



## Geopolitical Significance of Gilgit-Baltistan for CPEC

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### ABSTRACT

The geopolitical setting of a country has versatile effects on the destiny of a country. Its importance has remained since ancient times however, in the last two centuries the significance of geopolitics has been increased. This research aims to investigate the geopolitical importance of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) in the context of Sino-Pakistan relations, especially for CPEC. The Gilgit-Baltistan is a gateway for CPEC, and its ambiguous constitutional status could be developing some internal and external challenges for CPEC soon. In this regard, India has strong reservations on the route of CPEC, which is passes via the disputed region of Gilgit-Baltistan. The CPEC is an economic cooperation plan between Sino-Pakistan. While India and the United States sees it as a strategic plan against them to counter in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean.

**Disciplinary:** Political Science, International Relations, Political Economy, CPEC, Geopolitics, International Conflict.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

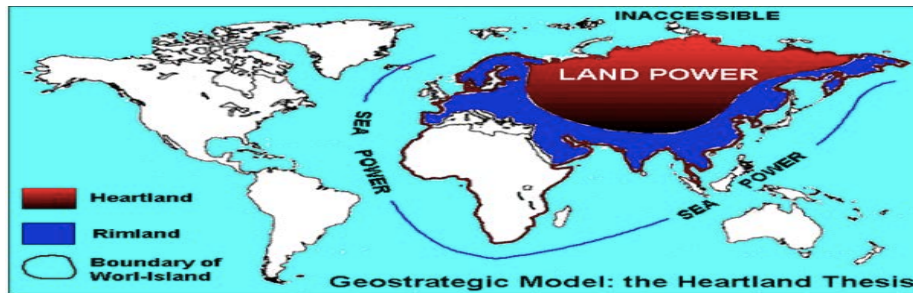
Geopolitics was introduced first time in the last eighteen century. However, the widespread use of it globally in the nineteenth century. In the early times, it was explained as a behavioral practice and linked relationship with other states. Later the concept describes that a geographical position is an essential tool among the role of states [1]. The Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) region has profound roots in history since 500 AD, as of its geopolitical importance. This piece of land has been the focal point of all the neighboring powers like China, India, Russia, and Afghanistan. From

the beginning, it has been the epicenter of influence for all great powers around it [2]. In 1947, the British parliament decided to withdrawal from the subcontinent, according to this plan the Ruler of Kashmir Maharaja Hari Sing accession with India on 26 October 1947, then Gilgit Scout arrested Governor Brigadier Gansara Sing on 1 November 1947 and declared the "Islamic Republic of Gilgit." The local population self-governed in the region for 16 days, then they affiliated themselves voluntarily with the newly established Muslim State of Pakistan [3]. During this period, this region's majority population consists of Muslims, and they want to ally with Pakistan. Therefore, they launched an armed revolution against Dogra, get freedom, and occupied the regions comprising 28000 km from the tyrant authority of Dogra [4]. History is a testimony to the fact that it is the only unfortunate piece of land that, despite being independent, never enjoyed the constitutional rights still now. The importance of the region has been more highlighted after the CPEC agreement, as the GB is the central point between the Sino-Pak. The region is controlled by Pakistan as administrative but not her constitutional part. Pakistan included this region with Kashmir issue for her cupidity regarding the plebiscite point of view in Kashmir under the UN resolutions 1948. Now Pakistan has faces many hurdles on the GB by her disputed status, especially in CPEC. The objective of this research is to analyze and examination the geopolitical importance of the significant role of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) for CPEC. The geopolitical theories, of Heartland, and Rim-land have been chosen to analyze the geopolitical importance of the GB. Which has a junction point to connect for Heartland (Western China, Xingjian), and Rim-land (Pakistan coastal line, Gwadar) regions through CPEC. For the validity of data primary and secondary data sources have been used. As primary data sources, individual in-depth interviews were taken from the political elite of GB Pakistan and the journal articles, books, magazines, and reports of think-tank forms have been used as secondary data sources.

