

**Past, Present, and Future Perspectives  
on Gilgit-Baltistan**

A Lecture

By

Major General Ehsan Mehmood Khan, HI (M)

Director General, ISSRA, NDU, Islamabad

NUST Institute of Policy Studies

*Islamabad*

REPORT WRITTEN BY

Adnan Ali

Research Associate

NUST Institute of Policy Studies

EDITED BY

Ali Shah

Head of Research

NUST Institute of Policy Studies

PREPARED AND PRINTED IN PAKISTAN BY

NUST Institute of Policy Studies (NIPS)

National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST)

H-12, Islamabad

[www.nips.nust.edu.pk](http://www.nips.nust.edu.pk)

DISCLAIMER

The views presented here are solely of the participants of the lecture and do not represent the position of NUST and NIPS.

© NIPS 2021

All rights are reserved.

## **Table of Contents**

About the Speaker	<b>4</b>
1. Introduction	<b>5</b>
2. Physical and Human Geography of Gilgit-Baltistan	<b>5</b>
3. Brief Historical Overview	<b>7</b>
4. Politico-Administrative Evolution of Gilgit-Baltistan: 1947 till date	<b>9</b>
5. Strategic Significance of Gilgit Baltistan	<b>10</b>
6. Region's Development: Progress and Challenges	<b>10</b>
7. Q&A Session	<b>12</b>
8. Conclusion	<b>14</b>
Gallery	<b>15</b>

## About the Speaker

Major General Ehsan Mehmood Khan, HI (M) is a graduate of Command and Staff College, Quetta, and National Defense University Islamabad, Center for National Defence Studies, Madrid, Spain and National Defense University, Washington DC, USA. He has held various important staff, command, and instructional assignments.

He has authored two books and several research papers in scholarly journals. He holds a Master's degree in Strategic Security Studies from NDU Washington D.C, an MPhil in Security Studies, and PhD in Peace

and Conflict Studies from NDU, Islamabad. His areas of study include National Security, Military Strategy, Human Security, Hybrid Warfare and Peace and Conflict Studies. He did his PhD on the role of geography in human security in Gilgit-Baltistan. His field work has led him deeper in the lives of people and communities inhabiting different valleys in GB, having given him a unique vantage point to study the region and its inhabitants.

He has been serving as Director General, Institute for Strategic Studies Research and Analysis (ISSRA) at NDU, Islamabad since May 2021.



# **Past, Present, and Future Perspectives on Gilgit-Baltistan**

## **1. Introduction**

Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) has been an important region throughout history. The region has been a battle ground for different empires and the great game saga also unfolded here. Previously known as Northern Areas, Gilgit-Baltistan has been in the international and national news ever since Pakistan and China ventured on China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

CPEC is a pivotal component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Both Pakistan and China have made huge investments in its projects. Karakorum Highway is a crucial part of the road connectivity which links the Gilgit-Baltistan region of Pakistan with that of Xinjiang in China. Constructed along one of the arteries of the old silk route, KKH is the jugular vein of CPEC. The region holds supreme importance for the success of CPEC, because the project can be a game changer for the region ushering in an era of coordinated economic, political, social, cultural, and environmental development not only of the region but also that of the country as a whole. Therefore, peace and stability in GB are indispensable for materializing the development dividends of CPEC. GB has been described diversely in terms of its breathtaking high-altitude landscape, unique culture, and religious history. It was known previously as the meeting place of three empires, namely the Chinese Qing Empire, Czarist Russian Empire, and the British Indian Empire. Called the wonderland of Asia and its fulcrum, it is also the timeless meeting ground of three mountain ranges and three regions. The speaker called it the "water tank of Pakistan and our window into China." Regardless of how apt these descriptions are in terms of describing various aspects of the region, still the region's diversity and significance happen to be greater than the words used to capture them.

