



Exploitation of Water and Mineral Resources of Gilgit-Baltistan

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Introduction

Gilgit-Baltistan comprises approximately 72,000 km² of territory, bordering Afghanistan to the north, the Xinjiang province of China to the northeast, the Pakistani occupied Jammu and Kashmir (PoJK) to the south and Jammu and Kashmir to the southeast. With an estimated population of 2 million, Gilgit-Baltistan's legal identity and constitutional status has been disputed ever since the Indo-Pakistani partition in 1947. For over 70 years now, the area of Gilgit-Baltistan is lacking a proper constitutional status, a working legal system and political autonomy. The lack of this democratic set-up has resulted in constant human rights violations, poverty, slow economic development, exploitation of natural resources and growing sectarian turbulence. While Islamabad earns billions in revenue from Gilgit-Baltistan annually from trade and transit, water resource exploitation, trophy hunting, eco-tourism, mineral exploration and direct and indirect federal taxes, the significant majority of these earnings are not allocated for the development of the region. My presentation will try and identify how the federal government has been exploiting the water and mineral resources of this autonomous region. I will also speak, brief, the presence of dubious Chinese companies and army in this region, which has created an atmosphere of doubts and discontent among the locals for want of a clear roadmap and policy by the government of Pakistan.

Gilgit-Baltistan is one of the least known parts of South Asia. This autonomous region, has not been constitutionally recognized by the Pakistan Government as a province of the country. This has far reaching consequences for the people of the region, who have an undefined relationship with Pakistan and have an unclear legal status. As they are not constitutionally part of the State of Pakistan, the people have limited rights and nearly no representation. This has

meant that they have very little space or legal recourse to object to the federal governments bids to exploit the regions natural resource wealth. The autonomous region finds rare mention in both, mainstream Pakistani or Indian media but is gaining significance since the territory of Gilgit-Baltistan determines an essential part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a multimillion dollar development project which is heralded as an 'game changer' for Pakistan and the whole region.¹ Yet, the current patterns of natural resource exploitation are environmentally destructive; socially inequitable; and contribute to human insecurity, political instability, and social conflict.²

The Wealth of Gilgit-Baltistan

The region of Gilgit-Baltistan has remained always been an anomaly in the political system of Pakistan. There are several factors that contributed to its constitutional limbo. Foremost among these is the Kashmir dispute, as well as regional geopolitics at large. The presence of natural resources is a testament of progress and prosperity of any region but ironically, the case is quite opposite with Gilgit-Baltistan. This hub of natural resources has been the most backward and ignored area of Pakistan since its inception. Gilgit-Baltistan is naturally a high potential and a resource-rich region with two key areas of interest, viz. mineral and water resources.

Mineral Resources

To understand the nature of exploitation of resources from GB, there is a need to assess the resource wealth of Gilgit-Baltistan. Covering about 73,000 km², this region is surrounded by three world famous mountain ranges, viz. the Hindukush, the Himalaya, and the Karakorum. Gilgit-Baltistan's geology is characterised by a large number of mineral deposits, including metallic, non-metallic, energy minerals, precious and dimension stones, and rocks of differing industrial value. In these mountains, have been found almost all the minerals Pakistan currently offers to the world markets including Topaz, Peridot, Emerald, Morganite, and Tourmaline etc. Reconnaissance surveys have revealed that there are also rich amount of precious metals like Gold, Gypsum, Chalcopyrite, Uranium etc. in various mountainous areas of Gilgit-Baltistan.³ The industrial minerals such as marble, china clay, feldspars and serpentinite are also found in GB in abundance. There were many surveys carried out by different mineral companies in different time frames. Also surveyed by N.A.M.D.C (Northern Areas Mineral Development Corporation) in the past. It is proved that Gilgit Baltistan is rich in minerals and gemstone. The state sees this wealth as an opportunity that can allow it to pursue economic growth through expansion of its mining industry. Mining in Pakistan is dominated by the public sector through federal and regional development corporations, mainly from China. Mineral exploitation contributes only about 1 per cent of the country's GDP (International Alert 2015), but is seen by centrally based development planners as the key to good governance and inclusive growth.⁴

Under the constitution of Pakistan, the federal government has jurisdiction over oil, gas and nuclear minerals. Provincial governments have jurisdiction over the development and exploitation of minerals, and enforcing the regulatory regime (Pakistan Minerals Working Group 2013). At the provincial level and in special areas, a Mineral Investment Facilitation Authority has

been established, and separate departments of Mines and Minerals have been established in each province to issue licenses and leases, collect fees and royalties, and monitor mining activities. There is no government department responsible for monitoring the welfare of artisanal miners.

