

Regional Dynamics of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC): The Case of Gilgit Baltistan

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Abstract:

China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is one of the most debated projects of twenty first century. As an offshoot of China's initiative to connect the world through 'One Belt One Road' Project, it is expected to connect Karachi and Gawadar ports of Pakistan with Chinese and Central Asian Industrial hubs and Europe and Africa. As it passes through and connects a number of regions together, therefore, regional dynamics is expected to contribute a great lot in the environment of functionality and infrastructure development. A regional environment has always been key-factor in setting the development pattern and future approaches. For, the paper focuses on the study of the Gilgit Baltistan region of Pakistan that is the Upper-Northern part of CPEC and that connects CPEC with China and Central Asia. The paper explores the regional ethnic as well political concerns and looks into how these issues can be resolved through a political discourse and development patterns.

Keywords: CPEC, Gilgit Baltistan, Regional Dynamics, Transport and development, World Connectivity

Introduction

The idea of inter regional and inter-cultural connectivity has always been considered a key to cultural, religious, racial and politico-institutional exchanges as well as of power/colonial mechanism. The ethnic, cultural, religious and environmental compound has played a vital role in the success of a connectivity and transportation passage leading to the development of multi-cultural level of civilization. That is why the major political and economic powers have been ultra-conscious about the knowledge of the ecology, philology and ethnology around the routes and roads. The regions with human friendly ecology, particularly linked with the availability of water, an easily accessible road and a peaceful ethnic space have been popular and prosperous routes and regions with the dominance of martial races remained far behind on the development map of human civilization. The introvert communities deny an access to any sort of passages to extrovert elements. Contrarily, urbanized trading elites try to find out peaceful and easy to travel routes. In this context the paper focuses to analyze the geo-ethnic dynamics of the CPEC in Gilgit Baltistan region. This analysis can help understand the nature of CPEC's route

China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is an initiative taken under the umbrella concept of "One Belt One Road (OBOR)". The project is an investment of 62 billion dollars only by China other than Pakistani investment. Its prime objective is regional and continental connectivity of Afro-Eurasia. There are two major components: Silk Road Economic Belt and Maritime Silk Road.¹ This connectivity covers the major interests of China including Policy coordination, infrastructure construction (railways and highways), trade, economic and financial integration and people to people contacts and ties.² It is going to connect and extend benefits to almost sixty countries. It is estimated that half of the world population would get benefits from this project. It is the first ever leading effort by China's Government for the globalized world to promote cross-continental trade, connectivity and

economic integration after the long policy of cultural containment. Considering the nature of the project and its dimensions, it is predicted that CPEC will have a global impact and will prove itself to be a significant geo-strategic factor in changing political and regional dynamics of Asia. It is the initiative to connect regions, enhance bilateral communication, promote integrity and produce investment opportunity.

On 5th July 2013, then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif visited China on his official visit and a Memorandum of Understanding was signed by both the countries.³ China has a vision of One Belt One Road (OBOR) promoted by President Xi Jinping. Its objectives are to connect the world markets of Europe, Asia, Africa and CPEC is an essential part of OBOR. The core idea of CPEC is to strengthen bilateral connectivity between China and Pakistan by connecting Gawadar port to Xinjiang and Central Asia states via Gilgit Baltistan. Gilgit Baltistan is a connecting line between Pakistan and China and a gateway to China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Gawadar port is of central importance to China. During Musharraf's era in 2002 Gawadar was handed over to the Chinese to develop and make it operational. Subsequent developmental projects are incorporated to make the functioning of Gawadar port possible. The traditional distance from Xinjiang to Gawadar is almost 3000 km and if China opts the route of East Coast it is even longer distance. That is why Gawadar and CPEC are most important part of OBOR due to geo-strategic importance.⁴

The areas of East China to Central China are well developed and Western China has been neglected since ages. Western China is further struck by many problems such as underdeveloped infrastructure, socio-economic disparity and growing extremism. These problems pose a great threat to the internal stability and the Chinese government came up with development projects to reduce the threat of such issues.⁵

The major projects of CPEC are related to energy sector, roads and railways infrastructure development. For Pakistan, it is an opportunity to minimize the electricity crisis. Importance of energy is profound owing to its need in industries, trade and for domestic uses. CPEC is multi-dimensional project and its three main dimensions are transit trade, China Pakistan bilateral

trade, investment and as a flagship for OBOR.⁶ All projects are long term and no pre-time inauguration is expected.

