

Title: The Strategic Importance of Gilgit-Baltistan for China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) .

ABSTRACT :

Gilgit-Baltistan, nestled in the heart of the Himalayas, Hindukush, and Karakoram, has emerged as a pivotal region with immense strategic significance in South Asia. It is located in the northern region of Pakistan and is made up of 14 districts that are indirectly bordered by Russia and Afghanistan as well as Pakistan, China, and India. Since the British Raj, India and Pakistan, two nuclear-armed nations, have disputed the region of Gilgit-Baltistan. The region is claimed as an essential component of both India and Pakistan. Nonetheless, the area is currently governed by Pakistan's constitution. The area was utilized by colonial powers for their commercial objectives, and its historical and geographical significance dates back to the time of the ancient Silk Road. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), also known as Project One Belt, One Road (OBOR), has further enhanced the region's significance by linking the Chinese economy with other areas. China has made investments in Gilgit-Baltistan as part of its economic goals to link Chinese companies with other parts of the world. Because it is regarded as a doorway to Asia and the rest of the globe, the region holds significance in international affairs. Gilgit-Baltistan serves as a gateway for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and its unclear constitutional status may soon provide both internal and external obstacles. In this sense, India has serious concerns about the CPEC route, which crosses the disputed Gilgit-Baltistan area. The China-Pakistan Economic Cooperation Plan is known as the CPEC. In contrast, the United States and India saw it as a strategic plan to counter them in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea.

Keywords: China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), One Belt One Road (OBOR), Gilgit-Baltistan, China, India, Sino-Pakistan, Belt Road Initiative (BRI), Government of Pakistan (GoP), Gilgit-Baltistan (GB)

INTRODUCTION:

A hilly area in northern Pakistan, Gilgit-Baltistan shares borders with Afghanistan to the northwest, India to the east, and China to the northeast. It is one of the most geographically significant regions in the globe since it is located where many large mountain ranges, including the Himalayas, Karakoram, and Hindu Kush, converge. Because of its advantageous location along the ancient Silk Road, Gilgit-Baltistan has historically been a significant crossroads for trade, culture, and military conquests. Numerous ethnic groups, each with its own unique culture and language, have lived in the area for thousands of years, including the Balti, Shina, and Burusho people. Under the Dogra Maharajas, Gilgit-Baltistan was a component of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir in the late 19th and early 20th century. But once British India was divided in 1947, Gilgit-Baltistan's status came under scrutiny. The area became part of Pakistan after British officers Major Brown and Captain A.S. Mathieson, who were in the Gilgit Scouts, planned a coup against the Maharaja's governor. Since then, India and Pakistan have maintained their claims to sovereignty over Gilgit-Baltistan, making it a disputed area. The Indo-Pakistani wars of 1947–1948; 1965; and 1999 are among the recurring tensions and conflicts that have occurred in the region between the two nations. Because of its closeness to China's Xinjiang province and the vital China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which runs through the region, Gilgit-Baltistan has grown in geopolitical importance in recent years. Mountaineers and explorers from all over the world frequent the area since it is home to some of the highest peaks in the world, including K2. Overall, Gilgit-Baltistan is a focal point in South Asian and international geopolitics due to its strategic significance, which has been molded by its physical location and historical past.[1]

Since gaining independence, Gilgit-Baltistan has merged with Pakistan and is governed by it. On August 29, 2009, Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari awarded GB self-governance. This area is divided into three divisions and 10 districts. With the announcement of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, it gained attention. Since the northern region is the CPEC's entrance and the well-known chicken collar, its prominence cannot be overlooked. The Karakorum Highway (KKH), which was built on an incredible journey across the hilly territory of Great Britain at 7,000 feet above sea level, is regarded as the eighth wonder of the world. It was constructed between 1969 and 1978 to provide access to the Arabian Sea and connect China to the rest of the globe. The KKH will be expanded and used temporarily along the region's mountains as part of the CPEC project. GB's location is strategically important for India, China, Pakistan, and the United States. It is just as important now as it was in the 1880s, when the Russian Tsar Empire ruled over central Asia and its rulers traveled to Gilgit and Hunza. The great game was said to have begun when they arrived.[2] In addition to new bridges, passages, and railroad tracks to link the two nations, the KKH will be expanded and some additional tracks will be constructed for quick transit. Since the time of the old Silk Road, the GB region has maintained dynamic trading conditions due to its shared borders with China. The last free trade deal between China and Pakistan was struck in 2006, but the two nations have since inked numerous others.[3]