Recognising this, the Government introduced special provisions in the mining legislation to legalise informal mining, which introduced the National Mineral Policy in 2013. The policy is focused mostly on private and international investment, which is consistent with recommendations by the World Bank in their Gilgit-Baltistan Economic Report (World Bank 2011) addressing large-scale mining and managing the mineral sector in Pakistan.⁵

According to the Mine and Minerals Department of Gilgit-Baltistan, “Different aspects of National Mineral Policy have been implemented in the provinces to a varying degree but up till now no major break-through has been achieved in the sector primarily due to lack of infrastructure facilities in the mineral bearing areas and high risk nature of investment in the sector. Under the constitutional frame work, Government, of Pakistan is responsible for policy formulation, generation of geological data and exploration targets.”⁶“The GB region has minerals worth billions of dollars. Around Rs. 500 million values of gemstones are extracted annually from Gilgit-Baltistan and efforts are underway to explore other precious minerals. It has been confirmed that nearly all valleys in Gilgit-Baltistan have reserves of gold and base metals but the lack of investment and oversight has meant that the region or its people has not benefited⁷.”

Due to the lack of oversight, it is alleged that a number of foreign companies with the support of corrupt officials have exploited more resources than permitted to the detriment of the local economy. Apart from over mining, the region also faces the problem of illegal mining, which has a long history in Pakistan and has played an increasing role as a source of rural employment and revenue. The absence of an effective regulatory state, as well as failure to develop a longterm strategy to harness labour force potential, has led to its growth. The fact that this region has uranium deposits and the possibility of illegal smuggling of this mineral is worrisome. The role of Chinese mining companies extracting uranium without any restriction or regulation of the federal or local government has been accused by the locals.

From the point of view of governance, the region’s geology, combined with its unique geopolitics, as well as its social-cultural distance from the central State, has created the context within which the informal mining of minerals and gemstones is being carried out. It is this combined geographical context of deep social and political complexity in which local livelihoods are enmeshed. The blurred nature of political existence in the region means that the central State’s attempts to exert control over livelihoods are rejected and thwarted by the existing feudal or semi-feudal modes of governance. Community members who have been taking risks to enjoy the benefits of local endowment through the production and trade of these minerals resist the imposition of central control over what they see as a legitimate activity.⁸Gilgit-Baltistan has a long history of mining with the mineral wealth has not been unknown to the local community. This knowledge has existed for longer than the State’s knowledge and has been exploited in a manner in which local communities organise the mining and distribute the proceeds. In Pakistan, the

central State and those who belong to the Centre have little or no productive knowledge of the livelihoods of these communities who continue to portray them as dangerous and illegal. Clearly, social and political factors have shaped the livelihood in this high-altitude area, which has remained off the state's radar for many decades. The illegality that the State associates with such informal mining and those who pursue such informal mining-based livelihoods points to the failure of the state to care for its citizens, and portraying their livelihoods as illegitimate enables the attribution to nature of a determination of ungovernability.⁹

Apart from these problems, the minerals department of the region has also been accused of patronizing non-local companies for mining licenses. This not only deprives the people of the region from access to their own resources, it also has a detrimental effect on employment generation in the region. The lack of communication with the region and the federal government is also expressed through miscommunication which widens the gaps in information and also perpetuates further confusion. For example, some people say that the federal government secretly awards licences, while others state that it operates "ghost companies" to extract resources from without local communities' permission and without providing them with any royalties. While the rumours have not been verified, they highlight frustration and a lack of basic communication between communities and the different levels of government.¹⁰ Pakistan is also strengthening its occupation by illegally awarding more than 2000 leases of these mighty mountains which are full of precious and industrial mines including Gold, Uranium and Molybdenum (which is used in space technology) to China and for its own national use by entirely violating State Subject Rule and UNCIP Resolutions.¹¹ Today, Chinese miners and their affiliates are everywhere in Gilgit Baltistan especially in the Hunza-Nagar district, which is rich in uranium and certain minerals used in space technology. Some areas in upper Hunza, for instance, like the Chapursan valley have become no-go areas, where the Chinese continue their work on tunnel building and mineral exploration. Chinese miners have also acquired lease in Astore district to extract high quality copper. Another company digging uranium and gold in Gilgit Baltistan and coordinating with the Chinese investors is Shahzad International, which is one of the largest lease-owning foreign contractors in the region. In Rondo and Shigar districts, however, the Chinese prefer to purchase minerals and gems directly from the local wholesalers. Reports have also come of military surveillance in certain uranium-rich areas of Nagar district.¹²