Gilgit Baltistan

Gilgit Baltistan is a land having ethnic diversity. The region comprises of multi-lingual and multi-culture population. It is a classic example to understand a plurality of society. The total area of Gilgit Baltistan is 72496 (Square KM) and the total estimated population is 1.3 million. It is also known as “*Baam-e-Jehan*” (the roof of the world). The main areas of present day Gilgit Baltistan are Gilgit city, Diamer, Skardu, Astore, Ghizer, Ghanche and Hunza-Nagar. Administratively, Gilgit Baltistan is divided into two divisions. First is Gilgit Division and Second is Baltistan Division. Further, these two divisions are



divided into seven districts. The districts of Ghizer, Diamer, Gilgit, Astore and Hunza-Nagar are the part of Gilgit. The Baltistan Division comprises of Ghanche and Skardu Districts.⁷ Gilgit Baltistan is home to three world famous mountain ranges namely, Karakorum, Himalayas and Hindu Kush. It is situated on the meeting point of Russia, Afghanistan, China and India. In the recent past, security, and deteriorating law and order conditions have become one of the most pertinent reason in de-stability of the area but over the period of times, things have been much improved.

Keeping in mind the ethno-linguistic complexities, one must first undertake the shifting dynamics of ethnic groups in the regions under consideration. The wave of settlers from different areas of Pakistan is going to be considered a challenge to

political and ethnic culture of the region. Major business in the city of Gilgit is owned by the settlers. The opening up of the roads and easy approach to the region in the form of Karakoram highway has promoted migration from different parts of Pakistan, especially from Kashmir to Gilgit Baltistan. This demographic shift has now reached at startling level and has continued to escalate ethno-linguistic complexities in the region. Despite the fact of adding to the of linguistic diversity of the region, most of the eight major ethn0-lingual groups especially, Shina, Brushaski, Khowar, Wakhi and Balti are very conscious in this regards.

Special Economic Zones (SEZ) of CPEC in Gilgit Baltistan⁸

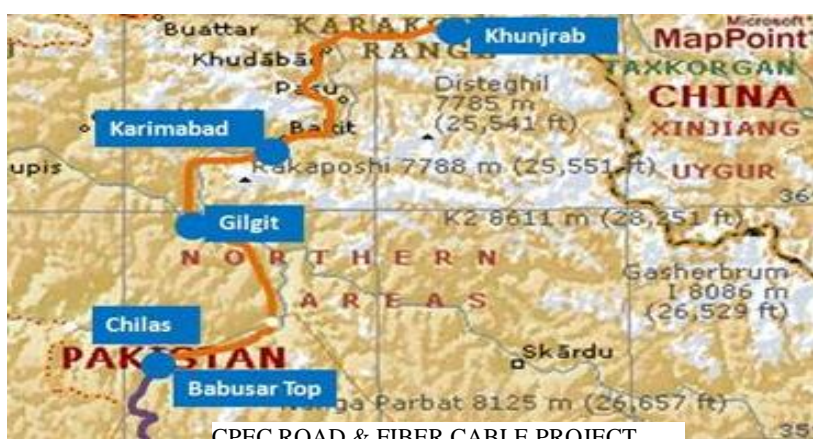
Special Economic Zones (SEZs) is one most important component under CPEC. Establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) is expected to provide a strong base to boost Pakistan's economic development through industrial growth. In the 6th JCC meeting in China, nine Special Economic Zones (SEZs) are planned under CPEC project in KPK, Balochistan, Punjab, FATA, Gilgit Baltistan, Kashmir, Islamabad and two in Sindh.⁹ The SEZ in Gilgit Baltistan will be established in the Maroondah area, located at Gilgit-Skardu road and a land of 250 acres has been allocated for this purpose. This site has potential for the development of industry related to wood work, livestock, minerals, handicraft and agriculture.¹⁰¹¹ The SEZ will be granted tax exemptions for the ten year and custom duties will be levied on import of goods. It will open good opportunity for the local and foreign investors. For, to cater with the domestic challenges such as poor governance and low institutional capacity, Board of Investment (BOI) has opened a regional office in Gilgit Baltistan.¹² To incorporate and implement the industrial policy for the effective working of SPZs is the major task of this office. The region of Gilgit Baltistan is facing numerous issues such as unemployment and low education rate. Such steps are expected to engage local population by providing them technical training and assistance and improve economic conditions potentially.

