



Research Paper

Pakistan Occupied Jammu and Kashmir: A Geo-Strategic Pivot in South Asia

Vivek Sumberia

Research Scholar, Centre for Kashmir Studies, Central University of Himachal Pradesh

Abstract

Pakistan Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (PoJK) forms an integral part of India. Presently under illegal occupation of Pakistan, this region forms a geo-strategic pivot in South-Asia. PoJK is located at the quadrangle sharing boundaries with four countries, India, Pakistan, China, and Afghanistan. PoJK forms the connecting link between China and Pakistan, two arch rivals of India in the region. The region has been used by Pakistan as a launch pad to infiltrate terrorists into India. It also acts as training ground for terrorists posing a huge security threat for India. The region is rich in natural resources like minerals and water resources. Historically the region has been a transit point in trade routes extending from India to rest of Asia, as well as a buffer zone between major powers and a military outpost. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) pass through the region violating India's sovereignty. It also provides China alternate access to Indian ocean through Gwadar port thus helping China to circumnavigate India. The high mountain peaks in the region act as military watch towers providing strategic advantage to whoever has control over them as observed during Kargil conflict in 1999. This paper explores the geostrategic significance of PoJK which is currently under the illegal occupation of Pakistan.

Keywords: Pakistan Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (PoJK), Strategic, CPEC, Geo-Political.

I. Introduction

The modern history of the state of Jammu and Kashmir can be traced back to Treaty of Amritsar on 16th march, 1846. According to Treaty of Amritsar, the "hilly or mountainous country with its dependencies situated eastward of river Indus and westward of river Ravee" was ceded to Maharaja Gulab Singh thus laying foundation of Dogra dynasty and formation of state of Jammu and Kashmir in its modern form. Till 1947, it was ruled as a single administrative unit. The partition of India in 1947 led to formation of Pakistan. In the chaos of partition, Pakistan illegally occupied some parts of state of Jammu and Kashmir. This illegally occupied part of Jammu and Kashmir came to be known as Pakistan occupied Jammu and Kashmir (PoJK). The line dividing Jammu and Kashmir into two came into being on 1st january, 1949. It was named as Line of Control (LoC) under Shimla Agreement 1972 and became de facto border between India and Pakistan in the region. Pakistan divided the occupied territory into two sub-units Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit- Baltistan (previously referred to as Northern areas). The Shaksgam valley also known as Trans-Karakoram tract also form part of Jammu and Kashmir. It was ceded to China by Pakistan under Sino-Pakistan border agreement in 1963. (Mir, 2014)

The total area of the State of Jammu and Kashmir is 2,22,236 sq. km. out of which 1,01,437 sq. km. is under India's administrative control. Pakistan occupies an area of 78,114 sq. km. and China controls an area of 42,685 sq. km. including 5,180 sq. km. of Shaksgam valley, illegally ceded to China by Pakistan.

PoJK has been part of Indian civilisation since antiquity. PoJK was an important centre of Uttarpatha and ancient silk road trade route connecting Indian subcontinent with Central Asia and beyond. Key mountain passes like Burzil pass and Khunjerab pass acted as conduit of trade, culture and imperial expansion. It became an important centre of inter-civilisational connectivity. The strategic significance of the region has continued from Kushan period to Sultanate and Mughal period to modern day India-Pakistan dynamics. Gilgit- Baltistan since ancient times acted as a check post to monitor trade and keep an eye on the invasions originating from the north-west frontier. Sharda peeth, one of the most important centres of learning in ancient India was located in Neelum valley in modern day PoJK. Sharda script along with Sanskrit flourished here and scholars from far off places came here to learn Indian civilisation. It was not a remote territory as it is imagined today, it was the heart of Indic thought, civilisation and cultural heritage. Sharda Ashtami is still celebrated in Jammu and Kashmir especially

among Kashmiri pandits as a testament of civilisational impact of Sharda peeth on civilisational heritage of Kashmir. (Sharma, 2024)

