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CPEC Issues and Threatening Cultural Diversity in Gilgit-Baltistan

Abstract

China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is simple by words but very much complicated in nature, described as “a game changer” for Pakistan although it is a leading step towards Chinese economic and political hegemony in the region. The gateway of CPEC “Khunjrab” provides opportunity for Chinese access to Gulf States, but also an easy, accessible and non-disrupted penetration to warm waters for Russia as well, considered an area of greater scope and higher potential for Pakistan to realize its dreams of economic extensions. This gateway of CPEC is the part of disputed territory of the State of Jammu & Kashmir, located in the region of “Gilgit-Baltistan” (GB); at the junction of Wakkhan (Afghanistan) and Xinjiang (China). This region has very significant role in global geo-economy and geo-political with prospects of regional unusually counted in global scenario, may be at hit list by the CPEC and Sino-Pak opposition. Having diverse ethnic, cultural and lingual aspects which obviously manifests its cultural richness also possesses potential of international hypocrisy by arising Sunni-Shia and other cultural and lingual social conflicts which is targeted in past still somehow endangered zone with result of neighboring aggression, dynamics of international politics and current economic war. This paper is an attempt to explore the cultural variation and diverse values of Gilgit-Baltistan which could be utilized by opposition to exploit the local community to disturb CPEC route. The primary aim is to highlight the major culture-based threats and challenges which could be instable GB and subjugate the CPEC project by using the tools of regionalism, ethnicity, lingual and sectarian levels. The basic conspiracy behind this plan is weakening the Kashmir dispute in international community also an attempt to disturb the CPEC which will change the fate of GB and Pakistan.

Key words: Geo-Strategic, Taliban, Gilgit-Baltistan, Russia, China, CPEC, Culture, threats, USA, India

The region of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) formally known “Northern Areas” is a northern part of the State of Jammu & Kashmir looks like a crown in the maps of Pakistan and India.¹ GB is home of unusual and irregular intersection of Central and South Asian massive landmass by having geographic linkages with South,

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Central and West Asian States. The opportunities for economic linkages through this region are area of attention for China, Tajikistan and Afghanistan but presently China obtained an economic passage for critical trading routes extending towards West Asia and stretching to Africa.²

This region borders with KPK's Dir, Swat, Kohistan, Kaghan and Chitral, Wakhan Corridor, Xinjiang, Kargil, Azad Jammu and Kashmir and about 480 km long "Line of Control" (LoC) running alongside Indian Administrated Jammu and Kashmir territory through "un-demarcated" northern side of Kashmir.³ Multiethnic and diverse neighborhood and their culture are parallel with the culture of GB which makes its unique in entire region. The traditions, social classes, living styles is mostly determined through their lingual variation and sects. Culture being an identity of any region may be comprised upon beliefs, religion, languages, dresses, notion of time, food preferences, songs, literature, races etc. but often caused most dangerous conflicts ends with destruction.

GB, a very significant land⁴ for Pakistan particularly the key area of CPEC which was questioned by United States of America (USA)⁵ and traditional rival India opposing for day first, could be in target of such opponents. This game changer project can be subjugated through fueling the cultural and sect-based conflict in this region, which somehow present in this area as well. In large national interest and peace keeping ties in this region some measures indicated in this study to bring national integrity and harmony in the region. To avoid culture-based conflict is guarantee for the socio-economic development and fulfill the dream of emerging power for Pakistan and regions of Kashmir.

GB is mostly mountainous territory having an area approximately 85, 793 square km early referred as "Northern Areas" located between Karakorum and Hindu Kush ranges in the northern side and Himalayas in the South. This land also has a confluence of three mighty mountain ranges; Hindu Kush, Karakorum, and Himalaya at "Bunji" which lies in the footstep of Mount Godwin Austin. Bordered with different areas of Pakistan, Afghanistan, china and Indian Administrated Kashmir this region has very vital position.