Road Infrastructure and Developmental Projects

Road Infrastructure is a vital component of CPEC which aims at improving the land connectivity. For, already functional Karakorum Highway (KKH) is one of the most important network to connect Pakistan with China. There are two major projects of road infrastructure development in Gilgit Baltistan. First is Karakorum Highway Phase 2 to upgrade KKH (Phase 2) from Raikot to Islamabad including is the construction of missing road link between Thakot to Havelian with a distance of 440 km.¹³ The estimated cost of this project is \$1305 millions. Second project is the construction of link roads to connect four areas of Gilgit with the main CPEC.¹⁴

Optic Fiber

The Pakistan-China Fiber Optic Project is one of the most significant project in Pakistan. The 840 km long project is likely to be completed by June 2018 with an amount of US \$ 44 million. through Karimabad, Gilgit, Babusar, Naran, Mansehra, and Jarkyas to Rawalpindi/Islamabad. Territory of Gilgit will benefit from it. Out of 840 km long optic fiber cable line, 466 km will pass through areas of Gilgit Baltistan.¹⁵ It will, apart from providing secure voice traffic, also generate employment opportunities in areas of Gilgit Baltistan.¹⁶ It will prove to be an important factor in strategic link between Pakistan and



China. Ministry of Information Technology and Special Communication Organization are working jointly on this project to ensure its safe and timely execution. Inception of this

additional project will address the provincial and regional grievances. Once again the challenge would be to incorporate the locals with that of the Pakistan-China Fiber Optic Project that is being called strategic link between the two countries and other development projects.

CPEC's Development Context and Key Issues in Gilgit Baltistan

Gilgit-Baltistan has been a region of conflict since the liquidation of the British Empire in 1947, with a special status under the Pakistani constitutions. With the exposure of CPEC, these issues have become more prominent, internally and externally. The Pakistan and China both have categorically rejected any sort of external concerns with CPEC and in Gilgit Baltistan. However, three internal issues are worth consideration and are going to be dealt very carefully, including:

1. Constitutional Status of Gilgit Baltistan
2. Devolution of Power and Empowerment
3. Sectarianism and Law & Order

Constitutional Status of Gilgit Baltistan

The current constitutional status of Gilgit Baltistan was awarded to it in 2009 through a Presidential Ordinance. After the announcement of CPEC, a dire need to revisit the constitutional status of Gilgit Baltistan was felt and measures have been taken. There are many questions in the context of constitutional status of Gilgit Baltistan. Among them, first question is related to Azad Jammu & Kashmir's historical relations with Gilgit Baltistan. This issue has remained controversial as Azad Jammu & Kashmir government claims that Gilgit Baltistan is their part. On the other hand, the Gilgit Baltistan Council and Government have always rejected this claim and have asserted their own distinct identity. It is termed as "Constitutional Limbo".¹⁷ Second issue is the nature of

relation and constitutional status of Azad Jammu & Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan within Pakistan.

Retrospect on Constitutional Status

Historically, the story of Gilgit Baltistan is a complex phenomenon as it was the constituent part of State of Jammu & Kashmir. After partition, the Gilgit Agency was established comprised of the princely states of Hunza & Nagar and small entities like Chillas, Ghizer, Yasin, Ishkoman, Punial and the Gilgit Wazarat. Normally, the Gilgit Agency is confused with Gilgit a small area which only covers Gilgit town and Hunza. Nagar, Chillas, Koh Ghizer, Yasin, Ishkoman, and Punial were the part of Gilgit Agency. Only Gilgit Wazarat was the part of State of Jammu and Kashmir and all the other areas were under the British India. Gilgit Agency was established in 1889 by the British to control the important frontier region as part of Great Game,¹⁸ under the British Political Agent.

