

Opinion – Pakistan’s New Approach to Gilgit-Baltistan

Written by Tridib Bhattacharya

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TRIDIB BHATTACHARYA, DEC 19 2020

On November 1, officially celebrated as ‘Independence Day’ in the Gilgit-Baltistan region of Pakistan-administered Kashmir, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan seemingly gave the people an additional cause for cheer. Since its liberation from Jammu and Kashmir’s ruling Dogra dynasty in 1947 and subsequent accession to Pakistan, the territory of Gilgit-Baltistan has had indeterminate status under Pakistan’s constitution. Khan’s announcement upgrading the region to “provisional provincial status” appears to fulfil Gilgit-Baltistan’s long-standing demand for constitutional recognition while also securing Pakistan’s wider political, economic and geostrategic interests. Gilgit-Baltistan’s treatment as essentially a colonial possession for seventy-three years now is grounded in the belief that its formal integration with the rest of the country would weaken Pakistan’s case for a UN plebiscite in Kashmir, which Islamabad officially considers to be disputed territory. The nominally autonomous, underdeveloped region is unrepresented in the national legislature and lacks access to federal courts; political activities are strictly controlled to project the notion of Kashmir’s eventual accession to Pakistan (Interestingly, Gilgit-Baltistan has traditionally been distinct from the rest of Kashmir: its diverse population comprises various non-Kashmiri ethnicities and does not speak the Kashmiri language).

Although not yet level with Pakistan’s four full provinces, provisional provincial status should considerably increase Gilgit-Baltistan’s constitutional rights and enhance its legislative assembly’s administrative powers. So why has Khan decided to break years of status quo? The obvious answer (and subject of much media coverage): China, Pakistan’s “all-weather friend”.

Gilgit-Baltistan provides Pakistan’s only contiguous border with China and is the entry point for the \$87 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), an ambitious infrastructure project. Connecting the city of Kashgar in China’s landlocked Western Xinjiang province to Pakistan’s southern Gwadar port, the CPEC will present an alternate supply route to the congested Malacca Strait, the primary shipping lane linking the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Offering easier access to West Asia and beyond, the shorter trade route will on completion protect the 40% of Chinese exports and 90% of oil imports currently passing through the Malacca Strait should any tensions flare-up in the contested South China Sea region. Beijing has long pushed for regularising Gilgit-Baltistan’s legal status to safeguard substantial Chinese investment in the region, part of the wider Belt and Road Initiative forming the centrepiece of President Xi Jinping’s foreign policy. Not surprisingly, China’s reaction to Khan’s announcement was subdued, starkly contrasting its sharp response to last year’s restructuring of Indian-administered Kashmir.

From Islamabad’s perspective, stronger relations with China will ultimately allow Pakistan to serve as a more effective counterbalance to India in South Asia, strategically benefitting both allies. Solely focusing on China also overlooks how this change benefits Pakistan’s economic interests – a 2010 World Bank report published in collaboration with the Asian Development Bank cited Gilgit-Baltistan’s unclear legal status as a major impediment to private and foreign investment, and provincial status could spur economic development of the mineral-rich region which also has major hydroelectric potential. Khan’s claims of a new era of development in Gilgit-Baltistan are not entirely unfounded.

The other widely cited key driver behind Khan’s announcement hinges on Gilgit-Baltistan’s status as part of the Kashmir dispute. Many commentators have termed Pakistan’s move a response to India’s reorganisation of Kashmir – a reassertion of claims on both sides. While such analysis regards Islamabad’s decision as a defensive one, it

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could alternately equally be interpreted as a pragmatic, realist policy action. By abandoning its long-standing policy and making Gilgit-Baltistan a province, Pakistan is effectively acknowledging the unlikelihood of any change in Kashmir’s status quo. This could possibly be a step towards accepting the military Line of Control (LoC) with India as the international border – and subsequent resolution of the dispute.

A plebiscite is anyhow improbable, and should Khan follow through on his announcement, India’s claim over the entirety of Kashmir would stand considerably undermined. Islamabad’s move may even strengthen its position internationally – while India’s reorganisation involved revoking Indian-administered Kashmir’s constitutional special status (thereby effecting ‘material change’ discouraged by past UN resolutions), Pakistan’s elevation of Gilgit-Baltistan’s constitutional status essentially protects against this. Much of this essentially relates to Gilgit-Baltistan’s wider geostrategic importance – arguably unparalleled for a region so mountainous and inhospitable. Described as “the crow’s nest” of Asia by British historian John Keay, Gilgit-Baltistan is ideally located for trade and commerce at the crossroads of South Asia, China and Central Asia.

Both Islamabad and New Delhi value access to Central Asia – while Pakistan’s maritime capacity has facilitated historical ties with the landlocked energy-rich region, India has attempted to access the area through Afghanistan with its development of Iran’s Chabahar Port. Given the context of the ongoing India-China standoff in Ladakh, Pakistan has evidently seized the opportunity to secure control over the gateway to Central Asia.

Broadening our lens, it is instructive to recall the nineteenth century “Great Game”, which saw the Russian and British empires compete for control of the wider Gilgit-Baltistan region. Over a century later, global power has returned to South Asia, with the region at the centre of the US-China ‘Cold War 2.0’. The modern update of the Great Game could pit Pakistan and China against India and the US, and Gilgit-Baltistan’s assimilation into Pakistan would secure critical economic and security interests for the former pairing. This would be particularly significant given the current flux in great power dynamics across greater South and West Asia.

Now Khan’s announcement came just before local elections in Gilgit-Baltistan, at a time when his party’s popularity was seen as declining nationally (Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf Party ended up winning the largest number of seats amidst claims of vote rigging by opposition parties). But two key factors make it doubtful this is merely empty election rhetoric – China and more importantly, the army. The Pakistani army, seen as the real power behind elected civilian governments, spearheaded efforts to build national political consensus around the move. And although legitimate criticisms of the CPEC regarding its excessive power centralisation and negative environmental impact exist, Pakistan’s economic slowdown leaves it with little choice.

There are also concerns about discontent in Azad Kashmir, the other nominally self-governing territory of Pakistan-administered Kashmir which also lacks provincial status. Pakistan is seen as forsaking the Kashmiri independence movement and thereby the “moral high ground”. Yet morality unfortunately counts for little in the realm of strategic *realpolitik* and in practical terms, the outsize influence of the military establishment makes widespread popular dissent rare. This step will, if anything, enhance Islamabad’s strength, standing and security.

Formal provincial status will require amending Pakistan’s constitution, and it remains to be seen when Gilgit-Baltistan’s two million people finally achieve the freedoms they have long strived for (Following the election results Khan recently stated that granting provisional provincial status will be taken up on a priority basis). But it is clear this decision’s wide ranging implications will impact Pakistani, Chinese, Indian and even American interests. While Gilgit-Baltistan’s integration may signal a Pakistani-Chinese strategic advantage, its status as a geopolitical hotspot in South Asia will endure for the foreseeable future. There is clearly far more at stake for Islamabad than merely appeasing Beijing or angering New Delhi.

About the author:

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