The region holds great geopolitical significance by virtue of its geographical location. Historically the region has acted as the north-west frontier of the Indian subcontinent. The Britishers understanding the geostrategic significance of the region kept it under their control and took lease of Gilgit from Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir. The region forms the link between China and Pakistan, geographically connecting the two countries and forming a strategic arch around India in the north-west frontier. China built Karakoram highway through the region connecting China and Pakistan and aims to complete the ambitious China Pakistan economic corridor (CPEC), a flagship programme under belt and road initiative (BRI). Once completed it will ensure China alternate access to Indian ocean effectively ending its 'Malacca dilemma'. It not only violates India's sovereignty but also enables China to establish long term strategic foothold in the region in the name of infrastructure development. (Kalis & Dar, 2013; Raj, 2020)

India's position on PoJK has been lacklustre since 1947. The Pakistani part of Jammu and Kashmir has been absent from academic debates. There has been 'intellectual silence' reflected in striking absence of literature on the region and the issues relating to it. The international community has also been silent on the issue by selectively focussing on the Kashmir valley and ignoring the rest of the region. It has turned deaf ears towards the suffering of the people on the other side of the Line of Control. A large part of politically aware population has been ignorant about PoJK. The constant neglect of the region has made it a challenging task to appropriately situate it in the existing strategic discourse and policy making regarding Jammu and Kashmir. (Behera, 2007)

Since independence India has been predominantly preoccupied with Jammu and Kashmir leading to neglect of PoJK. India has failed to publicise the human rights violation occurring in PoJK and existing political and social realities of the region. Pakistan has been more successful in developing the narrative against India at the international stage and propagandize against India on Kashmir issue. The parliament of India on 22nd February, 1994 passed a unanimous resolution declaring entire state of Jammu and Kashmir as integral part of India and asking Pakistan to vacate the areas illegally occupied by it. It was a concrete step towards reclaiming the illegally occupied territories by India. (Behera, 2007; Singh, 2017)

Geopolitical Significance of PoJK

The region is located at the confluence of central Asia, south Asia and China and borders Wakhan corridor of Afghanistan to its northwest, Xinjiang province and a small part of Tibet autonomous region of China towards the east and Pakistan towards its west and south-west direction. Most of PoJK has rugged mountainous terrain with high mountain peaks offering impenetrable defence. Gilgit- Baltistan has been the northern frontier of India since ages. PoJK shares border with Afghanistan, acting as direct link with Afghanistan as well as central Asia. According to 'Heartland Theory' of Mackinder, the 'inner crescent' will always remain a zone of conflict because of its geographical location. PoJK lies in this 'inner crescent'. In this 'inner crescent', most of the countries are Islamic. Hence Pakistan emphasizes on internationalising the Kashmir issue and most of these countries support Pakistan on Kashmir issue. Spykman calls this 'inner crescent' as 'Rimland'. This rimland operates in both continental and maritime modes. For USA the greatest challenge to its hegemony would be consolidation of rimland states or alliance of heartland and rimland states. Hence USA wants the conflict in the region to continue. It adopted dual policy on Kashmir, strengthening India-US ties and providing Pakistan arms and funding. (Kalis & Dar, 2013; Raj, 2020)

Samuel P. Huntington in his book 'clash of civilisations' argue that future wars will be fought along civilisational lines and civilisational fault lines will be the centre of conflict. According to this theory Kashmir is the civilisational fault line between the Islamic and Hindu civilisation. He argues that next global war will be fought between civilisations and most probably Muslim civilisation on one side and non-Muslims on the other side. The Kashmir issue can become deadlier if other Muslims nations come to support Pakistan on Kashmir issue based on civilisational affinity. He also argues that Islam has bloody borders and most of the borders of Islamic civilisation are prone to conflict. Kashmir also forms a part of eastern border of Islamic civilisation, hence prone to conflict.

