



## Wakhan Corridor: India's Possible Gateway to Central Asia



**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 posted at Defence Services Staff College, Wellington.

*"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".<sup>1</sup>*

—Shri Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India

### Introduction

The geographical location of Gilgit-Baltistan, sharing borders with Pakistan, Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan and Xinjiang Province of China, makes it geo-strategically significant for India. In pre-1947 period, the British decided to keep this Northern part under strict vigilance; they also decided to administer Gilgit on lease for a span of 60 years in 1935. However, the Gilgit Agency Mutiny of 1947 saw the 'unqualified inclusion' of Gilgit-Baltistan as part of the newly created Pakistan.<sup>2</sup> As time passed, Gilgit-Baltistan emerged as a crucial link between Pakistan and China especially after the construction of the Karakoram Highway. With the evolving

### Key Points

- The geographical location of Gilgit-Baltistan and Wakhan Corridor makes it geo-strategically significant for India in the context of Central Asia.
- Gilgit-Baltistan emerges as a crucial link between Pakistan and China especially after the construction of the Karakoram Highway.
- The Wakhan Corridor, significantly pan shaped, is located at the crossroads of five countries—Afghanistan, Tajikistan, China, Pakistan and India.
- The Corridor has been central to the ancient Silk Road, Great Game, and Cold War, and now China seemingly have plans to convert the Wakhan Corridor into a curious case of 'Corridor of Power or Conflict'.
- From the Indian perspective, Gilgit-Baltistan and Wakhan Corridor region could emerge as the India's Gateway to Central Asian Republics and their expanding markets.

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), this region holds more importance for India. The aim of this paper is to explore the geostrategic significance of Gilgit-Baltistan in the context of Wakhan Corridor as the possible 'Gateway of India to Central Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'.

### **Wakhan: Corridor of Power or Conflict**

The Wakhan Corridor, significantly pan shaped, is located at the crossroads of five countries viz. Afghanistan, Tajikistan, China, Pakistan and India. This Corridor was one of the most important junction point along the ancient Silk Road. In fact, the ancient Persian Royal Road<sup>3</sup> served as one of the main arteries of the Silk Road. The southern artery of the Silk Road was the sole route traversing from China through the Khunjerab Pass in Karakoram Mountains. This axis ran along almost the same alignment where it today exists in the form of Karakoram Highway (KKH) that connects China and Pakistan. As per records available, the southern limit of the Wakhan Corridor was formed by the Durand Line (South) while the northern part came into existence as a result of the Pamir Boundary Commission of 1895.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, any kind of infrastructural development in this corridor has been a fallacy primarily due to the quest for the Great Game between Russia and Britain, Chinese Communist Revolution of 1949, Soviet invasion of Afghanistan for a decade, followed by the NATO invasion since 2001. The area at the tip of the Wakhan Corridor, in Little Pamirs, is evolving into a key crossroad for CPEC<sup>5</sup> as it is crucial for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the region. China, now seemingly have plans to convert the corridor into a curious case of the 'Corridor of Power or Conflict'.<sup>6</sup>

### **Central Asia**

The Central Asian Region includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Mongolia, and Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup> In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Soviet definition of Central Asia involved certain parts of China as well to include Inner Mongolia, Tibet, and the territory of Xinjiang, but excluded Kazakhstan.<sup>8</sup> However, the most common geopolitical definition of Central Asia includes five countries namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. The specific geopolitical interests of superpowers have had a far-reaching as well as long-lasting impact on both— the security and economic affairs of the Central Asian region. The year 1877 was one of the key turning points in the changing tides of Central Asian affairs wherein Queen Victoria appropriated the title of 'Empress of India'. It led the Russian military strategists to engage in a debate about the importance of Central Asia from a Russian perspective. Colonel Mikhail Ivanovich Veniukoff vindicated the gradual movement of Russia in Central Asia as "the re-establishment of extension of the sway of the Aryan race over countries which, for a long period, were

subjected to the peoples of Turk and Mongol extraction”.<sup>9</sup> Veniukoff advocated a ‘Diffusion Theory’ in which he identified “the mountainous countries, at the sources of the Indus and the Oxus, to be the cradle of the Aryan or Indo-European race”.<sup>10</sup>