This land links with Wakhan Corridor on its Northern west, Chinese autonomous territory Xinjiang on North, Kargil region lies on its east, Azad Kashmir's Neelum Valley on its southern east, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's (KPK) regions; Kaghan, Kohistan, Dir, Swat and Chitral districts located on its south. More than 72% land is hilly and mountainous out of 85,793 square km containing high peaks and mountains. This land is also bestowed with rich water bodies and its 27% area in comprised upon the glaciers. Keeping diverse climate, which varies from east to west and north to south but somehow eastern and northern areas are sever cold most part of the year while western and southern terrains are warm in summer in daytime.

This hilly terrain is less populated with the density about 18 persons per km scattered in multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-sectarian groups preferring separate identity, living style and nodes. Urdu is spoken as an official language of this region usually works as "lingua franca" spoken and understood by majority of population while the Shina is 2nd biggest spoken language in this region especially in Gilgit, Astore, Diamir, and partially in Ghizer, Hunza, Nagar also in Baltistan

region as well, while the other languages like Shina is spoken in majority of the population in Gilgit, Astore, Diamir, some parts of Ghizer, Hunza, Nagar and Baltistan.⁶ Balti is spoken in entire Baltistan while some regional languages minorly spoken as Wakhi in upper Hunza and some villages of Ghizer, Khowar in Ghizer, Burushaski is widely spoken in Gilgit, Nagar, Gilgit, Punial, Yasin etc. although very small population used Kashmiri and Pashto for communication.⁷ Moreover, very interesting musical language belongs to musician clans Domaaki is also present in this region as well. Although it is Muslim majority territory but significant divided into two main Sect Sunni and Shia while Ismailis, Deobandi, Noorbakhshi as well.

Culture is a broader term covering all living aspects of any society, works as an identity, recognition, integrity and mostly contributes to harmony and strong local interaction. Usually, culture is referred to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving. Culture is considered a central concept in anthropology, encompassing the range of phenomena that are transmitted through social learning in human societies. Cultural universals are found in all human societies; these include expressive forms like art, music, dance, ritual, religion, and technologies like tool usage, cooking, shelter, and clothing. The prime concept of material culture surrounded by the physical expression like technology, architecture and art while the immaterial aspects most comprised upon the principles of social organization, mythology, philosophy, scripted and oral literature and science covers the intangible culture heritage of a society.⁸

Gilgit-Baltistan is very rich in its cultural diversity which varies from region to region and tribe to tribe. This diversity makes it distinguish in entire region of Kashmir as compared to the other part due to having scattered population. This region is the home of diversified cultures, ethnicity, socio-religious, lingual, and multiple backgrounds. This diverse culture is glimpsed by their event and festivals which are celebrated on special occasions. These events are belonging to their tradition, skills, religious activities, and local customs while some are truly manifestation of their values. Some events are religious which are celebrated on whole community level as Eid Milad-un-Nabi (SAAW), Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Azha. The collective celebrations can be seen in these formal and traditional festivals.

Navroz festival is adopted from the neighboring region of Iran and Central Asia although it has vanished from most of the parts of Jammu and Kashmir but in Gilgit-Baltistan, it is deliberately and well managed observed and celebrated. Jashn-e-Baharan is a domestically celebrated in near and far including the surrounding areas of GB soon after the end of severe cold, heavy snow and rain in all the mountainous region with the emergence of spring which is considered a declaration a freedom in outside movement after the restrictions of unfair weather conditions in entire region. Another local narrative was stated by Ikram Shah that it is an indication for the people who were captured in the house due to severe cold and heavy snow because this unfair weather has risks for movement as land sliding and risk of many seasonal diseases. At the end of this season now the

people can easily movement to their jobs, and on the work. Most people migrate from their villages and other parts of country so, this festival is an opportunity for seeking livelihood and departing meeting with friends and mates.⁹

Shandoor Polo Festival is one of the most famous festival in Pakistan and celebrated at the mid of Chitral and GB annually in the shape of polo tournament in which most of the public of Gilgit and Baltistan scheduled in 7th to 9th July. Mostly the majority of players who participated in this tournament.¹⁰ Babusar Polo Festival is arranged yearly during the 6th to 8th of August on the plains of Babusar Top near to Noori Top in which the teams of Gilgit-Baltistan participated and thousands of tourists and guest reach there to enjoy the pleasant weather and polo matches.¹¹ Harvest Time Festivals are mostly celebrated during the harvest of crops now vanishing out due to less trend towards local agriculture and focus upon the labour work during harvesting and breeding the crops. So, these traditional occasions and customs-based festivals are many useful in the cultural promotion and social cohesion and harmony, unity, and strong interconnectivity amongst each other. This is also an open opportunity for the encouraging the tourists and to observe the local culture and share the skills. The northern region along with Chitral are very famous for dances and local raqs performances which attracts the tourists and other guests to GB.¹²