## **2. Physical and Human Geography of Gilgit-Baltistan**

The region covers an area of 74,296 square kilometers with a population of approximately 1.5 million people. To put its geographical vastness in perspective, GB is 5 times the size of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, 2 times

the size of the Ex-FATA region, 8 times that of Nagorno-Karabakh, and about 10,000 km<sup>2</sup> bigger than Sri Lanka. Interestingly, GB is bigger than 36 smallest countries of the world put together. The region constitutes 8.22% of Pakistan's territory.

The region is sparsely populated, making up 0.7% of Pakistan's total population. For comparison, GB has a population of around 1.5 million, while Islamabad Capital Territory alone has about 2 million people. The administration of GB is divided into three divisions with 10 districts, 27 tehsils and subdivisions and 706 villages. 86% of the population lives in rural areas. Gilgit and Skardu are two major cities of the region. Although a lot of life and work opportunities have been created in the region as part of the development plans of successive governments, and more recently, as a result of the impetus provided by the development of CPEC, yet outbound migration has been influenced traditionally by three key factors, namely, health, education, and climate. In so far as the linguistic profile of the region is concerned, six major languages are spoken in the region, which include Shina, Balti, Khowar, Brushaski, Wakhi, Domaki, and Gojri, with Urdu enjoying the status of the regional lingua franca.

The process of mountain formation in the region occurred as the Indian Plate collided with the great Eurasian Plate about 40 to 50 million years ago. This geological event threw up the mighty mountains of the Karakorum and Himalayas. GB is the fulcrum of the mountain crescent that formed as a result of the collision. This region also features the famous Pamir Knot which stretches across different countries like China, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor. GB is home to 5 out of 14 above-8000-meter peaks in the world. Thirty-three rivers flow through GB from central Asia to South Asia. All these rivers flow into ten water basins and most of them flow into the Indus River Basin. Moreover, GB is home to 5100 glaciers and about 12% of the region is glaciated, containing 3400 glacial lakes. GB also happens to be world's largest plateau.

Mountains make up about 60% of the region. The region is mountain-locked, but is internally and externally connected through an amazingly labyrinthine network of 159 passes, of which around 70%

are glacial. As a result of this peculiar geographical feature, GB has been distinguished from the rest of the Pakistan because of its unique internal communication network. The inbound and outbound mobility was arduous in the old days. Before 1947, the average travel time from Skardu to Gilgit city was 14 days, and the journey from Gilgit city to Rawalpindi took 30 days. Things have improved markedly since then as it now takes around 4 hours to travel by road from Skardu to Gilgit city, and less than 10 hours to travel by road from Gilgit city to Rawalpindi.

Although the region is famous for its fruits, particularly apricots, yet the cultivable area represents a relatively small proportion of the total landmass of the region. The region has diverse climate, which varies from valley to valley. The region falls into three crop zones, i.e., double cropping zone (1200-1600m), marginal double cropping zone (1600-2400m), and upper single cropping zone (2400-3000m).

### **3. Brief Historical Overview**

The history of GB presents a complex kaleidoscope of events, influences, and circumstances. Like the history of almost all peoples and places, that of GB has also been conditioned by three overriding influences, namely, trade and commerce, war and conflict, and faith and belief systems. Its history can be divided into four different phases, namely: phase I, the ancient era, lasting from the Iron Age till 7th century of the Common Era; phase II, the medieval era, lasting from the arrival of Islam in the 8th and 9th centuries of the Common Era till the 18th century; phase III, the Dogra rule, from 1840 till 1947-48; and, phase IV, post-independence period after 1947. Epigraphical evidence dates the history of the place to as far back as 5th century BC. There are over 50,000 petroglyphs (rock carvings) present in the region. The region was a crucial node along the ancient silk route.

Religion has played a huge role in the region's social structure. Till the second century of the Common Era, Bonism or Bon Chos remained the popular religion in Tibet, Xinjiang, Central Asia, and GB. Buddhism supplanted Bonism around 150 AD. Islam arrived in the region around 8th and 9th centuries of the Common Era. Today, spread across

different valleys in the region, the four Islamic sects, namely, Sunni, Shia, Ismaili, and Noor Bakhshi, act as the devotional focus of different sections of the region's population.