Lord Curzon, British Viceroy in India, identified Central Asian countries and territories in his famous statement as “pawns on a chessboard”<sup>11</sup> at the turn from 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Halford Mackinder formulated his ‘Heartland Theory’ in 1904 which drew prime attention towards Central Asia wherein it had become the arena of contest. As per this theory, there was shift in world affairs towards the heartland of the Eurasian continent which he perceived as a “geographical pivot of history”. Due to the resultant chaos in Central Asia, following the break-up of the Soviet Union, India did some interest in this region at that time. The Prime Minister of India visited Central Asia in 1993 and announced some small credit lines, however, he expressed little enthusiasm to bolster the relations with Central Asia.<sup>12</sup> With a friendly government in Afghanistan (1992-96), India shifted its focus towards intensifying relations with other parts of the world. When Taliban assumed power in Afghanistan in 1996 leading to the possibility of Pakistan gaining strategic depth, Central Asia became an important region in India’s Foreign Policy.

Thus, India’s Central Asia Policy has been primarily focused on Afghanistan since the mid-1990s. In contrast, since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, China has considered Central Asia as significant to its national security and territorial integrity. To pre-empt any resentment in Central Asia, Beijing moved quickly and resolved its border issues with the three Central Asian countries namely Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Post the Cold War, there has been a shift in focus of India Westwards and Pakistan Eastwards. Interestingly, Andrew Korybko in his article “Pakistan is the ‘Zipper’ of Pan-Eurasian Integration” highlighted that Pakistan can bring together four of Eurasia’s most prominent economic entities.<sup>13</sup> Also, Arindham Sahi in his book *China-Pakistan-Russia: A Dangerous Axis* highlighted Pakistan’s potential to be the ‘Gate-Keeper of South Asian Region’. If Gilgit-Baltistan-Wakhan-Xinjiang, the crucial lynchpin in these geostrategic dynamics succeeds, then this region could catapult from the geoeconomic significance to an ‘Ultra Strategic Heartland Region’.<sup>14</sup>

### **Strategic Component: Gilgit-Baltistan as the sole link between China and Pakistan**

Today, Gilgit-Baltistan forms a crucial link between Pakistan and China. It is difficult to imagine how this bilateral relationship would have flourished, if Gilgit-Baltistan was under India. As part of a provisional border agreement with China in 1963, Pakistan ceded 5,000

plus square kilometres of territory to China— this was only the beginning of what has evolved and now being projected as the most defining partnership in the Asian context.<sup>15</sup> For India, Gilgit-Baltistan and Wakhan Corridor region could emerge as the gateway to Central Asian Republics and their expanding markets. Hypothetically speaking, access to Afghanistan via Wakhan Corridor through Gilgit-Baltistan would have given NATO Forces a viable option for transporting supplies.

Due to the ever increasing importance of this region, for both China and Pakistan, especially due to CPEC and other projects like the Indus Cascade undergoing in this region, the ‘window of checkmating’ by India is getting restricted both in time and space. India needs to get proactive, move beyond rhetoric, develop mid and long-term roadmap and execute it. This roadmap has to flow out from a well-defined National Vision and linked Grand Strategy for this region. National Vision will have to be spread over the next 12-15 years, followed and implemented irrespective of the political orientation of the government during this period. In the ultimate analysis, it would be prudent to capture Gilgit-Baltistan through the Indus and Shyok Valleys; choke the CPEC lifeline Karakoram Highway leading to the ultimate fall of PoJK. A proposed ‘Grand Strategy’ is premised on the fact that China-Pakistan collusive threat is real and China’s Westward Pivot Strategy is at play.

