

CHINA'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN GILGIT BALTISTAN - ITS IMPLICATIONS ON INDIA

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ABSTRACT: *The end of British imperialism in the twentieth century left India and China with territorial uncertainty and undemarcated boundary line. The absence of any commonly accepted maps related to mutually accepted LAC (Line of Actual Control), the understanding of where the LAC actually lies differs in context of both the countries. Both India and China have disputed claims over common borders. This unresolved issue led to Indo-China war of 1962 and the frequent Chinese intrusions in the Jammu and Kashmir region till now. Considering such news in the media on regular basis, it is obvious to think that what is the reason for the involvement of China in Gilgit-Baltistan region and Ladakh region of the Jammu and Kashmir State. Even though China is not a part of South Asia, then what are the reasons that inspired China to invest in the Gilgit-Baltistan region of Jammu and Kashmir.*

Keywords: *Strategy, Northern Areas, KKH, Silk Route, Ladakh, McMahon Line, Border dispute.*

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INTRODUCTION

India and China shares a largest and undemarcated border in the world, which includes vast distances and high altitude.¹ Keeping in view the fact that both shares 4,056 sq. kms. of border, their relations remained tense from the colonial period till now. While the LOC (Line of Control) with Pakistan in Kashmir is delineated on detailed maps, countersigned by both parties, there is no precise definition of the LAC either on maps or on ground.² During the colonial period, and later cold war period till 1980's, their relations remained hostile. Colonial rule was mainly responsible for Sino-Indian border dispute.³ The Simla Conference (1913-14) attended by representatives from British India, Tibet and Republic of China, which is known as McMahon Line was accepted by both British India and Tibet but China refused to sign it. India's position has been that there has always been a traditional and customary boundary while the Chinese position was somewhat unclear, till her control over Aksai Chin in 1958-59.⁴ The McMahon map gives rise to a number of errors when studied on ground. For instance, India maintains that Thag La Ridge north of Tawang falls on its side of LAC, because it is the highest crest on the Himalayas, going from Assam towards Tibet. But a strict transposition of the Simla map on the ground would see the border little bit inclined towards south, along the Hathug La ridge.⁵ The Indian move to occupy positions on the Thag La ridge led to the Sino-Indian border war of 1962.

In the west, two commissions were appointed by the British to demarcate the eastern boundary of Jammu and Kashmir in 1846-1847. But due to zero response from China, the project of demarcation could not be completed.⁶ In the 1980's and 1990's the British began to worry about the southern march of Tsarist Russia and virtually pushed the Chinese to claim a vast portion of territory, west and south of Saidullah. The British ambassador, Sir Claude MacDonald, in a note of 14 March, 1899, suggested to China a boundary line from China-India-Afghanistan trijunction, past the Karakoram Pass that would have given China a considerable portion of Aksai Chin. This time also, the Chinese did not respond. This was the position when India became independent in 1947. This clearly shows that the boundary between Jammu and Kashmir and Tibet was "undefined", and no one was in control of the uninhabited desert land. In 1948, after independence and then in 1950, White Papers were issued on the states that joined India and maps were attached to them that showed border along the McMahon Line, with a broken line

, noting "border undemarcated", while the entire in the central and western sector was shown by a colour flat wash with the words "border undefined."⁷

Both the countries sought to restore boundaries to their historical position. In 1962 Sino-Indian war, the PLA (People's Liberation Army) of China advanced into Lhasa and brought Tibet under Chinese control.⁸ Tibet, which earlier provided buffer zone to India by the Tibetan plateau and Himalayan frontiers now disappeared. Reacting to it, India incorporated Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim within its defensive boundaries and also extended its administration into the Tawang Tract. Tawang is a city of Arunachal Pradesh, having a famous monastery of Mahayana Buddhism of which Dalai Lama is the supreme head. Even after independence, Tawang was under Tibetan government till 1951, when it was occupied by India. The Chinese still claim that Tawang belongs to China as they believe that around 90,000 sq. kms. of Arunachal Pradesh is a part of south Tibet and hence belongs to China. In 1959, crushing the protesting Tibetans by China forced the Spiritual leader, Dalai Lama to leave the country. He left Lhasa on 17 March, 1959 along with 20 men including six cabinet ministers and crossed over the Indian border and took shelter in the Tawang monastery.⁹