## 2 Geopolitical Theories and CPEC

The British geographer Halford John Mackinder introduced a new concept of geopolitics by presented the "*Heartland Theory*" in 1919. The Great Brittan adopts this theory as a doctrine to sustain her dominant role across the world particularly, against the USSR. The US geographer Nicholas John Spykman presented a new vision about world geopolitics, and he elaborated Mackinder Heartland Theory in newly shaped the Rim-land Theory in 1942. Spykman changed the name of Mackinder's Inner Crescent as an alternative Rim-land, and World Island used instead of Outer Crescent. Spykman thought the rimland is the actual pivot region in the world by its geographical location and abundant resources. He summarized his theory in this statement; "*Who controls Rim-land controls Heartland, and who controls Heartland rules the World*"[5]. Brzezinski's views and the US practical involvement in different issues indicated that the US still thanking and followed the Heartland and Rim-land strategies to maintain her dominance in the world. While in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the US losing its hegemonic role in the Middle East to involve in different wars (Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria) and was not achieved her whims, especially badly flopped in Iraq and Syria. Brzezinski also elaborated that the US needs to consider the Russian and Chinese

influence in the world as a serious threat, and the US tackles them peaceful ways to use her proxies like India, Israel, and Southeast nations' allies [5].



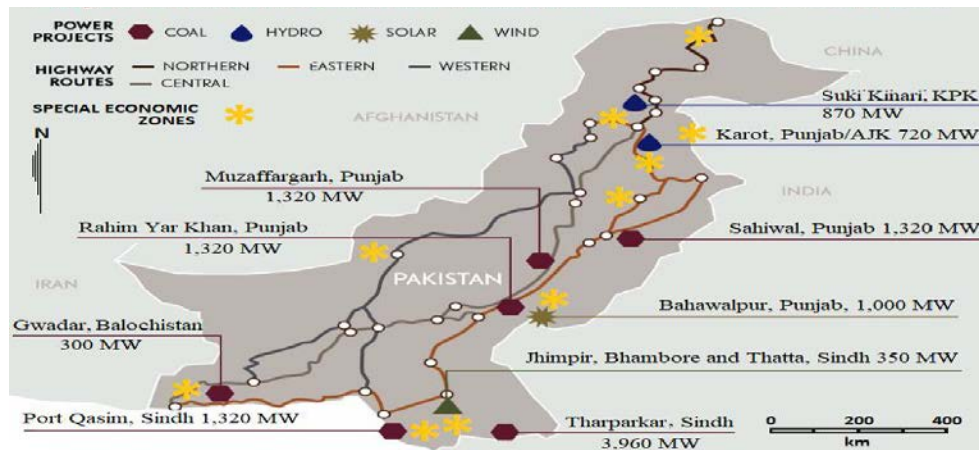
**Figure 1:** CPEC connect Heartland with Rimland's coastal line.

<http://www.geopolitica.ru/en/article/geopolitics-theories-concepts-schools-and-debates>

Brzezinski gave these ideas in 1997 before 16 years ago to launched BRI and CPEC, thus it can be expected that after BRI and CPEC announcement how much the US has a consciousness about it. The CPEC is economic cooperation between Pakistan and China, but India, the US, and its Western allies see it as a strategic plan to counter the US and India in the Indian Oceans [6]. The US naval bases in the Middle East, South China Sea, and the Indian Ocean reflected Spykman's Rimland Theory to control the world through rule in the Rim-land, and Heartland. According to these theories, the CPEC has a significant project to link with Heartland to Rim-land. In the Mackinder map, which has been drowned before one century mentioned China's western region in Heartland as such Spykman's theory, the Pakistan southern coastal line was declared in Rim-land. Now the world policies mostly diverted from strategic to economic, however, the US still considered cold war techniques and her annual budget's huge amount of spending on the naval bases around the world, especially the South China Sea and the Middle East. However, the global map was changed last decade, and a new era was starting with different strategic and mostly economic cooperation, where many states strategically hostility with each other, but the new economic dimensions compelled them to economic cooperation. Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) have the best example of new economic cooperation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century [7]. However, it can't possible to ignore the strategic and, geopolitics concepts because contemporary international politics has full of different conflicts.

### **3 China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)**

The geographical location of a country has a significant role in international politics. Geopolitically, Pakistan has a key geographical position in Asia, where the Asian regions are connecting. China is the second-largest economic power in the world, which develop an economic plan with Pakistan entitled CPEC, to take advantage of the geopolitical location of Pakistan. According to the plan of CPEC through the infrastructure, and energy projects both states will permanently connect each other.



**Figure 2: Major projects of CPEC**

The Sino-Pakistan has signed 51 MOUs under the title of CPEC on 20<sup>th</sup> April 2015 in Islamabad. Initially, the total worth of CPEC is \$46 billion, which was divided into different sectors [8]. This is the first time a huge foreign investment in Pakistan and in the current scenario a \$16 billion more investment were added to the project. Now its current worth is \$62 billion, and the worth of the project will increase [9]. The CPEC is providing a new dimension of the relationship among the two countries and The Project has been divided into three phases. Phase-I, Early Harvest Projects will be completed in 2020, and Phase-II and Phase-III will be completed by 2025, and 2030 respectively [10],[11]. To enable the timely implementation of all projects, a Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC) has been established to exchange their views and planning. On 5<sup>th</sup> November 2019 it 09 sessions were completed [12].

