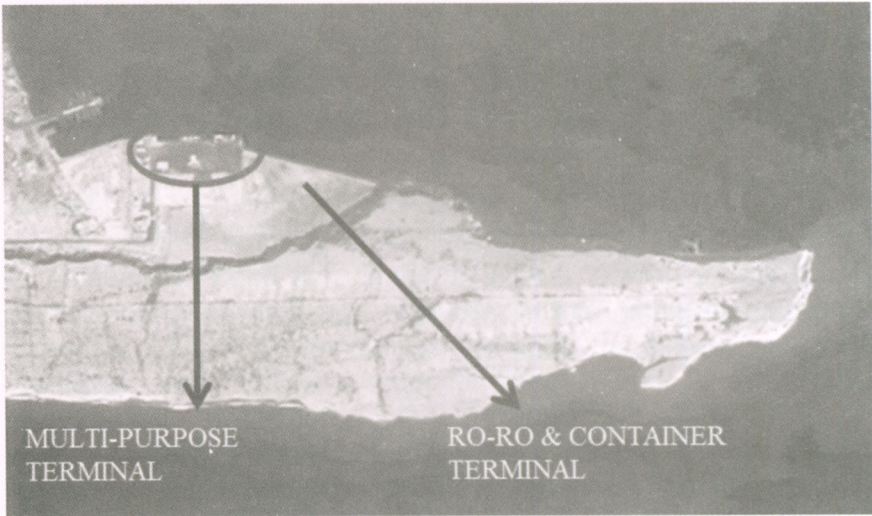
Yours Sincerely

Colonel Vinayak Bhatt

Endnotes

1. <http://tribune.com.pk/story/330126/gilgit-baltistan-divided-into-three-divisions/>
2. <http://pamirtimes.net/2012/07/13/gbla-approves-resolution-demanding-creation-of-three-more-districts-cm-disagrees/>
3. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/27/opinion/27iht-edharrison.html?_r=0
4. <http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/NaturalHazards/view.php?id=44551>
5. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/jan/28/israel2>

6. Digital Globe satellite imagery of 07 Nov 2012 Gwadar port:



7. Digital Globe satellite imagery of 07 Jul 2012 Hunza Lake:

