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GEOPOLITICAL INCARNATION OF GILGIT BALTISTAN ON POLITICAL HORIZON OF PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Geopolitics is the subject which is used to disclose the impact of geography on politics in a particular sphere. This research aims to analyze the geopolitics of Gilgit-Baltistan focusing both geographical and political perspectives. The geopolitical significance of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) is evident through its strategic location, connecting China, Afghanistan, and India. The research delves into the historical and contemporary political landscape, emphasizing the pre-independence status, the region's independence from Sikh Dogra Rulers, and its subsequent affiliation with Pakistan. The constitutional status of Gilgit-Baltistan is in limbo, revealing the absence of representation in Pakistan's parliament. Geopolitically, Gilgit-Baltistan emerges as a crucial hub, both historically and in the present. The region's role in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is highlighted, emphasizing its importance in global geopolitics. The analysis underscores the geopolitical impact on Pakistan, emphasizing the region's significance as a vital water source, energy producer, and potential tourism hotspot. Despite geopolitical challenges, the research advocates for collaboration and cooperation, suggesting that the GB's significance lies in connectivity and economic development rather than confrontation. The conclusion emphasizes the need for Pakistan to reassess its policies, considering the GB's geopolitical position to navigate future challenges successfully.

Key Words: Geography, Constitutional Status, Independence, Politics,

Introduction

The word geopolitics is composed of two words 'geo' and 'politics'. Geo means the earth or geography and politics is an art of government concerned with guidance or influence of governmental policy. So, geopolitics is concerned with the

politics and the way that geography affects politics or relations between countries (Oxford Dictionary 7th Edition, 2012). Geopolitics is to explore the geographical location of a region or a state and is to disclose the influence of that area in respect of physical features, power, international influences and advantages which it offers by its unique location (Agnew, 2013). The term “geopolitics” was first coined by Swedish writer Rudolf Kjellen in 1899 to signify the role of geography and politics in the social interaction of countries (Nayar, 2007a). Social analysts used two kinds of geopolitical theories – classical geopolitics and critical geopolitics. Classical geopolitics is fundamentally concerned with the role played by location and resources in the exercise of political power whereas the basic concept of critical geopolitics is the political outlook of intellectuals, social critics and analysts. The intellectuals of statecraft assemble ideas about places which can mould the political panorama of that region and their thought-provoking ideas have far long implication on the political behaviors and policy choices (Nayar, 2007b).

Geopolitics covers two extensive fields of knowledge: geography and politics. The geographic components highlight the climatic factors and its location that disclose defense and attack positions, human geographic factors such as ethnic settlement patterns and demographic pictures are shown. Moreover, the physical geographic factors show important resources and goods such as water, mineral, oil, iron, coal, and food (Bouzas, 2017). The historical components display routes and historical ties of the adjacent area along with that it reveals what had happened in the past in that particular state in the political arena. Lastly, the political components demonstrate what may happen and give an assessment of political development, cultural assimilations or differences, economic powers, social relationships, international affairs and practical guidance (Haverluk et al., 2014). So, Geopolitics provides practical guidance whenever policymakers seek to vary the political scenario of that region by deploying military forces or economic reformations, or by diplomatic policies or securing new alliances (Lambah, 2016).

The geographical contiguity of the GB with India, China, Afghanistan and Tajikistan make it strategically the most sensitive part of Pakistan. Although the region is neighboring Central and South Asia, yet it is not an integral part of the history of these bordering regions. The solitary existence of the GB due to its

detachment and steep routes kept it safe from major historical developments and disruptions of the neighboring states politics (Nashad, 2013).

Gilgit-Baltistan lies in the extreme north-east of Pakistan having resource rich places and beautiful tourist destinations. Geographically, this region has a diverse feature ranging from deep valleys, snowcapped mountains, sounding cascades, eye-catching lakes, highest plateaus and series of parallel ranges of Himalayas and Karakoram mountains, with an average height of more than 20,000 feet and having world's towering peaks as Nanga Parbat (26660 feet or 8126 meters) and K2 the second highest peak of the world (28251 feet or 8611 meters). The largest glaciers of the world apart from the polar areas are also located in this region (Khalid, 2010).