In 1930's an agreement was signed between the Maharaja of Kashmir and Government of British India for the lease of Gilgit Wazarat for 60 years.¹⁹ Hereafter, only the Gilgit Agency was under the British. After the Communist Revolution in Russia and disturbance on Chinese border, the question of sovereignty over areas of Hunza and Nagar, Koh Ghizer and Yasin became important.²⁰ The British Indian government decided to demark the boundaries and establish its suzerainty on the region. The Maharaja of Kashmir wrote a note to British Indian government and asserted its claim on Gilgit Agency. On 5th march 1941, the British rejected the claim of Maharaja Hari Singh and declared that although Hunza and Nagar are under the suzerainty of the Kashmir State, they are not the part of Kashmir but are separate states; Chillas, Koh Ghizr, Ishkoman, and Yasin are also under the suzerainty of Kashmir State, not as part of Kashmir but as tribal areas.”²¹

On 1st August 1947, as part of decolonization and liquidation of British Indian Empire, the British ended the lease agreement and government of Kashmir sent a Governor to the region. The step was not welcomed by the masses and Gilgit scouts and raised a voice for independence. Major Brown and Captain Matheison were the two important characters who played important role in the coup against the Governor.²² It

was successful and Gilgit Wazarat also joined Pakistan like other areas of Gilgit Agency. However, India has always made it controversial under the Kashmir dispute and using this history has launched a propaganda against CPEC.

India considers China's 'One Belt, One Road' regional/transnational project and CPEC as a threat to her influence and supremacy in the region.²³ For, India has joined hands with USA who also considers China a potential threat to her power.²⁴ India has continuous interference in CPEC affairs to disrupt the successful execution of the project. "India feels isolated in the region after CPEC was launched as part of greater One Belt One Road (OBOR) to link 3 billion people of South Asia, Central Asia and China".²⁵ Gilgit Baltistan Assembly condemned the Indian stance and expressed their belief in CPEC. Chief Minister of GB clearly stated that GB is not the part of India and "The people of G-B got independence from Dogra rule in 1947 and they would never support Indian hegemonic designs. CPEC projects have provided a second opportunity for GB, to change its destiny, after the construction of Karakoram Highway in 1970s".²⁶ The current governing document of GB is a presidential ordinance and hence not entitled to constitutional privileges.

In this context, the issue of provincial status of Gilgit Baltistan is still a question mark. Due to the recent developments in CPEC, the need to define the status of Gilgit Baltistan has become more important. A committee has been formed which is headed by Sartaj Aziz to prepare a draft proposal for the issue. Kashmiri stake holders were not included in this committee. Gilgit Baltistan has welcomed idea of the provincial status. They have demanded the representation in the National Assembly and Senate as well.²⁷

Devolution of Powers

This issue of provincial and constitutional status of Gilgit Baltistan is closely associated with the administrative and political local self autonomy. Through the demand of constitutional rights, people of Gilgit and Baltistan are demanding that fate of people should be decided by the elected representative of Gilgit Baltistan. In existing system, all the

important decisions are made by Federal Government without representation of Gilgit Baltistan in National Assembly and Senate.²⁸ There are many separatist movements around the globe but Gilgit Baltistan is demanding a proper merger with Pakistan through Constitutional and legal means.

Gilgit Baltistan being the only Shia-majority region in the Sunni-majority country have been a land of peace, colors and diversity, yet the competition among different ethnicities of Gilgit Baltistan to acquire more and more power has ultimately indulged the region into an unending tussle between the opposing groups. However, it is still under trial of state for merger of rivals having diverse ethnic background. There is an absence of collective political consciousness, urge and action for the constitutional rights. The proponents of status-quo are those who are reaping benefits out of it, while the dissidents call for the solution of issue because they are in the marginal position. The continuous limbo in the constitutional status of Gilgit-Baltistan is a result of an absurd, non-effective and inefficient approach to the issues grounded in individual interests and group stakes. The inception of formal political institutions in Gilgit-Baltistan is an appreciable development, yet these institutions should be independent enough to come up with effective and efficient legislation to overcome the ethnic dissonance and policies that could stop the happenings from escalating into a mass-conflict. Balvaristan National Front (BNF), a group in Gilgit Baltistan has taken up this case. They have asserted that Gilgit Baltistan should not be taken as a part of Kashmir dispute and the merger of Gilgit Baltistan would not harm the Pakistan's stance on Kashmir.²⁹ They are further demanding the status like Kashmir government under Pakistan, especially since the launch of CPEC.³⁰ Solution of such issues is expected to increase the trust of China in the CPEC.³¹

Sectarianism and Law & Order

Historically, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan who belong to diverse communities have lived together peacefully and in relative harmonious way. Ethnic and tribal affinity since long have remained the basis for mutual ties and cooperation,

religion was never a prime binding force. Families who ruled this region generally followed secular laws and policies towards administrative apparatus, matters of general population and dealing with other socio-political matters.³² It was observed that marriage alliances among powerful elites were common regardless of religious affiliations.

