



## India and the Pakistan-China Nexus in Gilgit-Baltistan

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Recent reports note that China has deployed troops in Gilgit Baltistan territory, in Pakistan occupied Kashmir.<sup>1</sup> [1] While Chinese officials ascribe this to the economic and infrastructure development in the region, this obtrusive presence is a cause for concern in New Delhi. Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Kashmir – Pakistan occupied parts of Kashmir - have been conspicuously absent in the media as well as in the scholarly literature.<sup>2</sup> [2] Occupied by Pakistan since 1948, the region has been kept under wraps and outside the ambit of the Kashmir Conflict by Islamabad, which has been relentless in diverting attention to the issue of human rights abuses in Jammu and Kashmir. Pakistan has been using the territory, resources and people of the region to further its national objectives. Militarily, this territory has served as a launching pad for all ventures of the Pakistan army to create unrest in Jammu and Kashmir including offering a permanent sanctuary for radical extremist and terrorist organisations that threaten regional security.<sup>3</sup> [3] Although the presence of Chinese troops in these areas has been denied by both Pakistan and China,<sup>4</sup> [4] Indian concerns are genuine and need attention. This commentary explores the implications of this development for India. In doing so, it argues that China's infrastructure development in the region indicates its attempt at regional dominance, which could jeopardise India's interests in the long run.

In recent years, China has been able to change the geopolitical and geostrategic equations in this region that borders China, India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan. China's upgrading of the Karakoram Highway, its development of road and rail access as well as other constructions including dams and tunnels, enable it to extend its strategic reach to the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf through Pakistan. As far as China is concerned, the Karakoram Highway is integral to keep Pakistan's military sustained against India. Hence, the presence of Chinese troops in the contested region constitutes Beijing's direct involvement in the Kashmir dispute. Consequentially, this could, in principle, transform a bilateral dispute into a trilateral dispute, with China being the third stakeholder. That apart, the roads and bridges being constructed with Chinese assistance, facilitate Pakistan army operations against India in the region. This involvement further signals that "Pakistan is a frontline state of China's Grand Strategy"<sup>5</sup> [5] to strengthen the Chinese presence in South Asia.

Another issue of political relevance is that China's 'Kashmir is a disputed territory' stance could harden, marking a shift from the earlier view that 'it is a de facto part of India'.<sup>6</sup> [6] This, coupled with Beijing's issue of stapled visas to residents of Jammu and Kashmir and its refusal of a visa to India's northern army commander on the grounds that he commanded a 'disputed territory',<sup>7</sup> [7] is causing India to suspect whether China is taking unilateral steps to change the dynamics of the dispute. Related to this is China's direct involvement in India's domestic politics - specifically the secessionist movement in Kashmir valley, which is evident in the invitation extended to

separatist leader Mirwaiz Farooq.<sup>8</sup> [8] This development could also be a signal to India to abstain from interfering in matters related to Tibet in future.

These developments are posing fresh military challenges to India not only along the India-China border but also along the Line of Control. Unlike earlier, when China had logistic limitations on India's western front (read Ladakh) in terms of fuel supply for troops, the Karakoram Highway and ongoing infrastructure development will facilitate military operations against India. China's intensified engagement in the region, encompassing reconstruction and development, suggests a subtle move to alter the security situation in the region. Commenting on what he describes as the "influx" of PLA soldiers in Gilgit-Baltistan region, Selig Harrison regards the development as the unfolding of "a quiet geopolitical crisis" in the Himalayan borderlands of Northern Pakistan.<sup>9</sup>

[9]

Finally, in the context of a combined China-Pakistan military threat to India, China's development activities in the area is likely to facilitate speedy and enhanced deployment of Pakistan army to complement China's military and thus outflank India. Another reason for the heightened concern about India's strategic environment is China's putting in place a "string of pearls" around India in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) through the development of ports and other infrastructure.<sup>10</sup> [10] This implies that the noose around India can be tightened if necessity, both on land and water. Beijing's geostrategic ambitions over time are translating into a grand strategy of regional dominance, which has serious security implications for India.

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