Research Method

This research provided an integrated analysis of the geopolitics of Gilgit-Baltistan, focusing on both geographical and political perspectives. The geographical section offers a brief overview of the study area, incorporating physical and human approaches to understand the region's landscape. The political aspect involves an extensive review of available literature on the political development of Gilgit-Baltistan before and after independence, with a particular emphasis on its affiliation with Pakistan. The available literatures in terms of research articles, books, reports and other contributing materials to a holistic understanding of the complex geopolitical dynamics shaping the region are analyzed qualitatively.

Geographical Get up of the Gilgit Baltistan

The GB is a classical incarnation of geography which is made up of purely mountainous composition. Due to its geographic location and makeup, GB is recognized with different names. It is a meeting point of the four highest mountain ranges in the world – the Karakoram, Himalayas, Pamir and Hindukush (Khalid, 2010). “These mountain ranges act as lofty fences all around which protect these regions from external influences. The Hindukush range cuts off GB from KP Province of Pakistan and Pamir cuts off from the Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan and Central Asia. The Himalayas separates GB from the Ladakh region of Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK) and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJ and K), and the

Karakoram splits GB and the Xinjiang region of China. GB is known as the Head of Pakistan. Some call the GB the Water Tank of Pakistan. It can also be named as the mountaineer's paradise and the capital of the mountain world. Thus, the term landlocked affects nothing when it comes to GB on account of ever flowing Indus River. It can rather be termed as mountain-locked because of gigantic mountain ranges (Khan, 2017).

Location

A location of places can be seen into a map by the main two categories absolute location and the relative location. The main location of the GB is 35.8026° N, 74.9832° E.



Figure 1 Location of Gilgit Baltistan

GB is connected with the adjoining regions through high mountain passes. Some of these passes cross over glaciers. There are some of the important passes which link the GB with China, Afghanistan and Indian Occupied Kashmir. Khunjerab Pass links GB with China which is the sole path that connects Pakistan with China by road. Now, CPEC has been constructed on this pass (Ullah & Anwar, 2020). The Darkot Pass is a link from Yasin to Chitral to Wakhan through Baroghil Pass which was the traditional route to assimilate Gilgit region to Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Irshad Pass is another narrow strip which bonds the GB with Wakhan Corridor in Afghanistan. Chorbata La in district Gangche connects the GB with Indian Occupied Ladakh. Kharmang sector joins GB with Kargil which is now under India. District Astore links with Srinagar and Neelam Valley in Azad

Kashmir which was traditional and the shortest route of transportation. Siachen Glacier links Baltistan with India (Dani, 2007).

Landscape Feature

GB has relatively a vast variety of landscapes on the basis of great range of altitude. Altitude causes massive ecological diversities and these in turn affect the way people get used to their environment. Total territorial area of GB is 72,496 square kilometers. Approximately 94 percent of GB's area contains high mountains and glaciers, 4 percent is covered with forest, 0.2 percent comprises built up area and 1.8 percent is cultivated. Another source displays forests as covering more or less 6,592 square kilometers in GB which make up to 9.1 percent of the region (Khan, 2017). The land surface can be broadly divided into the upper zone, above 4,500 m, and the lower zone between 2,700m to 4,500. About 74 percent of the land surface is above 4,500. The land below this altitude has vast stretches of barren, rugged and rocky terrain spread by pockets of cultivation and a few natural pastures. Most human settlement is situated at elevations of 2800m to 4100m above sea level. By and large, the soil in GB is coarse, porous, thin and sandy having varying quantity of pebbles. The soil is characterized by low organic matter content and poor water retention capacity (Siddiqa, 2017a).