PoJK is strategically located at the trijunction of India, Pakistan and China, three nuclear powers with very complex bilateral relationships. The mountains of PoJK act as watch towers to keep watch on troop movements and strategic missile deployment. Pakistani intrusion in Kargil in 1999 through PoJK highlight the strategic significance of the region and India's vulnerability in the region. China's meteoric rise and increasing assertiveness has made this region even more significant strategically and all the major power are directly or indirectly involved in the region. China has been involved in the region for a long time. The region is the only land link between China and Pakistan and Pakistan is central to China's regional connectivity network. China has made huge investments in the infrastructure development projects in the region. China is funding Diamer-Bhasha project, Kohala power project and Neelum-Jhelum hydroelectric project and many other hydroelectric projects in the region. China has also been developing infrastructure in the region to enhance its connectivity with energy

rich Persian Gulf region by building a dense network of roads and rails in the region. China can use the region as a lynchpin to form a nexus with Pakistan, West Asia and Afghanistan. (Raj, 2020; Singh, 2013)

China's increased involvement in the region has alarmed USA and it is also getting involved in the region. Other major powers like Britain, France, Russia, as well as Islamic countries are also involved in the region. This once politically restive region is turning into a political hotbed where major powers are rivalling each other to secure their geopolitical interests. The increased involvement of external players has mixed implications for India. India is against the internationalisation of Kashmir issue but involvement of external powers in the region can help to expose Pakistan and its human rights violations which it has been carrying on in the region since 1947. India needs to adopt proactive approach regarding the region and adopt a sound policy on PoJK. (Singh, 2013; Singh, 2017)

The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

The CPEC is a 2700 kilometres multimodal project which once completed will provide China direct access to Arabian sea via Gwadar port. This \$45 billion will include roads, highways, railways as well as energy projects connecting Kashgar in China to Gwadar in Pakistan. China poses this project as connectivity project enhancing regional connectivity and for Pakistan the project is aimed at fulfilling the huge energy deficit the country is facing but it has deep strategic objectives. Gwadar port is located close to strait of Hormuz in Persian Gulf and China aims to attain strategic depth in the region through it. It can also be seen as balance of power strategy against India. It has been a continuous process since 1963. It started with the transfer of Shaksgam valley (trans- Karakoram tract) to China by Pakistan under Sino-Pakistan Border Agreement. Then China built Karakoram highway to establish connectivity. The Karakoram highway is more than just an economic highway to increase trade volume and connectivity. Its politico-strategic significance outweighs its economic significance. CPEC is the third phase of establishing Chinese strategic presence in PoJK. (Singh, 2013; Singh, 2017)

CPEC is already facing various challenges in the region. The corridor passes through conflict prone zones of Xinjiang, Gilgit- Baltistan and Baluchistan hence faces huge security concern. Secondly, there has been funding issues with the projects. Many projects are facing funding crunches and China is withholding funds. Thirdly, domestic political situation in Pakistan also creates certain challenges for the projects. The projects are facing opposition from local population. The economic opportunities do not seem to be optimistic for the local people. For most of the overseas projects China hires its own workers, engineers and companies, thus no benefit to local population. This has been the case with the Karakoram highway which has seen little trade benefit for the locals. Recently there have been attacks on Chinese workers working in PoJK and to ensure their protection China is increasing its security presence in the region. This leads to militarisation of already militarised region. Pakistan is also trying to change the demography of the region. This Shia dominated region is being infiltrated by people of other ethnicities. This large-scale infrastructure development in the region has severe repercussions for the region. It is already ecologically fragile region vulnerable to earthquakes, landslides, floods and glacial outbursts. (Singh, 2013)

PoJK and China: Strategic Engagement of China in PoJK

The territories of PoJK are under illegal occupation of Pakistan but China also has strategic interests in the region. The region forms connecting land link between China and Pakistan which China can leverage to encircle India in the region. India is the biggest challenge to China in the region. India is the only country in the region to have the potential and capacity to challenge China. Hence China aims to contain India in the region. Besides India is the ideal swing state for other major powers like USA to contain and limit China. China and India share the same strategic space in south Asia and each tries to establish its dominance wherever possible. In this intense geopolitical competition, PoJK becomes a very effective tool in the hands of China to contain India and to interfere in its domestic politics. China wants India to remain engaged with Pakistan and divert most of its energy and resources dealing with Pakistan so that it is left with little resources and energy to divert towards China. So, China wants Kashmir issue to remain alive and active. Chinese involvement in PoJK started with the construction of Karakoram highway which established direct road link between China and Pakistan and CPEC is aimed at greater integration of Pakistan with China PoJK is likely to become the geo-strategic chessboard between India, China and Pakistan. (Singh, 2013; Singh, 2017)