By employing their advantageous geographic locations, nations can use geo-strategy to further their socio-economic and political goals. The adage "geography is the mother of nations" refers to the idea that strong nations are characterized by the convergence of strategy and geography. A wealth of natural resources, including minerals, rivers, breathtaking mountains, tall peaks, enormous glaciers, trade routes, strategic borders, vast forests, pristine environments, tourist attractions, mountain passes, and picturesque locations, make Gilgit-Baltistan famous for its

geostrategic importance. Notably, the socioeconomic and political changes in Gilgit-Baltistan continue to pique the interest of the three nuclear-armed nations of Asia (China, Pakistan, and India) as well as other significant international actors like the United States and Russia. Gilgit-Baltistan is a disputed region in South Asia that is situated between India and Pakistan. It has indirect ties to Russia and Afghanistan in addition to sharing borders with China, India, and Pakistan, the three nuclear-armed nations of Asia. With a population of 2.5 million and an area of 72,971 square kilometres (28,174 square miles), Gilgit-Baltistan is larger than Kashmir but smaller than China, India, and Pakistan. Surprisingly, it is the only disputed area of Pakistan having trade links and a conduit to China, making it an essential component of China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) plan. China and Pakistan's cooperation in this area greatly serves their respective political and socioeconomic objectives.[4] There are 22 Tehsils and 14 districts in Gilgit Baltistan. The capital of the entire region is Gilgit City. The Silk Route is Gilgit Baltistan's historic route that links China with Pakistan and other nations in the region and the world. In order to restore the socioeconomic and political significance of the historic Silk Road, China and Pakistan signed the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) agreement in 2016. since there is no other way to link China and Pakistan with the rest of the globe. The historical significance of Gilgit Baltistan is partly determined by its languages. The people of Gilgit Baltistan speak seven different languages, including Shina, Balti, Khawar, Brushki, and others. The most common language in Gilgit-Baltistan is Shina. Different ethnic groups and the historical concerns of various countries are represented by each language. Gilgit Baltistan is made up of twenty passes. These passes include the following: Babosar, Burzil, Darkot, Baraghil, Karambar, Shandor, Kilik, and Mintaka passes. Every crossing has significance, but the Mintaka pass, which separates Gilgit Baltistan from the Chinese province, is the most crucial. In Pakistan, Gilgit Baltistan is renowned for its allure, stunning valleys, and tourist destinations. All tourist destinations are currently referred to as Pakistan's national parks.[5] These tourism destinations and the stunning landscapes of Gilgit Baltistan generate millions of dollars for Pakistan. The following are the valleys of Shandur, Astore, Dowsai, Skardu, Shangrilla, Kutwal, Naltar, and Gojal. Beautiful natural lakes like Kutwal Lake, Naltur Lake, Shangrilla Lake, Sadpara Lake, and others can be found in every valley.[6]

Gilgit-Baltistan is the gateway to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which will open a sea channel for China's western neighbouring region via the Gwadar coast of Baluchistan, which is located in the Indian Ocean. (IIIIV). Following their liberation from Kashmiri Maharaja Hari Singh on November 1, 1947, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan voluntarily allied with Pakistan on the basis of Islamic principles and gave the entire area as a gift to Quaid-e-Azam, the father of the nation. FANA (Federally Administered Northern Areas) was its previous name. The GB region was mostly a part of the old princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, which joined Pakistan as an independent state on November 1st, 1947, as soon as it was divided.[7] The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a significant infrastructure project that intends to link China's northwest with Pakistan's Gwadar Port, depends heavily on Gilgit-Baltistan. Gilgit-Baltistan is traversed by the corridor, adding to its strategic and economic importance. In addition to promoting economic cooperation between China and Pakistan, the CPEC has wider geostrategic ramifications that impact regional power structures and alliances.[1]

The report examined relations between China and Pakistan following the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which raised the GB's prominence both regionally and internationally. Additionally, after China and Pakistan signed the CPEC deal in 2013, the US voiced worries about the project, while India voiced doubts. The geopolitical dynamics of the global community have shifted as a result of the inconvenience experienced by both the US and

India. On the other hand, locals voice concerns because they feel underrepresented and excluded from the socioeconomic advantages of the CPEC.