Pre Independence status of Gilgit Baltistan

Historically, the present GB was ruled by local emperors and monarchs before the British invasion. After the Second World War, when the British influence was declining all over the world, they decided to leave the subcontinent through a partition plan of 3rd June 1947. However, in the mid-19th century it came into under the Dogra rulers with the shadow of British supervision. Then on the eve of leaving of the British colonial presence from India, princely states were left to choose either Pakistan or India to go with. The Maharaja acceded to India in October 1947 against the wishes of the people of and the spirit of the partition plan. Strong resistance came out from the GB over this decision of the Maharaja (Naseem, 2007).

They mutinied and subjected the Dogra force and acceded to Pakistan with their free will. But the status of the GB has been declared disputed both from Pakistan and Indian perspectives. Pakistan is hoping to get a vote of the people of the GB whenever a plebiscite is carried out by the UN Commission. While looking

at the geostrategic scenario of the GB, it generally gives us a picture of hostile geopolitical environment due to an eccentric behavior of its immediate neighbor, India. Since day one of their establishment in 1947, Indo-Pak relations have always been characterized by mutual mistrust and distrust on regional and international issues (Ali, 2010). But the point to ponder is that the GB has never been a part of Kashmir, it was annexed and integrated into Kashmir during Dogra Rule. The people got freedom by defeating Dogras and eagerly joined Pakistan. So, the solution of the issue is that the people of the GB must be given representation in Pakistan's parliament and senate provisionally until the implementation of the UN resolution. The case of the GB is candid and obvious. The People of the GB acceded to Pakistan and expressed their consent to integrate with Pakistan unconditionally (Nasiruddin, 2018).

Independence of Gilgit Baltistan

The Gilgit Baltistan region got independence from Sikh Dogra Rulers region wise in two consecutive years as Gilgit region became an independent region in late 1947 and Baltistan region in 1948. The independence of Pakistan is considered as an escalating factor for the freedom movement in Gilgit Baltistan region (Hussainabadi, 2019). They established a new state of their own. Raja Shah Rais Khan became the President while Mirza Hassan Khan the Commander-in-Chief of the Gilgit Scouts and Major Brown as an Advisor to President. The region ran its own government for 15 days and then offered Pakistan to take possession of the administration (Naseem, 2007).

Affiliation with Islamic Republic of Pakistan

After getting independence from Dogras (Sikhs) without any external role, the natives of Gilgit Baltistan region at once decided to affiliate with the newly partitioned country Pakistan due to "Two Nation Theory" and due to Islamic state exclusive of any prior condition. However, the affiliation of region occurred in different time (Howe & Hunzai, 2019). Yasin (Ghizer) was the first state to join Pakistan on 7th of November, 1947, exactly one week after independence. Gilgit became part of Pakistan on November, 16th of same year and states of Hunza and Nagar affiliated with Pakistan 19th of same month. On December 7th, 1947, founder of Pakistan and 1st Governor General of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah himself

signed the document of Hunza-Nagar affiliation and these states became de facto part of Pakistan (Khan, 2017a).

As Baltistan region got independence after one year of independence of Pakistan and after nine months of Gilgit region's independence, so this region also decided to merge with Pakistan on August 14th, 1948 (Khan, 2017b).

Standpoint of Pakistan

Pakistan, the Islamic Republic consider that Gilgit Baltistan is part of Kashmir dispute as this region is part of Kashmir and any constitutional advancement for the region either that is to announce the status of province or to give representation in Senate or Parliament will directly affect the Kashmir cause and it will also weaken the standpoint of Pakistan on Kashmir dispute in the world including United Nations (Kreutzmann, 2015).

Constitutional Status of Gilgit Baltistan

Gilgit Baltistan, the north most region of Pakistan which is mountain locked due to mighty Karakoram, Hindukush and Himalayan range affiliated the whole region with Pakistan after independence to become constitutional part of the newly emerged Islamic republic in the neighboring territory. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the 1st governor general of Pakistan himself welcomed this affiliation and signed the document of early affiliated states (Bouzas, 2012).