## 4 The Geopolitical Position of GB for CPEC

The Geography of a country is directly or indirectly affected the state's culture, trade, economy, defense, and living slandered. GB has a unique status by her geographical features, and, according to history, the geopolitics of GB has been highlighted for four reasons. The first was known by the Silk Route as the vast favorable conditions for travel. The trade caravans preferred to travel via GB between China, Central Asia, and Northern-Subcontinent [13]. The new Silk Route Project, (CPEC) is starting from Kashgar China to Hasanabdal Pakistan and connected with Gwadar Port via three different routes of the project. The GB has the gateway for CPEC in Pakistan, and China can reach the Middle East, Africa, and Europe through this gateway [14]. The CPEC is expected to further strengthen trade and economic cooperation between Pakistan and China [15]. In the history of Sino-Pak relations, CPEC is a huge economic project among them. The CPEC has consisted of various projects such as Gwadar Port, road and railway infrastructure, energy generation, gas pipeline, and fiber optic projects. It plays a vital role for both countries; in this regard, it may bless the ailing economy of Pakistan, while China will directly access the Middle East and other world economic powers. Hence it provides an opportunity for China to become the world power, particularly, in economic terms [16]. Pakistan can easily access to sell her products in the international market via the CPEC. The economic corridor has also many benefits for Pakistan such



as create employment, foreign investments, and trade activities along with the economic corridor. China will avail a short and safe route to reach the Persian Gulf as compare to the Sea route and the distance reduces 12000 km. It's the shortest, cheapest, and safest route for China's energy pipeline and other transportations instead of Malacca Strait conflicts [17]. China and Pakistan could much strengthen their economy by the completion of CPEC [16]. Moreover, the marvelous geopolitical location of the Gwadar Port will play a significant role in regional development [18]. CPEC is not only beneficial for Pakistan and China; it's also a big opportunity for South and Central Asia. It will be a game-changer project regarding its vital importance for the whole region, where East, South, and Central Asia connect. Central Asian land-locks countries can access to open sea via the shortest route and export their mineral and oil resources via the port of Gwadar.

India claimed GB is her integral part as the previous part of Jammu and Kashmir State. India raised her voice on different occasions on many international forums about the Pak-China border treaty, KKH, and now on the CPEC. The GB is a strategic region for Pakistan to connect with her long-lasting friend China, and Central Asia. Pak-China relation has a symbolic icon for the milieu of the international relations. There have some slogans that are famous for both relations "*Pak-China friendship higher than the mountain, deeper than oceans, stronger than iron*" and new addition after the CPEC agreement *sweeter than honey*. The geopolitics of GB plays a vital role in Sino-Pak relations. Such as, GB is the connecting point between the Sino-Pak, and both made the border treaty in 1963 for settlement borders dispute with peacefully and mutual understanding. India raised its voice against the agreement that Pakistan hasn't the authority to decide on the disputed territory. But India wasn't prosperous as both countries mentioned in article 06 of the border agreement that, when the GB issue will resolve, then the GB representatives have the right to accepts or renegotiates with China [19]. After the CPEC agreement, the importance of GB has been more highlighted as before, and it has a key project, which connects the Heartland with Rim-land. From a historical perspective, Britain mentioned GB as an important region as the first battlefield against USSR in the Great Game and taken control for 60 years leased by Maharaja Kashmir in 1935 [20]. In this regard, GB has an essential figure in regional geopolitics. Thus India again raised objections on CPEC passes via GB and made a special wing of RAW to sabotage the CPEC in Pakistan.

## **5 Current Political Status of GILGIT-BALTISTAN**

Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) is an administrative province of Pakistan however it is not a constitutional part of Pakistan. With concerning CPEC, the largest permanent fear in the future will be GB because the project (CPEC) starts in Pakistan from GB [21]. The GB local government accessioned Pakistan on 16<sup>th</sup> November 1947, but insincere Pakistani bureaucracy has didn't included it with Azad Kashmir and neither in its federation. Pakistan should bring GB into its constitutional and legal circles, but the Pakistani bureaucracy is disingenuous and also fears to Indian reaction to takes any solid decision [22]. The ruff behavior of Pakistani bureaucracy is more irritating against them, especially after July 2014 when Pakistan central government-imposed taxes

