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Unveiling the  
Strategic  
Significance and  
Political Dynamics of  
Gilgit-Baltistan

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# Unveiling the Strategic Significance and Political Dynamics of Gilgit-Baltistan

## *Abstract*

*This paper delves into the multifaceted dimensions of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), an often-overlooked region nestled amidst the towering peaks of the Himalayas and Karakoram ranges. Initially seized by Pakistan in the tumultuous aftermath of the partition of India in 1947, GB has remained a region of geopolitical importance, both for its strategic location and abundant natural resources.*

*Examining GB's strategic importance for Pakistan, the paper elucidates how its geography, particularly the Karakoram Highway, and natural resources have become vital elements in Pakistan's regional and economic agendas, notably exemplified by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Furthermore, GB's abundant water resources have assumed critical significance amidst Pakistan's looming water crisis, with the construction of dams such as Diamer and proposed projects like Katzarah and Bunji poised to alleviate Pakistan's water woes.*

*Despite its geopolitical importance, GB remains mired in political limbo and its populace deprived of basic political rights. The paper unravels the historical and contemporary factors contributing to GB's political marginalisation including the sectarian tensions exacerbated by Pakistan's policies and geopolitical manoeuvres. In light of these insights, the paper unravels India's potential role and policy options vis-à-vis GB. It advocates for a nuanced approach, urging India to leverage narratives highlighting Pakistan's human rights abuses in GB, engage with nationalist groups, and amplify GB's voice on international platforms. Additionally, the paper underscores the imperative for India to educate its populace on GB's historical and geopolitical significance, fostering a deeper understanding of the region's complexities.*

*Ultimately, the paper underscores the need for India to de-hyphenate the violence in mainland Pakistan and GB, while advocating for a patient and determined pursuit of its strategic objectives in the region. As India's ties with the United States strengthen, the paper suggests leveraging this partnership to exert pressure on Pakistan and advance India's interests in GB. In navigating the intricate landscape of GB, India must exhibit patience, perseverance, and strategic foresight to realize its long-term objectives.*

**Keywords:** Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan, Political Rights, Sectarianism, India

## **Introduction**

Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) was occupied by Pakistan in 1947 in the aftermath of the bloody partition of India, when Major William, the British Commander of the Gilgit Scouts, announced Pakistan's accession to the region. Pakistan took possession of the Region on 4 November 1947, much to the dismay of many. (Bansal, 2018). To distinguish it from Kashmir, the area was dubbed "Northern Areas" and given direct authority to Pakistan's federal government. Although, India's official stand regarding Kashmir includes GB, as seen by the Parliament resolution on Jammu and Kashmir 1994 (Parliament, 1994), the GB discourse has been missing not just from the policy circle but from media and academia alike. The neglect of GB is such that much of the general population is aloof to the fact that GB is a part of Kashmir and, hence, India. Since 1947, Pakistan has kept GB in a constant state of political limbo; initially, the state was ruled under colonial and inhumane Frontier Crimes Regulations which provided no rights to the populace.

## **Strategic Importance of Gilgit-Baltistan**

The strategic importance of GB to Pakistan stems from its Geography and Natural Resources.

### ***Geography***

GB provides a land route to China through the Karakoram Highway. The Karakoram Highway has proved to be of great strategic significance to Pakistan; the highway starts from Kashgar on the Chinese side and Hasan Abdal city of Punjab province on the Pakistan side. China used it to transfer nuclear material, including missiles, to Pakistan in 1995 and 2013 (Nandy, 2013).

The region also provides for land trade between China and Pakistan. The Sost Dry Port has recently become a major trade route between the two countries. The port is also a major source of customs revenue for Pakistan, which is not shared with GB. Although the data on trade through the port is scarce, however, in 2018, 1569 containers reportedly passed through the port, of which 1508 entered Pakistan from China, and 61 entered China from Pakistan (Ali, 2020). The data shows a significant trade imbalance between China and Pakistan. According to latest data, the Gilgit-Baltistan Collectorate of Customs collected Rs 5.5 billion (Pakistani rupee) as duty and other taxes between July 2023 and December 2023 (Nagri, 2023).

Another strategic factor for Pakistan's interest in GB is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Pakistan sees CPEC as a much-needed investment infrastructure which can elevate its economy. Chinese President Xi Jinping and then Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif inked 51 Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) and deals worth a combined \$46 billion in April 2015 (Rauf, 2023). To enable China to transport its energy supplies from the Middle East through Gwadar to Xinjiang and lessen its reliance on the Malacca Straits, China and Pakistan decided to enlarge the Karakoram Highway (KKH) for larger freight trucks in 2006. This agreement can be considered the genesis of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Niazi, 2006).