Gilgit Baltistan region is not a constitutional part of Islamic Republic of Pakistan even in 2021, as there is no representation of Gilgit Baltistan in both the Upper house (Senate) and Lower house (Parliament). Out of 342 members of Parliament and 102 members of Senate in bicameral constitutional system of Pakistan, no one represents the Gilgit Baltistan region (Ali, 2022).

Administrative Control of Gilgit Baltistan after independence

After affiliation with Pakistan, the Gilgit Baltistan region, known as Northern Areas in Pakistan remained under direct control of Federal, FATA and under ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Northern Area (KANA) for more than two decades. There was no representation of the people of northern areas in any administration of decision making or high level and due to ambiguous constitutional status no decision was made regarding establishment of legislative assembly or any other local administration setup. The earlier decision towards transformation of

authority to the people of the region was establishment of advisory council which has now gained the status of legislative assembly of Gilgit Baltistan (Khan, 2015).

In November 1947, Government of Pakistan appointed a political agent in response to the invitation by the provisional government setup in Gilgit after the successful revolution. On 16 November 1947, Sardar Alam Khan arrived at Gilgit as a political agent. After taking control of Gilgit, the Gilgit Scouts along with Azad irregulars moved towards Baltistan and liberated Baltistan region (Bercha, 2002). Thus, GB became the part of Pakistan into various episodes: the state of Yasin on 7 November 1947; Gilgit on 16 November 1947; the states of Hunza and Nagar on 19 November 1947. Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah sanctioned the accession documents of Hunza and Nagar states with his own signs on 7 December 1947 and those of Baltistan on 14 August 1948 (Khan, 2017). The revolution of Gilgit-Baltistan reached its climax due to the patriotic and enthusiastic officers of Gilgit Scouts, the nationalist Muslim officers of 6 Jammu and Kashmir Infantry Battalion and the loyal and sincere local masses of the region. Besides that, it was a strong resistance against the longstanding tyranny of the Dogras and the British Raj (Brown, 1987).

The government of Pakistan took administrative control of the area by sending a political agent Sardar Muhammad Alam Khan to administer Gilgit Agency under the Frontier Crime Regulation (FCR). All of GB categorically acceded to Pakistan. Unfortunately, the government of Pakistan decided the fate of GB unilaterally instead of consulting with the local leadership. They signed an agreement on 28th April 1949 with the Kashmiri leaderships without having any representation from GB which is known as Karachi Agreement, 1949. Through that draconian and infamous agreement, GB's administration was entrusted to the Federal Government without any efforts to guarantee the people of GB their constitutional rights. In 1950, the control of GB was transferred from NWFP (North West Frontier Province) to Ministry of Kashmir Affairs (Jalal, 1995). A post of Political Resident was created to look after the administration which continued till 1952. Then a Joint Secretary of, Kashmir Affairs Division was handed over the additional charge of a Resident of Northern Area and Azad Kashmir. In 1967, another change was executed in the administrative sector; a separate post of Resident for Northern Areas was fashioned at Gilgit (Dani, 2007). The Resident was

vested with special power and authority to exercise the power of a local government. He acted as the Commissioner of High Court, FCR, Finance and Revenue. He was assisted by two political agents in the two administrative units known as Gilgit Agency and Baltistan Agency. There was no separate legislative body. The Resident himself had legislative power which he exercised with the consent of the government of Pakistan (Shafique & Iftikhar, 2017).

The first elections in the area were held in 1970 for electing the Northern Areas Advisory Council (NAAC) that was constituted by General Yahya Khan in 1969 which comprised sixteen members. In 1974, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto abolished FCR and introduced a reform package. NAAC was replaced with the Northern Areas Council (NAC) having elected members through direct adult franchise. It was in 1994 that the government of Pakistan issued a Legal Framework Order (LFO) for the area which served as the constitution of Northern Area and acknowledged the fundamental rights of the people. The LFO changed NAC into Northern Areas Legislative Council (NACL). The council was renamed as the “Northern Areas Legislative Assembly” (NALA) in 2007. A major step was taken in 2009 when Gilgit Baltistan Empowerment and Self Governance Order-2009 were introduced. Northern Areas were renamed as Gilgit Baltistan as a long-standing call and demand of the people. A province like-status was provisioned to the GB with the portfolio of Chief Minister and Governor (Khan, 2015).