### **India’s Proposed Grand Strategy**

The proposed Grand Strategy hinges around two key themes — ‘De-Balkanisation of erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir’ and ‘Re-Asianisation of Asia’. A feasible strategy would call for a ‘whole of nations approach’, bold policy with continuity, discarding self-restraint and would be spread over a period of 12-15 years with campaign conducted over multiple and parallel lines of operations (LOO) simultaneously.

The proposed six strands of the Grand Strategy should flow from the Kautilyan Approach of Statecraft<sup>16</sup> (*Arthashastra* by Kautilya offers distilled experience of operating in a multi-state system quite similar to the prevailing world geopolitics). These strands include domestic tier; weakening of China-Pakistan nexus; being part of the regional and international alliances; leveraging international stakeholders in the region; Afghanistan and Central Asia centric; and international policy statement strand. The six strands have been highlighted pictorially at Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: India's Proposed Grand Strategy



Source: Annotated by the Author

### Recommendations to Solve this Geopolitical Conundrum

To find an enduring and out of the box solution, the following recommendations are put forth.

- **Autonomous or Independent Gilgit-Baltistan.** The People of Gilgit-Baltistan wants an autonomous region. In fact, India has been quite disconnected with the region for over 70 plus years. An Autonomous or Independent Gilgit-Baltistan, being land locked, would require trading options, and the proposed connect from India to Central Asia through Gilgit-Baltistan is one of the most viable and workable option. It would connect Gilgit-Baltistan to both Central Asia and South Asia.
- **'As is Where is' Option.** This option proposes to convert the current Line of Control into International Border as was envisioned while signing the Simla Agreement (1972). However, to successfully implement this option, road and rail connectivity needs to be increased. In the interim, a dedicated and direct air corridor between India and Central Asian Republics, could be considered overflying this disputed region. However, while exercising this option, the Indian strategists need to keep the past experiences in mind.

- **Golden Arches Theory of Conflict Prevention.**<sup>17</sup> In 1999, Thomas L Friedman in his book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization*, made an interesting observation and stated that "No two countries that have McDonald's had fought a war against each other since each got its McDonald's" ; such countries would become 'McDonald's Country', and will not be interested in fighting wars anymore due to economic interlinkages. Measures could be initiated for this region to experiment this new approach and open franchises of all major multinational brands for economical as well as diplomatic benefit. The idea should remain that if you 'cannot take every youth of the region to the outside world, bring the world to them alongside the development of this region'.

## Conclusion

The recent geopolitics of expanding Chinese BRI and CPEC, the withdrawal of NATO Forces from Afghanistan and huge natural resource pool in Central Asia has brought this region back into central focus. Some of the scholars are calling it the 'New Great Game of the 21<sup>st</sup> century'. However, India cannot be at the fringes of these developments. In fact, India has been central to such developments historically as was exhibited during the Great Game of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. At present, it is the region of Gilgit-Baltistan which is preventing or holding back India from unleashing its untapped potential and re-establishing its historical and cultural links with Afghanistan and emerging markets of Central Asia. In this regard, India needs to ponder on questions like— Will this enable India to scuttle China-Pakistan nexus and defeat their collusive designs along the LAC to LoC? Does it profitably connect India with the Central Asian Republics? Can India untie this 'Gordian Knot' created on Partition and open the Gateway of India to Central Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? What is of utmost importance is that, requisite focus be maintained on the stated vision while exploiting India's full Comprehensive National Power (CNP). In this context, India needs to adopt the stated National Vision, Grand Strategy and de novo approach as brought out above to realise the geostrategic significance of Gilgit-Baltistan in the context of the Wakhan Corridor as Gateway of India to Central Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## End Notes

---

<sup>17</sup>"PM Narendra Modi Address on 70th Independence Day 2016 at Red Fort", *Youtube.com*, 15 August 2016. Accessible at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g1uaZSObeMQ>. Accessed on 18 August 2021.