Gilgit-Baltistan is an ethnically, religiously and culturally diverse region. Demographically this region has 41% Shias, 32% Sunnis, 17% Ismailis, 10% Nurbakhshis and less than 1% Non-Muslims.³³ After the Shia's slogan of Islamization Gilgit-Baltistan has remained in the grip of sectarian violence which has claimed hundreds of lives. This menace not only threatens peace and security, but also deteriorates the socio-economic and political life of the whole region. Sectarian violence has far reaching negative implications for the people living in the area and also directly or indirectly affects the people residing far away from their locality and families. Recently, a number of cases have been reported a number of people belonging to Gilgit-Baltistan have been killed resulting in a mass scale agitation.³⁴ Federal government introduced text books of Islamic Studies with Sunni ideological perspective and local Shia community launched a protest against this state biased curriculum. Sunni community of the region demanded the continuation of Sunni Curriculum.³⁵ However, these clashes are not simply sectarian and external involvement is found prominent.

Other internal factors such as absence of an effective criminal justice system, ethnic divisions, lack of education and awareness, and the exploitation of the religious sentiments by different interest groups have contributed significantly in this mess of unrest. Religious forums became more powerful due to the absence of any alternate effective platform available to better serve their interests, in the absence of strong political and constitutional institutions³⁶ CPEC project and china are concerned with the redress of such issues.

For, Central government has developed a zero-tolerance for violent sectarian groups and their religious leaders. All government officials and politicians accused of maintaining links with sectarian organizations, banned political groups are

restrained to participate in elections. Gilgit-Baltistan Code for conduct May, 2012 which bans religious leaders from promoting sectarianism and supporting sectarian organizations

Conclusion

The region of Gilgit Baltistan has a fundamental place in the road map drawn for the success of CPEC. It is the only land connecting China with Pakistan hence, all the networks of roads, and communication such as fiber optics, gas and oil pipelines have to pass through this area. In that sense, Gilgit Baltistan holds a great geo-strategic significance in linking AKJ, KPK and Indian occupied Kashmir, Wakhan corridor and Xinjiang province of China. Gilgit Baltistan could be considered as an important factor in the functioning and success of CPEC. The region of Gilgit Baltistan has mountainous terrain which provides great security to the developing projects and proximity of the region with regional powers such India, Afghanistan and China holds great significance for potential trade.

Gilgit Baltistan had undefined relationship with Islamabad since its accession with the state of Pakistan. It is expected that CPEC will address many resentments of the masses of Gilgit Baltistan and that of locals' people of Western China. Gilgit Baltistan received little attention in course of policy making but through CPEC there are fair chances of the empowerment of the people of the region through developing projects and trade, job opportunities and cross cultural mobilization. The Special Economic Zone can provide a great upward nudge to economy. Gilgit Baltistan has began to get benefit from highway, logistic facilities and other aspects of economic growth. In the context of CPEC, Gilgit Baltistan region's vibrant culture, demography and languages are going to find a chance of representation to international community. The number of tourists visiting the region after the developmental projects of roads and infrastructure under CPEC has increased and in this context CPEC has laid the foundation a major shift in the policy of federal government towards Gilgit Baltistan.

The state institutions have planned and agreed upon a spirit of collaboration, integration and connectivity in the region. The

small and medium enterprises are opened to a window of new opportunities through CPEC. With immediate effect, CPEC will not bring revolutionary changes but over a period of times its fruits will be reaped. Out of all problems revolving around CPEC, not only the issue of social impact and transparency needs immediate attention but also need to be addressed on priority basis. For smooth execution and development of the project, the political stability is the prerequisite. For the said purpose, there is a need to educate masses about the basis of the program, its potential return and advantages which it will bring to general population who are not the direct beneficiary of any tangible project. The solution of problems and grievances is an urgent need for the success of CPEC.

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