Local dynasties and principalities were formed and held sway in different valleys during this period. Some of the notable dynasties are: Trakhan dynasty in Gilgit (late 8th century CE to early 19th century); Kator Dynasty in Chitral (late 16th century till 1947); Khushwaqt dynasty in Yasin and Mastuj; Maghlots of Nagar; Mirs and Ayashoo in Hunza; the Burshai of Puniyal; and Maqpon dynasty in Skardu, Kharmang and Astore. There were 18 states and principalities in the region and the power struggle among these principalities was intense and chronic.

Dogras arrived in the region with Sikh regiment led by General Wazir Zorawar Singh in 1840. The people revolted against the new ruler in 1842, but Dogras succeeded in solidifying their rule in the same year, and continued to rule till 1947. The Dogras controlled GB first through direct rule, then through the duality of rule wherein Dogras and the British ruled jointly, and lastly by means of the triarchy consisting of British, Dogra and local rule.

Gilgit Agency was established in 1877, was abolished in 1881, re-established in 1889, and was leased to the British for 60 years in 1935, but was returned to the Dogra government on August 1, 1947. The agency was reestablished to stop the Russians during the great game between the Russian Czarist Empire and the British Empire. Ghansara Singh was the last Dogra governor of Gilgit Agency. The Gilgit Scouts, supported by the people, started the war of liberation from Dogra rule on October 31, 1947. Gilgit became a part of Pakistan in November 1947. In 1948, Baltistan also joined Pakistan, following a lengthy liberation war fought by the Gilgit Scouts and the valiant locals. Different local principalities also joined Pakistan during this period. Most of the stalwarts of the liberation war have passed away with the passage of time. Only 66 are alive; these veteran stalwarts are a living record of courage, patriotism, and self-sacrifice.



#### **4. Politico-Administrative Evolution of Gilgit-Baltistan: 1947 till date**

The region has traversed a phased constitutional and administrative journey during the last seven decades. The first interim government was formed on November 1, 1947. The region became part of North West Frontier Province (NWFP) on November 16, 1947. After the 1949 Karachi Agreement, the region came under complete and direct federal rule in 1950. The 1963 Sino-Pak Boundary Agreement witnessed Pakistan give 5000 km<sup>2</sup> of territory in the region to China, while China ceded 1942 km<sup>2</sup> of territory to Pakistan. In 1970, the region was turned into Northern Areas as a separate administrative unit. In 1974, the Frontier Crime Regulations, under which the region had been ruled until then, were abolished. In the same year, the jagirdari system and the rule of various *rajahs* (local rulers) were also abolished. In 1975, North Areas Council was established. In 1999-2000, Northern Areas Council was renamed Northern Areas Legislative Council, which enabled the council to undertake legislation in 40 items. In 2009, through a presidential order called Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order 2009, the region became an administrative province. The 2009 order was replaced by the Gilgit-Baltistan Order 2018 which enhanced the powers of the Gilgit-Baltistan Assembly. The current government has recently finalized the latest proposed legislation to award the provisional provincial status to GB. This may also lead to amendment in the Constitution of Pakistan. The proposed legislation could pave the way for the representation of GB in the national parliament and the establishment of the provincial assembly in the region.

The Gilgit-Baltistan Chief Court acts as the court of appeals in GB. The court's decisions can be appealed in the Supreme Appellate Court Gilgit-Baltistan. The court functions under the 2009 Empowerment and Self-Governance Order. It enjoys the same status as the provincial high courts of Pakistan. The Supreme Appellate Court is the highest court of appeal in GB, and is composed of a Chief Justice and two judges. Formed under the 2009 Order, the Supreme Appellate Court has a similar status to that of Pakistan's Supreme Court. However, the above-

mentioned proposed legislation may witness substantial changes in the composition and constitution of these courts.