It is also of note that crude methods with indiscriminate blasting techniques are being used for excavation of minerals including gemstones, which not only destroy this natural resource but, according to official sources, also result in wastage of more than 75 percent of the total yield. According to the Pakistani government, none of the country's mineral-producing areas have ever enjoyed modern mining equipment, safety standards or the expertise of mining engineers. Currently, most Pakistani miners use Chinese-made, gasoline-powered rock drills both on the surface and underground. This is not only detrimental to the miner's health, it also causes irreversible ecological damage. Mining activity conducted in forest areas has also led to heavy losses and increased deforestation and forest degradation.

Energy and Water Resources

The GB region lies at the confluence of the Karakorum, the Hindu kush and the Himalaya mountain ranges. It consists of about 27% glaciers and snow deposits. The Indus River and its tributaries such as the Gilgit, the Hunza and the Nagar make the region rich in hydro resources with the potential to generate over 30,000 MW of electricity. There are several dam projects underway in Gilgit Baltistan. Significant among these are the Diamer Bhasha project, the Satpara dam and the Bunji dam.

The construction of the Diamer-Bhasha Dam on the River Indus commenced on October 18, 2011. On completion, this will be the highest Roller Compacted Concrete (RCC) dam in the world and is slated to produce 4,500 MW of electricity, store 8,500,000 acre feet (10.5 km) of water for Pakistan that would then be used for irrigation and drinking. The estimated cost of the project is in excess of USD 11 billion with an estimated completion time of 12 years. Its location in a highly seismic zone is a source of great concern to the local population, who will face all the adverse consequences of construction, while all the benefits will flow to the people living in Punjab and Sindh. The Pakistani government has been pushing the development of the dam as being progressive and beneficial for all. However, the people of the illegally occupied territory of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) are the ones who face the most immediate consequences of such a large-scale project. The territory of the Gilgit-Baltistan region is critical in order for the project to take place, however the Government has both neglected to take into consideration the opinion of local communities and to compensate them for the dam's land acquisition. The most daunting challenge has been lack of funds to support the construction cost conservatively estimated at \$14 billion a few years ago. Since its genesis, this project on River Indus as part of Water and Power Development Authority's (WAPDA) Water Vision 2025 has witnessed unprecedented delays owing to numerous logistical hurdles. Moreover, there are geopolitical implications considering that the site of the project is located in a region claimed by India.

It needs to be noted that the two dams, Diamer-Bhasha and Bunji are part of Pakistan's North Indus River Cascade, which involves construction of five big water reservoirs with an estimated cost of \$50 billion. These dams, together, will have the potential of generating approximately 40,000MW of hydroelectricity. Under the MoU signed in 2017 between Pakistan and China, National Energy Administration of China would oversee the financing and funding of these projects. However, in November 2017, reports surfaced that talks between Pakistan and China on the Diamer-Bhasha hit a rough patch owing to China putting forth a pre-condition that it will "construct, operate and maintain" the dam. During the last few months of the former Chief Justice of the Pakistan Supreme Court Saqib Nisar had started a people's movement of collecting donations for building the Diamer Bhasha dam, which saw domestic and international donations pouring in. Prime Minister Imran Khan till last September 2018 had requested the people to openly donate for the dam. But with time, the momentum of such donations has died down, and has lost the media glare that was created by the former CJ of the Supreme Court.