She has essay and chip sets covering everything from excess to South Asia, Europe, and the rest of the world, and the CPEC is a crucial gateway for China's global advancement.[8]

The socio-political and economic dynamic is highly sensitive, and it is a source of conflict between India and Pakistan, according to the research. In addition, there have been four wars between India and Pakistan, and the border is constantly at war. However, from a strategic perspective, this is the simplest, least expensive, and safest way to access the global market, thus China's interests are being taken into consideration. The impact of China and the ways in which the United States and India's new strategic and defiant partnership has impacted Chinese expansion and global and regional geopolitical dynamics in the twenty-first century are also empirically examined in this paper. A new contract for the multi billion dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the expansion of the Karakorum Highway were recently announced. China and Pakistan share ownership of this project. The European Union, the United Arab Emirates, China's strategic surplus in the warm water, and other regions of the world depend on the project. CPEC is also known as the One Belt and One Road Initiative.[4]

Human interaction dates to the beginning of time. In his Greek philosophy, Aristotle claimed that humans are social animals who cannot accomplish their socioeconomic and political objectives without social interaction. Men should therefore communicate with one another in order to accomplish their goals. Men employ trading, travel, and idea sharing as a means of achieving their political and socioeconomic goals. As an illustration of how nations establish their international connections, consider the historical exchange of goods with their neighbours. The historic Silk Road served as a conduit for political and socioeconomic exchanges between major regional and other powers. One Belt One Road, or OBOR, is the modern-day equivalent of the historic Silk Road. One Belt One Road is an attempt to recreate the historic Silk Road. This also symbolizes early trading routes dating back to the Han period, which lasted for 200 years. The entirety of South Asia and other nations are connected by this historic silk road.[9]

Many scholars believe that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) links around 70 nations worldwide. India, the world's seventh-largest economy and the region's second-largest economy, aspires to join the One Belt One Road (OBOR). However, India's antagonistic ties with China and Pakistan were the reason for its failure. Given the physical significance of the Karakorum and the Himalayan mountains and their passes, this route demonstrates the historical and practical significance of Gilgit Baltistan. We can learn about the interactions between Chinese and Indian civilizations as well as Buddhist civilizations from the Himalayan mountain passes and Karakorum. This road was abandoned on the 15th, but China and Pakistan agreed to reconstruct it in 1960. At last, both states began building the Karakorum Highway. We may observe it in terms of one belt, one road today. [10] The contemporary Silk Road and a new era of globalization are other names for One Belt One Road. China is connected to Asia, Africa, and Europe with the One Belt One Road initiative. China and Pakistan collaborate on the One Belt One Road initiative to strengthen their economies. Both nations have the chance to link with other nations via highways, railroads, roads, airports, and corridors. One of the main goals of One Belt One Road is to facilitate communication between European, Asian, African, and Chinese nations. One Road, One Belt OBOR encompasses a wide range of plans and projects, including roads, ports, highways, oil and gas lines, railroads, hospitals, educational advancements, economic coordination, and cooperation, in addition to its primary goal of building highways, roads, and ports. The United States of America views China as an economic danger because to One Belt One Road. China uses this path to strategically increase its economic dominance.[6] China and Pakistan both view Gilgit-Baltistan as a crucial territory, and without this strategically important area, global connection

would be lacking. Historical occurrences such as the Sino-Indian War of 1962 and the Pak-Sino border adjustment of 1963 highlight the importance of Gilgit-Baltistan's geostrategic location. These days, the OBOR program is essential to boosting Central Asia's economic growth. In essence, it is the modernization and resuscitation of the historic Silk Road, which links several Asian nations.[11]