Old Man Dance is very old traditional dance which was celebrated once or twice in the years in which old men enjoys dancing usually participants are more than one person who wear old-style dresses. Cowboy Dance (Payaloo) is a dance a person wears old style dress, long leather shoes and a stick in hand. Sword Dance is although very common in Africa and Gulf but in this region, it is a unique dance the participants show taking one sword in right and shield in left. One to six participants as pair can dance.

In some areas of Gilgit-Baltistan, Hindu based system of social classes still present and regarded while mostly people distinguish themselves upon sectarian and lingual basis all through the region. Though specific living styles in sever climate conditions and lesser transportation and limited communication across the region often consider alienation among the society and individualistic approaches but in celebration and festival although local or regional harmony and unity obviously reflected. GB, by its strategic significance, makes easier, safer and cheaper penetration for China and Central Asian States (CAS/CA) towards warm waters by using the Gwadar Port and enjoying a lucrative junction. Chinese latest economic legendary project “One Belt-One Road (OBOR)” indeed, a mega project which covers majority of eastern world by crossing “Strait of Malacca” touching South Asia. This journey comprised upon thousands of miles with an endangered rout on the influence of India and US but surprisingly the region of Gilgit-Baltistan works as a bridge to reduces possible risks and longer maritime route in the shape of CPEC which directly links it with multi-national markets of Gulf States and shorter route to Europe through Pakistan. It is naturally gift for this region and Pakistan and in this context, China also underscored the fruits and outcomes of this steep corridor project that it further enhanced to their geostrategic goals in entire region.¹³

For the Pakistan it is also a vital opportunity to make landline linkages and close knits with CAS especially with Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and acquiring a peaceful passage to Uzbekistan. The trade through road is considered much impressive, potentially best, safer and fast marketing opportunity. So, this corridor can make Pak penetration to road links from Gwadar to Europe through Silk route by road of CAS on the west while the Sino western highway or Xinjiang Highway, recognized as Lhasa-Kashgar road which connects Xinjiang with Tibet which links with maritime silk road projects can give Pakistan more advantages. Comprehending the long-term importance of the highway, the Pakistan Highway Administration and China's state-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC) signed an agreement in 2006 to upgrade and widen the width of the highway from 10 to 30 meters. However, what perhaps can be termed as Beijing and Islamabad's grand design, to be realized by a joint consortium of Pakistan and Chinese Railways is the proposed Karakoram Rail Corridor. The reported linkage will be provided by the Khunjab Pass in the Karakoram Range through a 700 km rail corridor. This corridor shall link Kashgar in Xinjiang to Gulf State from the cities of Pakistan like Rawalpindi, Lahore, Multan and Quetta to Gwadar. The regional infrastructure is under development, and soon the railway track will be launched for freight trains which will reduce the time and safer the travel. In this process, whole Pakistan will be connected by the roads and trains and Pakistani industry will flourish and export is expected will be on rise. This development should be seen in Gilgit-Baltistan which is primary and essential part of this mega project and works as a bridge between Kashgar and Gwadar.

Gilgit-Baltistan is the land of minerals and water bodies, two glitters make his price higher and higher, the fertility of KPK, Punjab and Sindh are directly linked with these water sources and bodies. The second significant market is "mountaineering" which is a heavenly gift for a land like Pakistan, the mount Godwin Austin (K2) and other higher peaks invites global mountaineers and thousands of them had done this adventure successfully and dozens of them are still present there on their adventure because this land. In the list of "eight-thousander" five famous peaks are enlisted which are 2nd, 9th, 11th, 12th and 13th in the world highest peaks ranking¹⁴. Moreover, 7000 meters high peaks are nearly about more than 50 while the figure of 100 crossed of the peaks having over 6000-meter height.