### ***Pakistan's Water Crisis and Gilgit-Baltistan***

Another driver of Pakistan's interest in GB is its vast network of rivers and glaciers. Surface water is the main driver of Pakistan's economy, and most of the water available across the vast Indus River Basin is used for agriculture. The flows in the Indus Basin River System are mostly determined by snow/glacier melt in Gilgit- Baltistan which comprises the higher catchments (Adnan, 2017).

Unpredictable weather patterns have brought Pakistan on the verge of a water crisis further exacerbated by groundwater depletion. A report by the IMF in 2020 placed Pakistan third on the list of countries which can face acute water shortage by 2040 (ANI, 2021). Another study released by the Pakistan Council of Research in Water Resources (PCRWR) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) predicted that Pakistan would be completely water deficit by 2025 (United Nations, 2020). To stave off water shortage, Pakistan's best bet is on tapping the water potential of Gilgit-Baltistan.

Pakistan has been building the Diamer Dam in GB to supply water and electricity into mainland Pakistan. Apart from the Diamer Dam, Pakistan has also proposed to build the Katzarah Dam in Skardu starting 2024, however it has not moved past proposal stage. Pakistan also signed a memorandum with China in 2009 to build Bunji Dam (Press Trust of India, 2009)— the dam, on completion, will serve as the largest hydropower dam in Pakistan.

Gilgit-Baltistan, in part due to CPEC and water scarcity, has become a strategically important region for Pakistan. Although the initial reason for annexing the region was its Muslim majority, the variables have changed, and the region is more critical in terms of geography and natural resources than its demography.

### ***Lack of Political Rights in Gilgit-Baltistan***

Gilgit-Baltistan is an area with almost a hundred per cent Muslim population, but that does not take away the fact that it is one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse regions in Asia. GB's culture and language are an amalgamation of centuries of rule of Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Muslims. The demography of GB consists of various sects and sub-sects of Islam, such as Shia, Sunni, Twelver Shia, Ismaili, and Nur-Bakshi (Stobdan, 2008). Albeit Urdu, Punjabi, and Pashto have become lingua franca after Pakistan occupied the region. The populace in GB spoke various Dardic languages such as Shina and Burushaski in Gilgit; Khowar in Chitral; Ishkoman, Shina, and Khowar in Yasin (Stobdan, 2008). Gilgit-Baltistan consists of the former Gilgit Agency, Gilgit Wazarat, Astor Wazarat, and Skardu Tehsil of the Ladakh Wazarat of the erstwhile kingdom of Kashmir. After occupying the region, Pakistan renamed it as 'Northern Areas' and handed its administration to the so-called 'AJK'.

Pakistan took control of GB in April 1949 after the Karachi Agreement was signed between the Government of Pakistan, the Government of so-called 'AJK', and the All-Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference. The fact that the agreement was signed by the All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference, which never had any presence in the region, and the region was 'illegally' occupied by Pakistan, makes the Karachi Agreement illegitimate. The Agreement lacked public support and constitutional legitimacy because neither the people of Gilgit-Baltistan nor the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir were represented by the contracting parties. (Khan M. I., 2005). Since occupying GB, Pakistan has kept the state in a political limbo—handing out symbolic concessions when the populace demanded political power.

Pakistan's actions with respect to GB's political status raises the question as to why is Pakistan wary of providing provincial status to Gilgit-Baltistan? There are various underlying reasons for this like the strategic and geographical importance of GB or if (although chances are slim to none) a plebiscite happens in Kashmir in accordance with resolution 47 of the United Nations (United Nations, 1950) or the deep settled sectarianism in Pakistan.

### **Sectarianism in GB**

The sectarian bloodshed in GB began in the late 1970s along with sectarian violence in Pakistan; between 1950 and 1970, the two main Islamic sects, the Sunnis and the Shias, coexisted peacefully in Pakistan. The fact that they all held the same opinion on the Prophet's finality as the definition of Islam and declared the Ahmadiyyas as non-Muslims is evidence of inter-sectarian harmony in Pakistan that actually brought them together' (Behuria, 2004).

The rise of sectarianism in Pakistan coincided with the start of Afghan Jihad and the



coup by Zia-ul-Haq and his subsequent Islamization of Pakistan, which emphasised the Sunni Hanafi-Deobandi system of jurisprudence (Shan, 2016).