## **5. Strategic Significance of Gilgit Baltistan**

The strategic position of Pakistan has played a vital role in its history. Similarly, GB commands great geostrategic importance. It is located between Xinjiang in China, Central Asia, Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor, Chitral in Malakand Division, Hazara Division, AJK, the Ladakh region of IIOJK, and Askai Chin/Tibet in China.

The region can be rightfully termed the water tank and energy corridor of Pakistan with an estimated total energy production capacity of 40000 MWs. Some of the ongoing projects on the Indus Cascade in the region include, Skardu Dam (1200 MW), Tangus Dam (2200 MW), Yulbo Dam (2800 MW), Bunji Dam (7100 MW), Diamer-Bhasha Dam (4500 MW), and Dasu Dam (4320 MW).

The region is rich in mineral resources including industrial minerals and precious gemstones. There are 2,000 localities having different minerals with gold in 97 localities. The rich also contains strategic minerals. Surprisingly, no comprehensive geological survey has been carried out so far despite the immense potential value of these minerals. The region is also known for its tourism potential, especially mountain tourism. Development of tourism can act as one of the key drivers of the economic development of the region. Moreover, the strategic value of tourism as a soft power element cannot be overlooked.

## **6. Region's Development: Progress and Challenges**

GB is undergoing fast-paced modernization. As a result, a host of issues need to be resolved for smooth and coordinated development. Luckily, all the issues can be overcome through proper understanding, good planning, inclusive consensus-building approach, and an integrated and consultative implementation and delivery strategy. Some of the current key challenges are: the region's pending constitutional status; administrative reforms; sustainable development: health, education, and employment; energy; multimodal connectivity; human, food, and internal security; climate change mitigation; the legacy problem of divided families and settlement of refugees in Baltistan; and

infrastructure maintenance, especially the improvement of road conditions. However, it needs to be mentioned that the region has witnessed considerable infrastructure growth. Whereas in 1947 there were no paved roads, currently there are 1309 km of paved roads including 427 km of the Karakorum Highway (KKH). Similarly, educational infrastructure has seen massive expansion in the last seven decades. In 1947, there were only 2 middle schools in the entire region, one in Gilgit and the other in Skardu. Today, there are 3000 public educational institutions and 1200 private schools and colleges.

The region is also undergoing fast development in the higher education sector. There are two universities in Gilgit-Baltistan, Karakorum International University in Gilgit and the University of Baltistan in Skardu, but since the demand for higher education amidst the region's youth population is remarkably high, so more colleges and universities will need to be established in the years to come to meet this massive demand. Outbound mobility of university-level students continues to increase with each passing year. Several undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate students hailing from GB are receiving education at domestic and foreign universities. There are over 150 PhD scholars in GB, while over 500 doctoral students are pursuing their PhD research.

The region is also experiencing an extraordinary youth bulge, as approximately 70% of the region's population is below 35. It is expected that regional development may lead to significant demographic dividend. The youth population of Gilgit-Baltistan is politically and social aware, so their socioeconomic participation will define the long-term future of the region. The region's youth strongly disapprove of sectarianism and extremism, and are highly interested in regional and national prosperity as both are inextricably linked to each other. Since physical and human geography tend to be key drivers of socioeconomic change, therefore, the youth of the region is passionately interested in the enhancement of physical and human security. It is fully engaged with the state to ensure the establishment of a holistic security paradigm for the region. Physical and human development interventions in GB should be ideally aimed at the creation of a positive locational development-led dynamic, especially by means of CPEC-led

connectivity improvements. This would lead to integrated development of services sector, trade expansion and diversification, tourism promotion, digital connectivity, creation of social infrastructure consisting of health service delivery, provision of quality education and an increase in educational capacity, built environment improvements, transit services development, industrial development, and rural vitalization. Especially, the development of the proposed Moqpondass Special Economic Zone would promote industrial development of the region.