Geopolitical Impact of the Gilgit Baltistan on Pakistan

It is not an exaggeration to call the GB as a heartland of Pakistan. The heartland theory is a geopolitical concept which was introduced by a British scholar Halford Mackinder in his paper to Royal Geographical Association with the title “The Geographical Pivot of History” in 1904. According to Mackinder, the heartland is the region which is the core of global influence due to its size, wealth, resources, and territorial powers (Sloan, 1999). Mackinder applied the “Heartland Theory” in a particular context of Eurasia but it can be applied to others. If we have a cursory glance over the GB, the significance will be evident. Today, GB has become a centre of new great game played by India, United State of America and Afghanistan with the start of CPEC. They are expressing their reservation by saying that it passes through the disputed territory of Pakistan. The GB is the junction point that connects Pakistan and China through Khunjerab Pass and Karakorum Highway,

the only route that can solidify Pak-China trade agreement. So, CPEC has no meaning to China and Pakistan without GB. For Pakistan, the significance of GB is that it gives her a ray of hope to get out of the economic distress through CPEC project (Safdar, 2014).

From the past to the present, GB is a hub of attraction to the world powers due to its exclusive geopolitical position. In past, the GB was visualized as a gateway to India and fulcrum of Asia. The British wanted to secure India from the Russian invasion; therefore, Lord Curzon visited this inaccessible area even before becoming the viceroy of India. Field Marshal Kitchener Commander in Chief of Indian army, who was serving the Britain, also visited Gilgit to get first-hand knowledge and information after a visit of Hunza by a Russian military officer. For some periods, Chitral has been part of GB. During the first to seven Century, some parts of the GB have been ruled by China and Tibet. Besides that, the routes of the GB served as the crossroads of China and Central Asia in the past (Bercha, 2002).

In the age of globalization and interdependence, no country can live alone. Every nation banks on each other in order to live a better life. Hence, one should search for the ways of cooperation and coordination instead of living aside. The people of GB do not want to see their land as a land of confrontation. Instead of that the GB is geo-strategically an important sphere in terms of cooperation, fraternity, prosperity, trade, peace and tranquility. The land of GB should be the land of connectivity like it was in the ancient times (Bouzas, 2017). The GB wants to enjoy the significance of being situated in an area which connects some of the economically and politically significant zones of the world like Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. In future, the oil and gas pipeline from Iran to China can pass through this mountainous corridor. India can use this region as a gateway to meet the need of energy shortage, oil and gas from the Central Asia. However, neither India nor Pakistan shows such an interest to resolve their confrontation due to classical and traditional politics (Hussain & Javid, 2018).

GB has an ideal location to joint Asian countries. However, the traditional conflict with India has made it a conflict zone. The geographical assimilation of Gilgit-Baltistan with Kargil and Ladakh makes it strategically the most sensitive part of Pakistan. In past, Kargil and Ladakh were the part of the GB. Now India has occupied these regions. If Pakistan and India come on the same page and vary their

policies, the region can provide a passage to expand their economic linkages and the GB can become an economic zone for the both countries instead of being a conflict zone (Bouzas, 2012). Apart from that, a strong feeling is growing on both sides of the GB and Kargil that the traditional Kargil Skardu route should also be opened to connect these regions. After opening the kartas pore corridor, people of Skardu and kargil are mounting pressure to open the traditional Skardu- Kargil routs. Positive steps to extend their relationship can open more avenues to promote trade and tourism in this resource rich region of Gilgit-Baltistan. By this way, thousands of refugees can get a chance to meet their relatives who are across the line of control (Baig et al., 2018).