Various scholars have debated the cause of sectarian violence in Gilgit-Baltistan. Muhammad Feyyaz argues that the Iranian revolution coupled with Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization project was a significant factor in the advent of sectarian violence in Pakistan and Gilgit-Baltistan alike (Feyazz, 2011). Vivek Mishra sees the Karakoram Highway and the Afghan jihad as significant reasons for sectarian conflict in the region (Mishra, 2018). Alok Bansal, in his book "Gilgit-Baltistan and its Saga of Unending Human Rights Abuse" states that the sectarian conflict may have started due to some underlying reasons, but it was kept alive by the government to maintain a divide between the people of Gilgit-Baltistan in order to avoid them from demanding political rights that they were devoid of since 1947 (Bansal, 2018). Pakistan is a Sunni-majority country with its army and polity largely dominated by Sunnis from Punjab. On the other hand, GB was the only region in Pakistan which had a Shia majority. Pakistani establishment despised the Shias in GB, which is evident from the fact that in 1974, during the tenure of Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Pakistan abolished the state-subject rule, which, coupled with the opening of Karakoram Highway to the public in 1986, led to an influx of Sunni hardliners (often aided by the state) into GB.

Another evidence of state sponsored sectarianism is the 1979 sectarian violence against the Shias wherein Pervez Musharraf (then head of the Special Service Group) brought hordes of Sunnis from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and gave them free hand to attack the Shias in Gilgit. The International Crisis Group report stated that "Sunni militants killed, looted and pillaged with impunity while the authorities sat back and watched" (ICG, 2007).

The Gilgit-Baltistan House passed a joint resolution in March 2021 for interim provincial status to the region (Khan, 2021). The resolution came after the announcement by former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan in December 2020, that granted provincial status to Gilgit-Baltistan after the assembly elections (TimesNow, 2020). This was not the first time a leader of Pakistan promised provincial status to GB.

Currently, China has substantial investments in the GB area as part of CPEC, which may compel Pakistan to grant provincial status to GB for stability. However, it is to be noted that sectarianism is rife in every region of Pakistan (satp, 2024) despite their political status. The establishment sponsors terrorism as a state policy, hence, even if the state provides provincial status to GB, it will just be a farcical practice like the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order 2009.

## **What should India do?**

India's Kashmir policy has been affected at large due to Cold War dynamics. Pakistan was an essential partner of the United States during the Cold War especially during the Soviet-Afghan war and the subsequent "War on Terror". During the Cold War, international public opinion dominated by Western perception constantly castigated India as an oppressor of Kashmiri opinion and demands (Joseph, 2009). However, equations have changed due to US's withdrawal from Afghanistan and Pakistan's increasing closeness with China.

As a policy, India must show intent as to whether it wants to liberate GB (including the entire PoK) or make the Line of Control (LoC) the de jure border. If India wants to liberate GB and assimilate it back into India along with the so-called AJK, some policy shifts that India could make are as follows:

- In contemporary times, narratives have taken over morality. The Indian state should work on building a narrative by highlighting Pakistan's gross human rights abuses in GB. On the other hand, India should give back Jammu and Kashmir state status as soon as possible and inculcate a new political class which is local and patriotic. The country should also work rapidly on developing Kashmir and Ladakh into a modern and economically developed region by promoting tourism and developing infrastructure. For the above to happen, we must stop infiltration by Pakistan-backed terrorists into Kashmir and prevent local youths from joining their ranks.
- To engage with nationalist and separatist groups from GB, India should encourage researchers and scholars to focus on the region's past and present in culture, language and region to understand their dynamics better.
- India needs to reach out to GB through expatriates in the UK, Canada and the USA and encourage and fund them to raise their voices against Pakistan in international forums.
- Last but not least, India should educate its populace on GB. Majority of people are aloof to the fact that GB is part of PoK. This can be done by dedicating a chapter to GB in school books and encouraging & funding research on GB.

## **Conclusion**

The situation in Pakistan is bleak. There is large-scale sectarian violence and even intersect violence. There are five Maslaks (schools of Islamic thought) in Pakistan, four of which (Barelvi, Deobandi, Ahl-e-Hadees and Jamaat-e-Islami) are Sunni and the fifth Shia. When the Sunni Maslak are not fighting Shias or the Muhajirs in Sindh, they fight among themselves (Fair, 2018). India needs to dehyphenate the violence in mainland Pakistan and GB and build

a narrative around that on the world stage. Gilgit-Baltistan is a member of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO)—an organisation formed to raise the voices of unrepresented and marginalised nations and people worldwide. India should actively raise voices of the people of GB at multilateral organizations such as the UN, SAARC (if it ever becomes functional again), SCO and BRICS (to test China). As stated above Pakistan created a ‘narrative of excess by India in Jammu and Kashmir during the Cold War taking advantage of its partnership with Western countries including the USA. Presently, India and the United States’ ties are growing stronger day by day (partially due to mutual concerns regarding China), hence we should extrapolate our ties with US to pressurise Pakistan on GB. The road of liberating GB and assimilating it back with India is a long one, we need to have patience, perseverance and determination to achieve our goal.

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