## **7. Q&A Session**

The participants highly appreciated the lecture. During the Q&A session, there were interesting exchanges between the audience and the speaker on different issues of GB. The questions revolved around India's destabilization of the region, Kashmir dispute, CPEC development, the relationship of GB to AJK, grant of provincial status to GB, the region's geopolitical significance, the nature of NGOs working in GB, and the diversification of the region's economy.

It was unanimously considered that India was against the development of GB, and was trying its utmost to foment trouble in the region. Such nefarious efforts consisted of a baseless propaganda campaign that was purveying a fake and false narrative of regional marginalization. The people of GB had sufficient discernment to see through such disreputable and discredited Indian attempts to misrepresent the peaceful and promising state of affairs in GB. The speaker and the audience agreed that the Indian propaganda had failed in the face of the ardent collective desire and aspiration of the people of GB for complete, formal, and substantive integration with Pakistan. Their self-perception as Pakistanis was the most potent refutation of the Indian propaganda and its false claims. Moreover, the logic of concrete development taking place in the politics, economy, and society of the region strongly suggested that Indian designs against not just GB but also Pakistan as a whole were bound to be frustrated.

There was also, a unanimous view among the audience that the resolution of Kashmir dispute in line with the UNSC resolutions could

only lead to further development of the region. The speaker stated that India's illegal and unilateral actions in the IIOJK since August 5, 2019 had invariably exposed the inherently weak Indian position on Kashmir. He opined that Indian missteps had perhaps initiated the objective historical process that would lead through many a twist and turn to the eventual freedom of IIOJK from Indian occupation. It was mentioned that the tide of history was already against India as real-world developments had started showing. Such trends would gather momentum in the years to come. The important thing was for the people of Pakistan to keep their focus and aim for speedy and integrated development.

It was also noted that CPEC was a vital and core national interest of Pakistan and no compromise on its development could be tolerated. All attempts to undermine its development would be roundly countered and defeated. All the areas through which CPEC passed were secure and their security was part and parcel of the national security of Pakistan. India's anti-CPEC propaganda had been and will continue to be countered comprehensively using all means at the disposal of Pakistan.

In response to a question from a student from GB on the pace of development in the region, the speaker mentioned that progress had to be gradual, and since the issues involved in constitutional, political, administrative, economic and social development were complex so hasty steps could backfire. Initiatives in any domain needed to be well-planned. This could sometimes give the impression that things were moving slowly. However, after a certain point, the speed of progress would inevitably pick up and things would begin to move in the desired direction at a faster pace. The speaker mentioned that the direction of progress was nevertheless more significant than the speed, and, therefore, it was imperative to ensure that the direction of development was correct. He further mentioned that the positive aspirations of the people of GB would lead to great changes in the region that would make them happy and do Pakistan proud. The speaker stressed that the focus of all our activities had to be national

unity, common understanding, domestic stability, and mutual solidarity.

On the question of numerous NGOs working in GB and their implications for domestic order, it was stated that hundreds of NGOs were operating all over Pakistan in a range of areas, and so GB could not be an exception. NGOs are working in different domains such as nature and wildlife conservation, mountain tourism, health, education, etc. A case-by-case evaluation coupled with continuous monitoring and evaluation of the NGOs' activities by the concerned institutions was a good way forward. A uniform and criteria-based system could provide safeguards against risks.

In response to a question about the development of the region's mineral resources, the speaker opined that a thorough geological survey was required as a key aspect of any mineral development strategy in the region.

## **8. Conclusion**

The lecture provided a very good opportunity for the audience, that consisted of diplomats, experts, scholars, and students, to know in depth about GB. The region's development is an inseparable part of national progress. Concerted improvements in GB's physical and human geography would provide a strong guarantee of regional and national prosperity. Broad-based cooperation of state, people, communities, society, and industry could become the basis for the region's comprehensive development.

## Gallery