Chinese interest in Gilgit Baltistan is as old as that of other regional and global powers that have dominated the area, like as Britain and Russia. We can comprehend China's interest in the area by using the example of an ancient silk road. These days, China makes long-term economic investments in Gilgit Baltistan. China intends to implement measures in Gilgit Baltistan that are conducive to the economy. China is introducing economic and social advancements to Gilgit Baltistan. China is specifically focusing on building the region's infrastructure to support economic expansion. Because this area is traversed by a single belt road. China and Pakistan both benefit economically from the One Belt One Road initiative. China has a variety of economic and social ties to Gilgit Baltistan. Additionally, the Chinese economic model is geared toward global economic expansion. China is consistently constructing highways, airports, railways, and corridors as part of the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative. China therefore wants to see Gilgit Baltistan's constitutional status.[12]

Gilgit Baltistan is said to be the Atutong of India and the Shah Rag of Pakistan. Both nations have the power to grant the area autonomy (based on a Kashmiri system). Both states merely take pleasure in their interest in the area, and they do not provide it with such a setup. For both states, the region is strategically and economically significant. She reiterated that Gilgit Baltistan generates millions of dollars for Pakistan. This is the sole area that offers natural resources and key destinations, such as the Silk Road, tourism, and water (spring and Indus water). Pakistan is currently building the Dimer Bhasha Dam. Pakistan has the capacity to produce 50,000 megawatts of power, and it will eventually be able to make millions of dollars from both electricity and water.[13] Pakistan can improve its economy through China Pakistan Economic Corridor CPEC and One Belt One Road OBOR. Because CPEC and OBOR provide a lot of economic and job opportunities to Pakistani people.[14]

Discussion:

As a "game changer," the CPEC will improve ties between China and Pakistan while also providing Pakistan with new growth opportunities. The CPEC is beneficial for all provinces. Since the CPEC is a major project of the Belt Road Initiative (BRI), both China and Pakistan place a high priority on its security. Similarly, Gilgit-Baltistan has to be a gateway to the CPEC. This project could attract South Asia, Central Asia and Europe and open billions of dollars for the Pakistani markets including regional markets. Additionally, Baluchistan will be the main beneficiary of the CPEC. Similarly, all the provinces and regions would also gain from the project. The CPEC Project has many advantages and disadvantages for the region which are discussed below;

ADVANTAGES OF CPEC FOR THE REGION:

Considering CPEC is the gateway for both China and Pakistan, the GB region benefits in some ways. There are a number of potential future benefits for the local population, including

- For the population of Gilgit Baltistan, the corridor will result in 1% more work opportunities.
- The area serves as Pakistan's water storage facility and generates electricity for the country's other provinces.
- The optical fiber connection provided by CPEC will be important to the inhabitants of Gilgit-Baltistan.
- The CPEC established nine special economic zones around Pakistan, one of which will be built in the Magpoondas area specifically for this region.
- Gilgit-Baltistan's roads will be widened, making the trip from Pindi to Gilgit quick and simple.
- Given that a railway link would be established from China to Gilgit to Gwadar port, it may eventually be feasible for train service to begin between China and Pakistan, which would be crucial for the GB region.

RECOMPENSES ACCORDING TO THE GOVERNMENT OF PAKISTAN:

The Pakistani government is outlining their vision for the future of the region's citizens, and they claim that the CPEC will benefit the area in several ways, including;

- In the future, an iron and steel industry, a valuable gemstone cutting and polishing centre, and fruit processing companies will be built at Magpoondas.
- GB is expected to benefit from the CPEC's secondary effects in terms of energy generation, road construction infrastructure, telecommunications, and commercial advancement.
- To promote greater social and economic integration, internal city roads as well as road and train connectivity will be established.
- The local population benefits from the CPEC Road since it makes it easier and faster to connect one district to another.
- As people in the area receive training or acquire professional skills and Chinese languages, future development is anticipated.
- Given that people are receiving professional training and acquiring Chinese languages, future development in the area is anticipated.
- In the interest of their own interests, China and Pakistan will both receive better security in the region as a result of the CPEC.
- Ten years of sectarian warfare will conclude with improved security because of the CPEC and both countries' interests.[2, 3]
- The construction of the Gilgit to Chitral Road, the installation of the Phandar hydropower project in Ghizer, the Karakoram International University hydropower project in Gilgit City, and the CPEC all contributed to the extension of the Karakorum highway.
- The Diamer-Bhasha dam and the China-Pakistan optical fiber project were built by the Pakistani government.
- The Bunji-Roundo Dam, which will be constructed in the future as part of the CPEC, will supply Pakistan with water and energy.[3]
- According to the Pakistani government, the project would give 1.8 million people in Gilgit-Baltistan access to new job prospects.