However, there still remained the significance of unresolved status of borders in the Ladakh region of Indian Jammu and Kashmir and in the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), now the State of Arunachal Pradesh, North of Assam (now Assam) and East of Myanmar. China had already occupied the Aksai Chin plateau of Ladakh and built a road through it, connecting its Tibetan region with that of Xinjiang.¹⁰ Ladakh border dispute involves a total territory of over 1,30,000 sq. km. while China had occupied 38,000 sq. km. of its territory in the west.¹¹ Differences in the middle sector of about 2000 sq. km. remains. The Colonial experience in both the countries made them extremely possessive about territorial sovereignty. Much of the Ladakh region is covered with glaciers, arid, isolated plateaus and any survey or patrolling in this region is quite challenging and poses severe limitations. Maintaining a large military or administrative units there, also faces challenges which proves that border management in this region is a difficult task. Till now, both the countries could not resolve boundary dispute to their mutual satisfaction.

Though in 1980's, the Sino-Indian border dispute somewhat became normal after mutual recognition of status quo by both the countries i.e Indian acceptance of Chinese control over

Aksai Chin and Chinese recognition of Indian control over territory of Arunachal Pradesh. Thereafter, the process of normalisation started and their strategies deviated from hostility to friendship in the shape of regular Summit Meetings and Confidence Building Measures (CBM's).¹² At present, the main issue between China and India is no more the boundary issue but the Chinese government felt the necessity to maintain a friendly relationship with India so as to create a favourable atmosphere for the final solution to boundary issue and for the economic prosperity of both the countries.¹³ The growing economic interdependence in the international system, limits China's scope for pursuing its aggressive policies regarding India. Thus, it need to formulate a sustainable strategy to maintain friendly relations with India for its economic development.¹⁴

CHINA AND NORTHERN AREAS

In 1963, Pakistan has signed "Boundary Agreement" with China and has given Northern Areas or Gilgit-Baltistan to China - a disputed region and part of undivided Jammu and Kashmir which belongs to India. What are the strategic interests of China in securing the areas of Gilgit-Baltistan is a question of utmost importance? This issue needs an elaborate discussion. Besides providing freedom of movement, logistics and security, the area of Gilgit Baltistan also provides the much needed buffer between India and Chinese mainland.¹⁵ The region of Gilgit Baltistan has a strategic importance since ancient times. This region is also called as Northern Areas (NA) which is a part of J&K of undivided India. The strategic significance of the region is due to the reason that it has borders with Afghanistan, Central Asian Republics, China and India. During British rule, they established an observation post in Gilgit for surveillance in this vital region, by taking it on lease in 1935, from Maharaja of J&K State.¹⁶ The Gilgit agency remained in their occupation till 1947, after which they handed it over to Maharaja of J&K State. On 15 August, 1947, when India got freedom from British rule, Maharaja Hari Singh was unwilling to join either India or Pakistan and wanted to remain independent. When Pakistani raiders attacked J&K State in October, 1947, Maharaja Hari Singh sought help from India by Signing Instrument of Accession.¹⁷ Till the Indian help reached J&K, Pakistani raiders occupied 2/3rd area of J&K including Muzaffarabad (POK) and Gilgit Baltistan (NA). From then onwards, POK and NA are

under Pakistan's administration. In 1963, Pakistan ceded an area of 5,180 sq. km. of NA to China by signing Sino-Pakistan Border Treaty, 1963.

China has considerable economic, political and strategic interests in the region of Gilgit-Baltistan. Although China's strategic policies are unclear and even the think tanks are unable to analyse the real objectives of those policies.¹⁸ China's strategic compulsion in the field of energy security forced it physically in the Northern Areas of Jammu and Kashmir State occupied by Pakistan.¹⁹ It has built inroads into sub-continent via Pakistan, by taking advantage of Pakistan's economic inability to develop the region and managed to seek its place as a vital player in the region by offering its assistance. Approximately 50% of the energy/oil supply to China comes from Middle East and 30% from Africa. This energy flow has to pass through a naval choke point of Strait of Malacca, Sunda and Lombok Strait.²⁰ Any disturbance to the flow of energy resources into China could severely affect the economic growth which is the most important factor of Chinese ambition of becoming great power. So, China's entry into Northern Areas has the definite aim to create a bypass that will save them from any emergency crisis in the Malacca choke point. Moreover, the Northern Areas route will shorten their distance of energy flow from 25 days to 48 hours.²¹

The KKH connecting Gilgit and Kashgar has served as an important strategic factor in Sino-Pakistan relations.²² In order to improve connectivity with Pakistani coast for trade purpose, the Chinese have started repair and widening of the KKH and to connect it to Pakistan's existing highway network. Therefore, this KKH (Karakoram Highway) and Gilgit-Gwadar Corridor and Rail and Road network construction projects have been initiated by China in the NA region and holds immense significance for China. The KKH project will provide China easy accessibility in winter to Pakistani ports from where they can push forward their trade goods to Gulf and also get trouble free access to oil from there and admitting its presence in the Gulf of Aden.