<sup>2</sup> Sisir Gupta, *Kashmir: A Study in India-Pakistan Relations*, (New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1967), p.109. ISBN: 0210226250.

<sup>3</sup> The Persian Royal Road ran from Susa, in North Persia (Iran) to the Mediterranean Sea in Asia Minor (Turkey) and featured postal stations along the route with horses for envoys to quickly deliver messages throughout the empire. The Persians maintained the Royal Road carefully and, in time, expanded it through smaller side roads. These paths eventually crossed down into the Indian sub-continent, across Mesopotamia, and over into Egypt. See Joshua J Mark, "Silk Road", *World History Encyclopedia*, 01 May 2018. Accessible at [http://www.ancient.eu/Silk\\_Road](http://www.ancient.eu/Silk_Road). Accessed on 20 August 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Hermann Kreutzmann, "Globalization, Spatial Integration and Sustainable Development in Northern Pakistan", *Mountain Research and Development*, Vol. 15 No.3, 1995. Accessible at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3673929>. Accessed on 20 August 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Suzanne Levi-Sanchez, "The Corridor of Power", *The Interpreter*, 16 October 2018. Accessible at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/corridor-power>. Accessed on 21 August 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> DANI, Ahmad Hasan, VM Masson, J Harmatta, Baij Nath Puri, et al, *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, (Paris: UNESCO, 1992-2005).

<sup>8</sup> "Great Soviet Encyclopedia", the 2012 edited electronic version of the issues between 1926 and 1990. Accessible at <https://slovar.cc/enc/bse/2057489.html>. Accessed on 22 August 2021.

<sup>9</sup> MJ Veniukoff, "The Progress of Russia in Central Asia (Translated)", *British Library: Asian and African Studies*. Accessed on 22 August 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Hermann Kreutzmann, "The Significance of Geopolitical Issues for Internal Development and Intervention In mountainous Areas of Crossroads Asia", *Competence Network Crossroads Asia*, January 2013. Accessible at [https://www.academia.edu/3310413/\\_Competence\\_Network\\_Crossroads\\_Asia\\_Conflict\\_Migration\\_Development\\_Editors\\_Ingeborg\\_Baldauf\\_Stephan\\_Conermann\\_Hermann\\_Kreutzmann\\_Shahnaz](https://www.academia.edu/3310413/_Competence_Network_Crossroads_Asia_Conflict_Migration_Development_Editors_Ingeborg_Baldauf_Stephan_Conermann_Hermann_Kreutzmann_Shahnaz). Accessed on 25 August 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> In 1993, during P.V. Narsimha Rao's visit to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and in 1995 to Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, India proposed an aid package of US\$10 million to each of the newly independent states. Tajikistan was offered a credit of \$5 million in 1993. After opening a credit line to Turkmenistan worth \$5 million in March 1995, India again extended another credit line of \$10 million in September of the same year.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Korybko "Pakistan Is the 'Zipper' of Pan-Eurasian Integration", *Russian Institute for Strategic Studies*, 15 September 2015. Accessible at <https://en.riss.ru/analysis/18882/>. Accessed on 26 August 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Arindham Sahi (etd), *China, Pakistan and Russia: A Dangerous Axis*, (New Delhi: Lenin Media Pvt. Ltd, 2017). ISBN: 9385995235.



---

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). ISBN: 0190210753.

<sup>16</sup> Shivshankar Menon, "Kautilya Approach Useful in Multi-Polar World", *IDSA Press Release*, 09 April 2014. Accessible at <https://idsa.in/pressrelease/KautilyanApproachUsefulinMultiShivshankarMenon>. Accessed on 26 August 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Jonathon Haeber, "What is the Golden Arches Theory of Conflict Prevention?", *CBS News*, 28 January 2008. Accessible at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/what-is-the-golden-arches-theory-of-conflict-prevention/>. Accessed on 26 August 2021.

---

*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](mailto:landwarfare@gmail.com)

Website: [www.claws.in](http://www.claws.in)