DRAWBACKS OF CPEC FOR GILGIT-BALTISTAN:

According to locals, the CPEC has several disadvantages for the GB region, including:

- The people of Gilgit Baltistan lack faith in the Pakistani administration. India, China, the United States, and Russia could go to war over the GB region.
- Since both India and Pakistan have claims to the area, a conflict between them is possible.
- There will be more cultural shifts, and Chinese culture will either completely replace or alter local culture.
- Chinese people's unrestricted access may have a significant impact on the area, which may cause problems for the locals.
- Chinese individuals having unrestricted access to the area may have a significant impact and cause problems for the local population.
- Since Chinese people are not Muslims, it may produce religious problems for the area and influence local religious sentiments.
- Due to its contested status in the 1947 and 1948 United Nations resolutions, the Gilgit region lacks political and constitutional statutes and fundamental rights, and there is a risk of local migration.
- People thought that, in a short period, CPEC was causing major environmental problems in Gilgit-Baltistan, such as air pollution and glacier melting.
- A lot of heavy vehicle transportation daily leads to a rise in temperature, heat, and other ailments, including skin conditions.
- The problems facing the Gilgit-Baltistan region are trash disposal and an increase in soil erosion.
- The country's plan for CPEC-related projects indicates that the region will receive very little from the massive project because the regime has not yet announced any significant hydro or industry projects.
- The country will establish nine trade and industrial zones under CPEC, with the establishment of a CPEC economic zone being the only addition for Gilgit-Baltistan.
- Due to a narrative crafted by a segment of society that failed to recognize the direct and indirect benefits of CPEC, the people of the region are completely confused and doubtful.
- The majority of Gilgit Baltistan's population thinks that because the government is unable to create a plan, they would not benefit from the CPEC in any way, including employment opportunities or regional economic growth.
- The local nationalism movement opposed to the CPEC because of the GB's vague statutes and the locals' uneven rights.

The Nationalist leader of Gilgit Baltistan, Manzoor Parwana, reportedly stated:

“We are one of the three major parties to the project. Gilgit-Baltistan should be regarded as a third party in the CPEC by China and Pakistan, and our shares should reflect this. According to him, Gilgit-Baltistan is a disputed region that is not a part of either Pakistan or China. Since the region has a unique cultural and historical identity, neither of the two nations would be able to partner on the CPEC project”.[3]

Due to the CPEC, non-locals from various parts of Pakistan already own the majority of the hotels, shops, markets, and businesses. Locals fear that once the project starts, more non-locals will be drawn to the area, which could be dangerous for them and eventually make locals a minority in business.

This area will be weakly traversed by the 7000 trucks. The Chinese and Pakistani governments will be laying railway tracks in this hilly region by constructing several tunnels, which will

release a significant amount of smoke and carbon dioxide. Future landslides will result from this, upsetting the ecological balance of the area and endangering people, animals, and plants. Climate change in the area will lead to migration into Gilgit-Baltistan from Punjab, KPK, and Sindh, which will fuel sectarian strife. The locals worry that the natural environment will be destroyed by air pollution from the extensive transportation of goods between China and Pakistan via Great Britain. Chinese immigration to Pakistan and the GB region has changed Islamic values and traditions, leading to the emergence of unethical values in these Islamic areas.

China ships 80% of its oil to Shanghai across the Strait of Malacca, covering 16,000 km in two or three months. With CPEC, however, the shipment period will just be a few days, covering 3218 km.