China is also in the advantage of Gwadar's most accessible international trade routes to the Central Asian Republic with its own Xinjiang border region. Construction of Railway Line from the Chinese border city of Kashi in the East to Peshawar in Pakistan's North-west, can facilitate China to import and export goods from Gwadar along the shortest route via Karachi to Peshawar. Rail network can also be used for oil supply from Persian Gulf to Xinjiang. The strategy of Beijing here is to reduce its dependence on oil supplies through the Malacca Straits and instead

have an alternative route through Gwadar. It also seems that China is hoping to take advantage of additional road networks planned between Pakistan and Afghanistan and further onwards to Central Asia as a part of enhancing its strategy reaching South and Central Asia and to vigil the developments in these regions. Besides, the port at Arabian sea is also of immense significance to China as it is connected through railway and roadway. China have also invested in other infrastructure projects going on in different parts of NA i.e. hydro-power projects, water diversion channels and telecommunication facilities. Pakistan serves as a best option for China's strategic interests and economically, a suitable market. For all concerns, it is likely that China will continue to consider Pakistan important for its primary role as a counter to India and also because KKH is an important factor in China's plan for strategic outreach.²³ The above mentioned projects under construction indicates the economic aspects of China's strategy in Northern Areas under Pakistan.

Apart from China's requirement for economic and natural resources, the Chinese policy makers realises that its presence in POK can help in keeping watch over terrorist activities (infiltration of terrorists from Afghanistan-Pakistan region into Muslim dominated region of Xinjiang) growing on in the Xinjiang region and in case of emergency, it can put pressure on Pakistan to deal with the situation.²⁴ Though, such an ally with Pakistan may prove disastrous whenever a war like situation arises over frontier operations like the one in Ladakh region. The construction of Railways in KKH and Aksai Chin by Chinese alarms India to be prepared for any tough situation.

CHINA AND KASHMIR

Besides, China's views on Kashmir issue has also been changed over time and presently, it supports Pakistan's claim over POK and Gilgit-Baltistan area. The change in China's Kashmir policy was also due to shift in its domestic policy. It started a process of integrating with the global economy and looking forward for a peaceful environment suitable for its economic growth.²⁵ India has always adopted a policy of accommodative and inclusive approach while China has followed an exclusivist approach that appears to be against India, USA and Japan.²⁶ The contemporary strategy of Beijing regarding Kashmir problem includes supporting Indo-Pak bilateralism rather than any third party mediation, to remain neutral on Indo-Pak problem or

reacting to the ground realities if demand arises for such situation and not allowing tensions between India and Pakistan which could affect China's relations with both the countries.²⁷

CHINA'S INTEREST IN SILK ROUTE

The world famous silk route lies north-east in Tibet in Wakhan corridor of Afghanistan, in the west in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan and in the South in Punjab province under Pakistan.²⁸ The route known as "silk route" was most popular during ancient times and British era. The British authorities used trade as the most important tool for securing their interests in the region vis-a-vis Tsarist Russia and China. The strategic importance of silk route was also because of its access to economically and politically significant zones of Central Asia, Russia, Persia, China, Tibet and British Indian empire in the past. Even today, this route provides gateway for both India and China to Central Asia. Leh, the capital town of Ladakh, where the British commissioner was stationed, was the major crossroads of caravans, where traders from Central Asia, especially from Xinjiang in the north, and traders from Kashmir and Punjab in the south, met for trade transactions.²⁹ India had a strong political and economic presence in Xinjiang until 1954, when it had to withdraw its consulate from Kashgar.³⁰ The Silk route from Ladakh to Xinjiang is probably the most viable and shortest route between India and Central Asia. China wants to revive the silk route through the territory of Gilgit Baltistan and India would like to develop energy routes to the Central Asian Region through Afghanistan which are best accessed through its territory via Pakistan.³¹ China is a fast growing economy and in order to promote its economic interests, it is looking for easy and inexpensive access to world market for which it wants to revive the ancient silk route. It will benefit oil and gas supply from Iran to China through this mountainous corridor.³² In the recent years, large scale developmental projects being envisaged to remove transportation difficulties across the Chinese- Central Asian sector, which includes construction of highways, railway lines and oil pipelines. Since 1992, the Chinese government has been paying great attention to the development of Xinjiang province as a new prosperity zone. China wants to make Xinjiang a major hub of trans-Asian and trans-Eurasian economic activity.