It is estimated that Bhasha Damar Mega Dam's reservoir, located in Damar would submerge 110 kilometers of the Karakoram Highway and around 80,000 people would be displaced initially. After further extension of this dam, about 300,000 local indigenous people will be displaced and about 200 KM area up to Gilgit town will be submerged. Pakistan also has also built a mega dam in Skardu. With a depth of 650 feet, Skardu Dam, , which commenced in April 2003, is slated to produce 17.6 MW of power. This dam is opposed by local journalists and activists due to its faulty design and material use, which could lead to a burst affecting the inhabitants of Skardu Valley. Pakistan is also building a 3rd Dam in Bunji on river Indus. Great loss to our environment, wild life, minerals both semi and precious stones worth billions is expected. It is expected that the construction of these dams would result in an indigenous population displacement of 80,000 in Damar Bhasha Dam, 300,000 in Skardu dam and about 30,000 in Bunji dam will occur. (<https://www.scribd.com/document/49243829/Untold-story-of-balawaristan-By-Abdul-Hamid-Khan>)

The PTI government though has announced to provide GB the status of an interim province, it still awaits to gain the status of a full province.¹³ The caveat is that although Prime Minister has mentioned that royalty of all dams would go to the provinces, it needs to be made clear that though the Prime Minister proposes to provide partial provincial status to GB, as per the Constitution, only a province enjoys the right to receive royalty, an autonomous region or partial province does not. So if the dam, hypothetically gets built, GB would remain bereft from receiving any royalty.

Grievances of the people of GB

To date, dozens of locals in G-B face sedition charges, arrest and torture for resisting Chinese mining projects for gems, uranium, gold, copper and heavy metals. There are complaints against Chinese firms for denying jobs and financial compensation and damaging farmlands and infrastructure. Many accuse the China Roads and Bridges Corporation, a Chinese firm currently blacklisted in Turkey and Malaysia, of using devastating environmental practices in its expansion of the Karakoram highway in Gilgit-Baltistan.¹⁴ Local newspaper, *Daily Baadeshimal* stated that the Chinese firms violate local laws and have failed to contribute to regional development.¹⁵ However, Huang Xilian, Deputy Director General of the Asian Affairs of the Foreign Ministry of China, stated that these “projects are not political projects. They are all for the livelihood of people. There is no commercial action by China in that part of the region,” which seems to overlook the plight of the common people of G-B.¹⁶

Selig Harrison stated that Pakistan has de facto handed over G-B to China. “Many of the PLA soldiers entering Gilgit-Baltistan are expected to work on the railroad. Some are extending the Karakoram highway, built to link China's Sinkiang Province with Pakistan. Others are working on dams, expressways and other projects.” He further said that “mystery surrounds the construction of 22 tunnels in secret locations where Pakistanis are barred. Tunnels would be necessary for a projected gas pipeline from Iran to China that would cross the Himalayas through Gilgit. But they could also be used as missile storage sites... Until recently, the PLA construction

crews lived in temporary encampments and went home after completing their assignments. Now they are building big residential enclaves, clearly designed for a long-term presence.”¹⁷

People’s Liberation Army during the making of the highway had created serious reservations not only in the Pakistani neighbourhood, but even the people of G-B had doubts of getting annexed by the Chinese. The purpose of the highway was clear to most foreign analysts as in 2010 only, it was stated that “China deployed an infantry battalion of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) at the 15,397-foot Khunjerab Pass on the Karakoram highway... for the security of its workers engaged in building a railroad. This railroad will eventually connect Xinjiang to the port of Gwadar in Balochistan, Pakistan,”¹⁸ which has been turned into the China Pakistan Economic Corridor of today.

As the elected government of GB is not part of the dialogue process between Pakistani and Chinese leaderships with regard to CPEC, an alliance of political groups from GB, the Awami Action Committee (AAC) has demanded that since GB is a disputed territory, the CPEC agreement be amended to include the territory as a third party as GB still remain a non-stakeholder to the entire project.