As a result, the local populace urged the government to grant it constitutional powers and make it Pakistan's fifth province. They also asked that the CPEC grant them the same privileges as other provinces.[3]

One of Pakistan's biggest challenges is providing for and guaranteeing the security of the Chinese workers and project locations. To guarantee the safety and security of the Chinese workers on the project, the federal government established the Pakistan Army's Special Security Division (SSD). Under the command of a Major General, the division has 12,000 soldiers.¹⁷ Instability in Pakistan is said to be caused by issues including militancy in tribal areas, the insurgency in Baluchistan, and the state of law and order in Karachi. Furthermore, political divisions between the government and the opposition fuel an unstable political environment that eventually impacts the CPEC.

Conclusion:

The largest initiative between China and Pakistan is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, but Beijing benefits more from it than Islamabad does. China can conduct land-based trade with countries all around the world. It is a quick and simple method of trading with the rest of the world through Pakistan. In addition, CPEC gives China an alternative means of transporting 80 percent of its required oil, which will arrive in a few days via the Karakorum Highway rather than across the Strait of Malacca, which takes two or three months.

As it offers the quickest path to China, connecting to Central Asia, West Asia, South Asia, and ultimately Europe, the CPEC is extremely significant for both nations. In addition to increasing trade between China and Pakistan, it will shorten the distance needed to carry oil from the Gulf to China and allow China to act as a key global import-export catalyst. Because of its potential for intra-regional connectivity, the CPEC is expected to benefit billions of people throughout the whole area. Pakistan and China have a cordial relationship, as demonstrated by the China-Pakistan commercial Corridor (CPEC), which also presents opportunities for Pakistan to deepen and expand its strategic and commercial ties with China. It is crucial to stress that Pakistan's economic operations have been significantly impacted by the War on Terror and the worst security scenario in the region since 2001.

Locals, on the other hand, are looking to the governments of China and Pakistan in the hopes that the benefits will be comparable to those in the GB region. The corridor has several benefits for the area because it is the main route for Chinese and Pakistani travel. The disputed territory of Gilgit-Baltistan and the future of the China-Pakistan economy may need to be highlighted in the best possible way. For decades, GB has been protesting Pakistan's aggressive treatment

of its region. Better rights, legal and political engagement inside the nation, and total freedom are some of the demands. The government's credentials of local frugality initiatives remain inadequate and inconsistent, although Pakistan claims to the contrary. Due to high rates of redundancy, young people from the area are migrating and relocating to the country's cities, the Middle East, and other countries.

The dictatorship needs to reconsider and restructure its policies about vague matters that could endanger not just the massive project but the entire nation. Locals' concerns about this project must be allayed to foster consensus. Locals fear that because of international politics, the project could lead to war between China, India, and Pakistan—the three major nuclear-armed states—and that world powers could help India act against the massive project. The moment is opportune to create a fifth province and alter the constitution; only then will this massive undertaking result in peace, economic growth, development, and young employment. The benefits of the project for Pakistan are multifaceted; in addition to boosting trade between the two nations, the CPEC will create enormous commercial and economic opportunities that will contribute to job creation. Furthermore, it can be inferred that the initiatives promoting economic growth are delivering security. By enhancing its capacity to generate energy to meet its electricity needs, several energy and infrastructure projects under the CPEC will stimulate significant economic activity in Pakistan and aid in the country's recovery from its energy crisis. The fundamental component of the proposal will be the establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) around the nation by the GoP. All the country's provinces and regions will be connected via the development of the port and airport at Gwadar as well as the building of eastern, western, and central roads. Additionally, China's involvement in the CPEC will help attract foreign direct investment and change the perception of Pakistan as a terrorist safe heaven. To take advantage of this project's prospects, Pakistan must resolve any political concerns about the CPEC, establish stability, and uphold law and order. Pakistan must act to stop the political disputes endangering the CPEC and guarantee the safety of all workers involved in the project. Pakistan will not be able to benefit economically and socially from the item without these actions. In summary, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has political and geopolitical implications for both countries in addition to its economic ones. In addition to the two nations, the functioning of the CPEC will have a profound impact on the neighbouring regions of East Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, West Asia, the Gulf, and Africa.

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