CHINA AND LADAKH

India and China shares borders in the Himalayas mostly facing the Tibetan plateau.³³ Both the countries shares the largest borders along the Himalayas and have no demarcated boundaries. The roots of this border dispute goes back to the days of colonial rule.³⁴ The frequent incursions of PLA (People's Liberation Army) into Ladakh region poses serious threat to India's security. China's interest in Ladakh should not be seen from a narrow perspective. It should be perceived and understood in terms of what Beijing wants really from Karakoram pass, north of Gilgit, Arunachal Pradesh in Eastern India and beyond? In fact, it should be seen in the larger framework of China's rise in Asia.³⁵ To be a global superpower, the Chinese government needs to be more assertive in defending its core interests and main objectives.³⁶ With the large scale infrastructure projects of China in Gilgit Baltistan, the question and contest of India's legal status in J&K is at stake as it puts India on the defensive and harms its stand on challenging Pakistan's illegal possession of POK. China is also becoming an inescapable factor if any final resolution of India-Pakistan settlement to the Kashmir issue is arrived at.³⁷

Recent and repeated intrusion of Chinese PLA in the Ladakh region is a matter of serious concern. It compels us to think that what does China wants in India? Is China really interested in the territory of J&K ? Is this China's strategy for a larger political objective vis-a-vis India? China's recent intrusions must be seen in the light of its wider strategy to its rise in Asia, to encircle India from all sides and to prevent India from making any allies with South-East Asia or East Asian countries. China's intrusion in the Despang Bulge, a table top plateau, threatened to cut off India's access to 750 sq.km. area in the Northern Ladakh.³⁸ The intruded area was merely 35 km South of KKH, at the tri-junction of China-Pak-India borders and overlooks the Siachen glaciers - Salto Ridge to the west and the Indian observation post in the Chumar sector in the East.³⁹ If this area was lost, it would cut off access to the areas north of the passes. Though this confrontation ended after the Indian army agreed to demolish bunkers it had built in the Chumar sector near LAC.⁴⁰

Both India and China had made positive progress by the flag meetings and restoring to status-quo.⁴¹ Though China had made no statement regarding the Ladakh intrusion. It pretends if nothing has happened or as they had done nothing.⁴² The joint efforts of the two sides shows that their close trade relations are much important than the border issue as both are emerging

economies.⁴³ But PLA incursions in DBO sector, Demchok in South of Aksai Chin, Chumar and Pangong areas along the LAC are regular occurrences and cannot be ignored in respect of India's security and border management issue. India must also be fully prepared and equipped in military capacity to counter such acts of China with full might, if the situation so demands.⁴⁴ Along the Ladakh sector across the LAC, China's objectives will be guided by its larger political calculations vis-a-vis India, and the larger Indo-China relationship.

CONCLUSION

China has always been viewed in the countries of South Asia largely in terms of strategic potential it provided to other countries or in terms of threat it posed. The former point can be associated in terms of Sino-Pak economic relations, especially for the Northern Areas under Pakistan's occupation. And the latter point is in the case of China's security challenge in the Ladakh region. Therefore, it is time for India to become action-oriented in its border areas. The lenient attitude of India can prove to be a big loss. The construction of railways in KKH and Aksai Chin by the Chinese is an alarming situation for India to wake up and make its border management more firm and act promptly and assertively if the time so demands.

India must understand that the Chinese position in POK will adversely affect our foreign policy. It is also necessary to mention here that the construction work in POK also affects the ecosystem, and bio-diversity of the adjacent areas will be ruined. The melting of glaciers can lead to rise in sea level, increasing humidity, flash floods and ultimately, submergence of the areas near the sea. The seismic zone close to J&K would be harmful to other parts of state if calamity persists. The best example put forth can be of Diamer Basha Dam - one of the harmful projects affecting the entire region of J&K including Gilgit Baltistan.

Moreover, India must try to develop and maintain relations with the civil society of POK, because the instability existing there can be favourable for India. India must strengthen against China's possible strategic involvement in POK and also recognise the potential threat to international security which POK has become of late. India must be proactive in its policies and also consult the international bodies. India must learn from the Chinese method and convert strategic assets into economic opportunities. With such constructive measures, India can hope to preserve peace on its borders and ensure its development in different spheres.

END NOTES

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