



Recent Developments in Gilgit-Baltistan

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The present-day Gilgit Baltistan (GB) is a territory illegally occupied by Pakistan since 1947. It has a unique geo-strategic location where the boundaries of three nuclear powers—China, India, and Pakistan—as well as Afghanistan and Tajikistan converge. The numerous traditional passes, existing in the region, had been used by a number of invaders in the past as a gateway to enter into India. These passes were also instrumental in socio-economic and religio-cultural transactions between India and rest of the world.

There is historical and documentary evidence that establishes that GB has historically been part of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. Given the geo-strategic importance of this region, the Sikhs of Punjab, the Dogras of Jammu and the British developed an interest to bring the area under their direct control. The first Anglo-Sikh War (1845-46), between the Sikh Empire and British East India Company resulted in the Sikh Kingdom surrendering the Jullundur Doab, a valuable region between the Beas and Sutlej rivers. The British were also to be paid Rs. 15 million as indemnity failing which the Sikh Kingdom ceded Kashmir and Hazara. Soon after this, the British entered into a separate agreement with Maharaja Gulab Singh of Jammu. Under the Treaty of Amritsar (1846), Gulab Singh acquired Kashmir from the British and thus came to be known as Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir. Later, in 1899, Ladakh, Gilgit and Baltistan were merged into one frontier district and placed under *Wazir-i-Wazarat* (Governor).

In 1935, the British coaxed Maharaja Hari Singh, the then ruler of Jammu and Kashmir, to lease the Gilgit Agency for the next 60 years. The Lease agreement (March 26, 1935) clearly underlined that the Viceroy and Governor General of India would take over only the civil and military administration, whereas the territory along with the mining rights would continue to be under the dominion of Maharaja.

In 1947, with the end of the Raj, the lease was terminated in July and the Gilgit Agency reverted back to its original ruler. Maharaja Hari Singh appointed Brigadier Ghansara Singh as the new *Wazir-i-Wazarat*. However, Major William Brown, the British Commander of Gilgit Scouts, not only organised a revolt/coup d'état and arrested Ghansara Singh, he also handed over the area to Pakistan which appointed Sardar Muhammad Alam as its political agent. These steps were accompanied by Pakistan sending tribal raiders and regular forces, also disguised as raiders, into other parts of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. It was under these circumstances; Maharaja Hari Singh signed the Instrument of Accession making the princely state an inalienable part of India. The Indian armed forces pushed back, both the Pakistani regular forces as well as tribal raiders. At the time of the declaration of ceasefire in January 1949, Pakistan however remained in possession of a large territory of Jammu and Kashmir including Mirpur, Muzaffarabad and Gilgit-Baltistan. India considers the entire State of Jammu and Kashmir, which includes Gilgit-Baltistan, as its integral part.

Initially, GB was treated by Pakistan as a part of the occupied territory—which Pakistan refers to as “Azad Jammu and Kashmir” and India terms as Pakistan Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (POJK). Later in April 1949, under the Karachi Agreement between the governments of Pakistan and “Azad Kashmir,” Pakistan assumed direct control over GB and imposed the draconian Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR) on it. Ever since then its indigenous people have been deprived of basic human and political rights. The people of GB have no representation in the parliament of Pakistan. The territory has not figured in any of the three Constitutions adopted by Pakistan in 1956, 1962, and 1973. Even POK's interim Constitution (1974) did not refer to the area of GB as its part. Pakistan has not only neglected, isolated and disfranchised the people GB, it could never justify or clarify GB's undefined and ambiguous status.

Instead of addressing the concerns of the people, the politico-security elites of Pakistan have decided to use the strategically located territory for proxy wars in the region. A number of terrorist training camps—belonging to Lashkar-e-Toiba, Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, Jaish-e-Mohammad, Hibul Mujahideen, Al Badar, Harkat-ul-Ansar—exist and operate in the area under the protection of security institutions and intelligence agencies of Pakistan. There have also been moves to infect the area with extremist ideologies. Pakistan has also been trying to change the demography of the region by bringing people from other areas and settling them in GB.

The ambiguities in its legal status and lack of basic human and political rights over the years have given rise to political unrest and deep-seated resentment against the government of Pakistan. This led to the emergence of certain political/nationalist groups opposing the highhandedness of Pakistan. Their demands range from autonomy, a POK like structure, provincial status, to complete freedom from Pakistan. Some of such prominent groups include the Balwaristan National Front (BNF), the Gilgit Baltistan United Movement (GBUM), the Balwaristan Student National Organisation (BSNO), the United Kashmir People's National Party (UKPNP), the Gilgit Baltistan Democratic Alliance (GBDM), the Gilgit Baltistan National Movement (GBNM), the Gilgit Baltistan National Alliance (GBNA), the Karakoram National Movement (KNM), the Gilgit Baltistan Thinkers Forum (GBTf), and the Bolor Thinkers Forum (BTF).

Although political unrest has been endemic in GB for the past several decades, protests have largely been peaceful, and focussed on a legal-constitutional battle and launching political movements to get grievances addressed. Pakistan's politico-security establishment continues to be inattentive to these genuine demands. The politico-legal changes, which Pakistan has introduced from time to time, have failed to assuage the concerns on the ground and its legally ambiguous status seeks to cloak the fundamental fact that this is a territory under illegal occupation. The Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self Governance Order of 2009 renamed the area from Federally Administered Northern Areas to Gilgit-Baltistan, it introduced an improved setup of legislative system which included a Legislative Assembly, GB Council, and offices of Governor and Chief Minister. It is important to note however that the order ensured that the real power remains with the Governor and the GB Council—the Governor was to be appointed by the President of Pakistan on the advise of the Prime Minister and all the members of the GB Council were to be appointed by federal government with Prime Minister as the Chairman of the Council. The recent Gilgit-Baltistan Order 2018 abolished GB Council and transferred all its power to the GB Legislative Assembly. However, it made the Prime Minister of Pakistan even more intrusive in GB affairs by vesting extra-ordinary powers in his office. The Prime Minister now has the final say on all legislation and policies which actually strips GB Legislative Assembly of all authority and credibility.

In the wake of an increasing Chinese presence in the area under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) framework, Islamabad seeks to further tighten its grip on the region and pushed the people into subservience. If there is no transparency regarding the CPEC projects in Pakistan as a whole this is particularly so far GB. Islamabad is forcibly acquiring land and displacing people. No studies are known to have been undertaken about the possible ecological impact of these projects. Many fear the manner of implementation is in violation of environmental safety norms. Those raising their voice are being arrested, tortured and imprisoned on false charges of terrorism.

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