and withdrawal some subsidies, consequently a new organization entitled "Awami Action Comity"(AAC) has been established. Around 20 different religious, political, and nationalist parties have participated unanimously in the Awami Action Comity" (AAC). The main slogan of the AAC has *"No Taxations without Representation."* After a strong protest against the new *taxations*, the government of Pakistan has withdrawn her decisions [23]. This movement caught stronger when the former PM of Pakistan Shahid Khaqan Abbasi visited Gilgit on 27<sup>th</sup> May 2018 to announce the new Parliament Act of 2018 for the constitutional status of GB. It's the first time in the history of Pakistan that the GB peoples strongly condemn the PM visit to Pakistan, and raised the slogan 'we strongly condemn the Pakistani Parliament Order, and called Viceroy of Pakistan, we want fully constitutional rights. Eleven members of the GB Legislative Assembly out of thirty-three members also tear the copies of the Parliament Act of 2018 and walk out during the PM speech [24]. The situation was more worsen after the Supreme Court's seven-judge bench decision on 17<sup>th</sup> January 2019 regarding a petition from GB Bar Council. The GB Bar Council challenging the GB order of 2018, but the Supreme Court rejected and made a reluctant decision [25]. The locals have reservations against Islamabad that CPEC will be passing through GB but the Islamabad government didn't mention any major project, which could be beneficial for local peoples. The AAC has also submitted a charter of demand to Sino-Pak governments about their reservations and demanded mention GB as the third party in CPEC. It will be supportive for CPEC internally and externally; on the internal front, the GB people reservations would be fulfilled. On the external front, it will be helpful against the Indian and US objections about CPEC that Pakistan hasn't the authority to decide about disputed region planning with other states [26]. The Speaker of GB Assembly Mr. Fida Muhammad Nashad Said that: *"If we demand the rights of GB, then the Government of Pakistan puts lame excuses; if we give the rights to GB, it will affect the Kashmir Issue at the International level. But why Kashmir Issue wasn't affected in 1963 by the Border Agreement with China. Pakistan can take legal measures for GB still Kashmir Issue salvation the same as the Border Treaty with China."* [27].

The member of Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly (GBLA) Dr. Rizwan Ali said; the current situation has different from the past, and the Government of Pakistan claimed we can't decide any action for GB until the Kashmir Issue resolved. The GB case is different where we took independent ourselves, and accession with Pakistan for the sake of Islam, while we had other options to accession. We demand Province legally and constitutionally, but Pakistan denied it according to the UN Resolution however, India did it on 5<sup>th</sup> August 2019. Now Pakistan solved the issue through the UN or declares GB as its Fifth Province until Kashmir Issue will solve. If the Government of Pakistan doesn't take a concrete decision then there are many chances the area will be a battlefield between Indo-Pak, and in this situation, all neighboring regions will not be saved from destruction [28]. After many protests from the GB Assembly members, the Federal Government was just promised to established a special economic zone in Gilgit and mentioned on the government website two energy projects (180 MW) as a probable energy project means not confirmed yet. Now mostly youth

have been disappointed by Islamabad authorities and demand full constitutional rights under the UN articles, while some extreme nationalist parties are spreading independent ideologies. If Pakistan more delayed the GB constitutional issue and neglected GB in the CPEC projects, it may be very worse consequences for Pakistan, just like Bangladesh in 1971.

## **6 Indian Concerns of CPEC**

India is the largest country in South Asia by population and economy rather than the other countries. India has many border disputes with China and Pakistan since 1947. India has fought four wars with Pakistan, and one war with China that is the reason India still considered these two countries as the permanent enemies [13]. Therefore, the Indian government has expressed some reservations about the route of CPEC, and they want to sabotage the project. In this regard, the New Delhi administration took the following steps to sabotage this project. Sino-India has geopolitical controversies since 1962, while India wants to act as a hegemonic power in the region particularly, in the Indian Ocean with the strategic and economic support of the US. The Indo-US nexus and other regional states' collaborations with the US are big challenges for China's trade route in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. The CPEC was the alternative cheapest and safest route for China to avoid all these conflicts, to connect with the Middle East via Pakistan [29].