Tourism, another potential of economy in this region, Unique landscapes, evergreen forests, cold deserts, snowcapped mountains, and great cultural heritage are the attractions. It is a famous tourist place and has always been a paradise for mountaineers, trekkers and landscape loving people. You can experience a cool weather over there throughout the year. It is surrounded by highest peak of the world and is famous for trekking, climbing, rafting, camping and paragliding.¹⁵No doubt, beauty of this land is just like paradise, hill climbers, mountaineers and expeditions can bring huge difference in local income, if this industry was supported on government or semi government level. The main source of income is fruit gardening and GB is the highest producer of apricots in whole Pakistan. GB almonds also very famous in Pakistan which is cultivated in a small area and other fruits also present in this area. The main micro industry in GB is farms of dry fruits. Crops also cultivated in those areas which become free from snow during

March and April. It is also an open reality that 66.3% area of GB remained under mountains, lakes, rivers and glaciers, forest present on 9% and range lands occupy 22.4% of area. In whole G.B cultivable area is only 1.1% and cultivable waster is about 1.2%. Wheat cultivated in whole region, maize is not found in Skardu and Ghanche and potato is the major vegetable which is produced 0.13 million tons in the region. Most prominent production are fruits, which are about 0.164 million tons which also used for local dry fruit industry. Irrigation system also naturally present in this region in which 85% of cultivable land irrigated by water channels fed by snow, glaciers and springs while 14% systems run on tanks and other resources. Livestock is main source of income in this region, according to the statistics of livestock Department of G.B about 1.6 million livestock population present in which goats and cattle in maximum numbers are about 40% of all.

Prospective of CPEC routes in Pakistan from China are connected via GB and the ground reality is not as simple and peaceful as we are looking because GB is complicated in nature due to the complex geographic location and complicated weather condition, the region of Gilgit-Baltistan has many issues and challenges from internal level to extreme external level. Internal levels are can be addressed as Sectarian issues, Ethnic diversity, Lingual differences, Complicated status and weaker institutions while external issues can be studied as neighboring controversy from eastern side by India can be seen in Siachen and Kargil and from western side the Wakhkan strip and instability in Afghanistan. The influence from tribal areas which narrowly cut down by Chitral, still a higher potential of Afghan led trans radical activities.

Although Gilgit-Baltistan is a part of disputed State of Jammu & Kashmir, but this land is facing a serious challenge from last 70 years. In which the most prominent is constitutional status, which is undermined while the political autonomy a facade, given the circumscribed powers of its legislative assembly.¹⁶ To curtail such administrative issue and challenge the Govt. of Pakistan made a revolutionary work by introducing “Self-rule” through “Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self Governance Oder, 2009” which widely reduced the political suppression and longstanding alienation. However, this ordinance still deprived from “legitimate political performance” in a region of “polluted environment which has no politico-constitutional status and fundamental rights”, with passage of time especially after the fully implementation of CPEC this region will stretch out from political subjugation and shall become its Achille’s heel.

The residents of this region expecting that in mountainous region, the narrow highways can only be upgraded in case of any mega project. Karakorum Highway was constructed in the period about 20 years, so it is not an easy task to perform. Only “overland trade is in any case very expensive and would remain so even if the rout is developed further”.¹⁷ The GB community still not satisfied after the clear declaration of benefits to the region by Sino ambassador in Pakistan that CPEC related benefits including “Cross-border trade, hydropower projects and infrastructure development”.¹⁸ The GB community is resentful on constitutional polarization, economic isolation with addition feeling insult over CPEC project, which is designed, implemented and running without their input and benefit share is much lesser than their expectations. Furthermore, employment and labour quota is also neglected which forced local community to walk in protest.¹⁹ In

environmental prospects this region is suffering from ecological cost during infrastructure development which dually effected this region; land sliding and vanishing of precious wildlife. In broader scenario the beauty of this land is going to die in the process of CPEC implementation and running while precautionary measures still not taken place by the government machinery and responsible agencies.