During the Indo-Pakistan wars of 1947, 1965, 1971 and even 1999, Kargil war made it a sensitive zone and was an important war front between Pakistan and India. "The people of GB are serving on various key post of Pakistan army. Now, Northern Light Infantry (NLI) as part of civil armed forces is capable of combating any threat arising from its boarder. It is serving in every corner of Pakistan to protect its national security. It was because of their outstanding performance in Kargil war in 1999, NLI regiment was bestowed the status of a regular infantry. The soldiers of the GB are considered as the best warriors who proved their courage and bravery during Siachen conflict, Kargil war and the war on terror. Lalik Jan, the recipient of Nishan-e- Haider, the highest military award, is the son of Gilgit Baltistan. People of Gilgit Baltistan are true patriots who love Pakistan more than any other common Pakistani. It sounds that the GB is the inseparable part of Pakistan (Bansal, 2008).

Moreover, GB is a storehouse of water for Pakistan. There is almost no dry area in the region. The Indus River is the longest river in Asia and Lake Mansarvor is the fountainhead of this river which runs through Ladakh region. It enters into Pakistan through Kharmang District of Baltistan. When it flows into GB, six different branches within GB further adds its water, namely Shingo River, Shyok River, Shigar River, Hunza River, Astor River and Gilgit River. These sub-tributaries flow into the Indus River before reaching Kohistan district of KP. It is said that GB has a huge potential to produce hydro power to meet the shortage of electricity of Pakistan which is more or less 40,000 MW (Nigar, 2017). Diamer-Bhasha dam is a mega project of Pakistan which is going to be constructed in GB. After the successful

completion of this project, Pakistan's energy crisis and water shortages will be fairly mitigated. Moreover, it will reduce Pakistan's thermal power. It can supply more and more water for irrigation in Punjab and Sindh that will help the former to grow the different kinds of crops. Thus, Indus River is the life vein for Pakistan. It will help to alleviate poverty in the country. Besides that, it provides clean water for domestic usage as well (Abbas et al., 2016).

Tourism has become an industry. Now, many countries generate more than half of their revenues from tourism sector. Pakistan has incredible potential for tourism. Despite having extraordinary potential in tourism industry, Pakistan has not yet paid attention to boost up its amazing tourism sector. As far as the GB is concerned, it has a wide potential to promote tourism in the region particularly, adventure, mountaineering, and sightseeing tourism on account of its geography, biodiversity and its rich culture (Abbas et al., 2015). Nobody can get a wide divergence of adventure in the world as in the GB. Mighty mountain, biggest glaciers outside the polar region, quiet deserts, unspoiled valleys, foamy waterfalls, lush green meadows, calm lakes, thick forests and roaring rivers are scenic places. If the Government of Pakistan provide congenial environment for domestic and international tourists to explore this beautiful place, it will not only boost up Pakistan's economy but also provide job opportunities for the young people (Anwar, 2017).

Conclusion

The geostrategic of GB revealed the Geopolitical importance of the region with regard to its geographical position, its influence among the neighboring countries, its national and international gains on the basis of its location and the challenges when it comes to political relationships with other countries. The people of the GB are nonviolent and peaceful. They do not want to see their land as place of confrontation. As an alternative, they want peace and prosperity. The land of the GB is the land of connectivity as it was in the ancient times. They wish to enjoy the significance of being located in an area which is rich in natural resources. The routes which pass through these regions played dynamic role in the development of culture, trade, religion and commerce in the past. Mutual cooperation of Pakistan and India is needed for peaceful development of the whole regions. The point is that the profit of collaboration is extremely greater than the cost of hostility or

confrontation. Pakistan can make the routes of the GB as intersection points to meet with three regions- China in the north, Kargil and Ladakh (India) in the east, and Afghanistan and Central Asia in the north-west. The emerging nexus of the GB with Pakistan poses a picture that there is no chance of disintegration so far. But a loophole can be seen through minute observation in the political horizon. Pakistan is reluctant to take a compact political decision to clear out the constitutional position of the GB due to Kashmir debacle. Time has ripened to rethink its policies while keeping its geopolitical position in view to shun further challenges in the future.

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