The BRI is an economical and mutual integration plan for the region and the rest of the world. The Chinese government invites India to join this initiative for the mutual interest and bright future of the global through economic relations without interfering with each other's conflicts, however, India refused to be part of CPEC, while agrees on the project BCIM-EC. India is trying to get help from the US and EU to wrongly portray the GB disputed issue through the diplomatic way, as well as used terrorists to create insurgency in Pakistan. On behalf of all these concerns, India fully supports many religious and ethnic terrorist groups to spread insurgency in Pakistan and used Afghan land for these conspiracies [30]. In this regard, Pakistani intelligence agencies captured an agent of Indian intelligence agency RAW Mr. Kulbhushan Sudhir Jadhav from Baluchistan on 3 March 2016. The Indian PM Narendra Modi also threatens Pakistan about GB, and Baluchistan during his 70 national anniversary speech in 2016 [31]. After an investigation to Kulbushan Jadhav, another network of five spies was captured from Indian High Communication Islamabad, where they were working as diplomats [32].

## **7 US Anxiety Regarding CPEC**

Asia has unique features for the global by her resources as well as population size, and the US has keen interests regarding economic and strategic point of view in Asia. America sees China's fast-growing economy as a big threat to its monopoly in the world. The CPEC will be a good opportunity for China to boost up its economy very rapidly as compared to the past [33]. The US signed many treaties with its allies during the era of President Obama to reshaping their strategic, economic, and military relationships to counter China in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Thus the US thinks that CPEC is directly affected and failed her strategy "pivot to Asia" in the region [34]. In October 2017, US defense secretary James Mattis also gave his statement against

CPEC due to cross the disputed land (Gilgit-Baltistan) between India and Pakistan. He gave his statement in front of the "Senate Armed Services Committee," which was the first American highly official statement against CPEC [35]. The US has also worried about Chinese investment in different hydro projects, including Diemer-Bhasha Dam. The US wants to counter China in the region, as agreed for a loan with the World Bank (WB) and Asian Development Bank (ADP) for the construction of the Diemer-Bhasha Dam in 2012. India objected to Diemer-Bhasha Dam due to the disputed status of GB, and after Indian objection, the US and other international financial institutions refused funding [36]. In the past America has put enough pressure on Pakistan to avoid hand over Gwadar Port to China, as a result, which kept despite completion of Gwadar Port in 2006 remains idle until 2014. In all these concerns, the US aggression ever can be exposing in near future [37].

## 8 Conclusion

The geographical locations have been could powerful effects on the nations or states' role in world politics, particularly in geopolitics. In world history, many nations fought with other nations for the struggle of valuable geographical areas. The geopolitics of GB has a pivot role in the region as its location. It has a junction point between the Asian regions where Central Asia (Afghanistan and Tajikistan), South Asia (Pakistan, and India), and Southeast Asia (China) are connected. Its geopolitical position is significant for China-Pakistan relations as both haven't other border links without GB. Both countries make a border agreement in March 1963, India, and the US objected that Pakistan wasn't the authority to agree with China as GB hasn't her constitutional part. The geopolitical significance of GB has been highlighted in international media when Sino-Pak signed the CPEC agreement. The CPEC is a multidimensional project to link China with Pakistan through infrastructure (road and railway lines), oil and gas pipelines, and cross-border fiber optics. The CPEC has many new dimensions for the long-lasting friendship of Sino-Pak, and it will change the economic status of both states, which will, directly and indirectly, affects international politics.

The major issue which has the actual barrier on the way of CPEC is the disputed status of GB. The GB constitutional position has a serious issue on domestic and regional fronts. On the domestic front, the peoples of GB have strongly demanded to resolve the constitutional status. The people demand to make GB a constitutional province of Pakistan. China and Pakistan can't complete the economic corridor without the participation of GB. If the people of GB make any reaction against CPEC, then the issue will raise at the international level. During research interviews from GB Assembly members, local leaders, and youth representatives, the opinions were almost the same that the GB people gave respect to China and welcomed to CPEC. However, the GB is facing the issues of constitutional rights. Moreover, the Federation of Pakistan has also ignored this valuable region in the development projects CPEC. The new coalition of all parties representatives "Awami Action Committee (AAC)" has submitted their demand to the Sino-Pak governments to include GB as the third party on CPEC. From the committee's point of view, it will be a good sign for both stakeholders domestically and internationally. Internationally India raises



objections with the help of the US that the GB is a disputed territory, and Sino-Pak hasn't the right to make any joint venture until resolving the Kashmir issue. If the Sino-Pak governments agreed and included GB as the third party, then all international conspiracies will be null and void due to the representation of GB, according to the resolutions of the UN. However, the GB issue is hidden numerous hurdles for CPEC, which could be creating many issues in the future from the US, EU, and India. As the current situation without solving the constitutional issue of GB, it will be difficult for Pakistan to take benefits of the geopolitical position of the CPEC in near future.

## 9 Availability of Data and Material

Data can be made available by contacting the corresponding author.

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