It was the common hearing in all over Pakistan that the advent of CPEC turns into miracle in reducing unemployment especially in a region like GB but reports and news describes that most of the labour from Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) “which could also affect delicate Sunni-Shia demographic balance”.²⁰ The traditional and sentimental accuses about Indian intelligence agencies like “RAW” will make its utmost effort to stirrup anti state activities through dissidents and violent protests by their spies to subjugate CPEC.²¹ Now, after Balakot attacks, hence they would not make any damage in the region but opened an environment of frustration and hanging sword of uncertainty and peaceless of the residents of the State. The links through Wakhkan which was earlier part of Kashmir till 1892, the Indian Consulates from Kabal can use Muslim recruits trained in Afghanistan to attack CPEC installation on Karakorum Highway and other routes, this is further notified by the federal interior minister in 2018. This allegation provoked into highest security measures and the strictest monitoring of the roots.²²

The concerns from the Pakistani leadership are not supernatural, baseless and politico-manifesto but there is something happening on the paper, behind the curtain, proposals, agreements and disagreements, gossips and conspiracy look like something sooner appear on the screen due to geostrategic significance of this territory in entire region. This statement can be strengthened through Indian repeatedly claim which rejected by Pak official in the light of Sino-Pak trans pact 1963.²³ Indian claim of Kashmir is still over Pakistan and China as well and India threatened the China in a simple diplomatic narration that “China is very sensitive about its sovereignty and the economic corridor passes through an illegal territory”, while Modi officially stated, “connectivity in itself cannot override or undermine the sovereignty of other nation”.²⁴ China solidify its opinion about CPEC by neglecting Indian accuses in such a polite manner that CPEC is not against any nation or region it is a scheme of prosperity.²⁵

CPEC is 62 billion US dollar project designed to resolve energy crisis in Pakistan, improving the connectivity, construction of economic development sectors and zones and supporting the soft and hard infrastructure. The primary focus of this project was subsequent economic growth, reduction of unemployment, grapple with endemic deficit, decreasing instability and above all exploit strategic position of Pakistan. There are so many challenges in this milestone project like sever weather conditions, unfair geographic location, uncertain climate, endangered environment, debt management and political instability furthermore, international geopolitics especially regarding rivalry traditions with India, always counted, examined, judged and assessed.

Vitality and significance of this project is on one side while its successful running and accomplishment is always questionable in such toughest circumstances where the farsighted and visionary plans and policies are dreams in Pakistan, mostly

seems hasty, flawed reforms and limited implication holders have aggravated like all other sectors and region, while in GB which has longstanding grievances this aggravation is much higher. The poor policies, weak decision making and limited global influence badly impacting the façade of the State of Pakistan on the international avenues. Few examples like Sino-Pak marriages, two mega scandals arose almost together; first is about 50 Muslim girls who married from Uighur with residents of GB were detained by China and Government of Pakistan (GoP) could not resist,²⁶ but such actions can further fuel on local alienation from Islamabad and Beijing and second is Chinese fraud marriages in Pakistan in which 11 Chinese arrested by FIA.²⁷ Such policies from both sides surely badly impact CPEC and would not turned with inevitable implications as well.

The assist of long living and everlasting of any community which mostly known as introduction of any region is “culture and cultural assist”. The diverse culture of Gilgit-Baltistan plays in multidimensional aspects and approaches, but the potential threats are much higher than in current international geopolitics and its significant geostrategic position. Consideration upon both aspects will be sign of wisdom in policy making and containing the local community of GB. First of all, fundamental right, protection, political empowerment, economic development and infrastructural upgradation along with reduction of unemployment, skillful education, utilization of natural resources and encouraging local industries and business such type of measures are preliminary steps to encourage the community to play their role in national development and progress.

Respect of culture, regard of culture and encourage to protect and preserve the cultural heritage and use this segment into the growth of tourism industry. The prime aim of the government is to produce harmony among the society through education, religious and sectarian equality and forbearance must be ensured. The role and contribution of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan should be acknowledged, provide equal opportunities to use their potential, skills and experience in the national development and economic growth. Political stability in the region and sustainable political bodies, institutions, right of litigation and legislation must be safeguarded. In the long-term regional cooperation and development, the role of the GB community is only ensured by their consultation, opinion and participation in this project otherwise, let the community to count vehicles passes from Karakorum Highway only, depriving them from ride and luggage.

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