In a recent report published, it has been shown that most of the proposed projects by the federal government from 2015 has not been completed. In 2015-2016, the Pakistan had approved 103 schemes, and in 2016-2017 had approved 152 schemes and none of the projects have been completed.¹⁹

In this same report it has been stated that Gilgit-Baltistan Order 2018 was promulgated by the former Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi on May 21, 2018, and replaced the Gilgit Baltistan Empowerment and Self Governance Order 2009, with the ostensible aim of providing the “same rights enjoyed by the other citizens of Pakistan to people of Gilgit Baltistan.” The August 8, 2018, order purportedly provided political, administrative, financial and judicial powers to people in the region. In actual fact, however, the order shifted powers from the Gilgit Baltistan Council — including those related to passing laws relating to minerals and tourism — to the Gilgit Baltistan Assembly. A comparative analysis of the 2009 and 2018 Orders indicates that the ‘special rights’ the people of Gilgit Baltistan enjoyed have been curtailed further. For instance, the Legislative Power, according to the 2009 Order, was vested in the Gilgit Baltistan Council (though this was led by the Prime Minister of Pakistan, but also had representatives from Gilgit Baltistan) and the Gilgit Baltistan Assembly. As per the 2018 Order, this power lies with the Prime Minister of Pakistan and the Gilgit Baltistan Assembly, which comprises 33 members of which 24 members were Elected through direct Election. The Prime Minister seems to hold final authority in terms of legislative powers, as the Gilgit-Baltistan Order 2018 reads,

*If any provision of an Act of Assembly is repugnant to any provision of any law which the Prime Minister is competent to enact, then the law made by the Prime Minister, whether passed before or after the Act of the Assembly, shall prevail and the Act of the Assembly shall, to the extent of the repugnancy, be void.*²⁰

In a media interview, Farman Ali, a political activist from Upper Hunza in GB said “Over 70,000 trucks will pass through this region daily, emitting a large amount of carbon. The government will also lay railway tracks in this mountainous area by building a number of tunnels. This will likely cause landslides and disturb the region’s ecological balance.”²¹

Amir Hussain, a political analyst from Lower Hunza part of the region stated that “The Chinese bring their own manpower wherever they go. For CPEC they are likely to bring seven million workers to Pakistan. Around 400,000 of them will be working in Gilgit Baltistan. How will the local get jobs?”²² He further stated on the question of 500 acre land allocated to create a special economic zone in the Maqpoon Das area in GB that “These lands have been taken over in the name of CPEC projects. In addition, the Army is planning to build checkpoints to provide security to CPEC projects. For that reason, they are planning to relocate people from Hunza and Nagar districts, which are located to the Chinese border... CPEC has become a holy cow in Pakistan. The locals are not allowed to protest against CPEC projects. Those who do are so are booked under anti-terrorism laws and dubbed anti-state elements”.²³

Faizullah Faraq, spokesman for the GB local government, in view of the forced alteration of the demography of the indigenous populace, stated “Most of the hotels, shops, markets and businesses are already owned by non-locals from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or Punjab. Now CPEC projects will attract more migrants. This will ultimately turn the locals into a minority.”²⁴

Conclusion

Gilgit-Baltistan can be seen as “occupy[ing] a problematic, minimal position in the national order of things.” The region has an ambiguous place within both Pakistan and the wider international sphere. Its in-between status stems from a complex web of colonialism, post-colonialism, globalization of resources, and even international security which makes the status of the region uncertain, but also geo-politically, economically, and militaristically strategic.²⁵ Pakistan is mulling to elevate the constitutional status of northern Gilgit-Baltistan region in a bid to provide legal cover to the multi-billion-dollar Chinese investment plan. The proposal would see the mountainous region mentioned by name for the first time in the country's Constitution, bringing it one step closer to being fully absorbed as an additional province. In addition to being named in the Constitution, Gilgit-Baltistan would also send two lawmakers to sit in the federal parliament — though they would be given observer status only.²⁶ Taking into account the geostrategic importance of Gilgit-Baltistan for Pakistan and now, China it is unlikely that Islamabad and Beijing will allow the province more autonomy. This may mean more a more control governance combined with extraordinary repressive measures. This may in the long run not only turn the people against the CPEC. The fear is that it would be seen as a means for China to entrench its security forces in the region.

It is also clear that communities feel vulnerable, excluded and denied access to much needed sources of revenue. They are unable to lobby or express their interests and they have an uncertain position in negotiations. Attempts at mining in Chipursan expose the challenges facing

communities. Besides limiting potential investment, the constitutional uncertainty also inhibits the ability of communities to lobby for greater control of the development of these industries. Weak political elected bodies may not be able to defend the rights and interests of people in the region.²⁷ The region will continue experiencing exploitation till the federal government makes an earnest attempt to listen to the woes of the people living in GB.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

End Notes

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