Also, the region of PoJK lies at the confluence of South Asia, Central Asia and China. The region can act as a gateway for China to Afghanistan, West Asia as well as Central Asia. The region provides China shortest route to energy rich west Asia to meet its ever-increasing energy requirements. Also, West Asia is the hotbed of global politics and China wants to ensure its presence in the region to ascertain its status of a global power. Most importantly the region is gateway for China to reach Arabian sea and to develop an alternate route which will effectively solve its Malacca dilemma. Gwadar port will help China to monitor sea line of communications originating in the Persian Gulf. Pakistan is a pawn in Chinese hand to contain India and a platform for power projection for China. (Singh, 2013; Raj, 2020)

Natural resources Wealth of PoJK

Gilgit- Baltistan is rich in natural resources like gold, uranium, copper, lead and gemstones. The region is rich in metallic minerals like arsenic, copper, lead, zinc, iron, nickel and cobalt as well as non-metallic minerals like limestone, granite, slate and quartzite. The region has also reserves of coal and petroleum. There are also traces of radioactive minerals like uranium and thorium. The region also has some reserves of rare earth minerals. It has great potential for hydropower generation. Many huge rivers flow through the region having high slope gradient. These rivers flow from high mountains into plains and thus are ideal for hydroelectricity generation. The region is home to a large number of glaciers and high-altitude fresh water lakes thus a huge reserve of freshwater. The region also has a rich reserve of geothermal energy sources. (Malkani, 2020)

Pakistan is heavily dependent upon indus river system for meeting its water needs causing huge stress on indus basin aquifers. The situation is further aggravated by climate change. With increasing temperature, changing rainfall patterns and melting glaciers Pakistan is at huge risk of climatic calamities like floods e.g. floods in 2022 led to loss of more than 1700 lives and billions of dollars of infrastructure loss. (Mahla, 2026)

Status of PoJK since 1947

In October 1947, Pakistan army under the guise of tribals carried out massacres in PoJK and thousands of innocent citizens were mercilessly killed. It was a planned military operation codenamed ‘Operation Gulmarg’ directed by Major General Akbar Khan, a serving officer of Pakistan army. They attacked Bhimber, Mirpur, Kotli, Muzaffarabad, Deva Batala, Poonch and the Gilgit-Baltistan belt. The raiding army killed, abducted and looted thousands of Hindus and Sikhs in the occupied districts. The Mirpur Massacre in November 1947 in which thousands were killed serves as a testimony of the atrocities carried out during that period. Pakistan has been violating the human rights of the people of PoJK for seven decades. They are denied basic dignity, civic amenities are dismal, political representation is absent and people are being harassed and exploited. Sectarian violence has been a regular phenomenon in the region. Pakistan army has been killing innocent civilians and thousands remain disappeared and untraceable. Shias who were the original inhabitants are in minority now; the demographic shift is intended to benefit Pakistan a Sunni-majority state. Most of the inhabitants have migrated to other countries, since employment and job opportunities are minimal. Reports such as the Human Rights Violation in Azad Kashmir and Baroness Emma Nicholson’s Kashmir Report for the EU depict a distressing picture of the state of human rights in POK. (Lambah, 2016; Mir, 2014)

Pakistan divided the occupied territory into two administrative units; Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan. The Mirpur- Muzaffarabad belt is known as ‘Azad Kashmir’ by Pakistan. It is a self-governing entity with a president, prime minister and a legislative assembly but all in name, there is no autonomy. The real authority is retained by Islamabad. On 28 April 1949, Karachi agreement was signed between Pakistan government and government of Azad Jammu and Kashmir under which the administration of Northern Areas (Gilgit-Baltistan) was conceded to Pakistan. The decision however was taken without the consent of people. The Government of Pakistan announced the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self Governance Order on 29 August 2009, which reversed the nomenclature of the Northern Areas to the original Gilgit-Baltistan However constitutionally it is not part of Pakistan. Under article 257 of the Pakistan constitution, “When the people of the State of Jammu and Kashmir decide to accede to Pakistan, the relationship between Pakistan and the State shall be determined in accordance with the wishes of the people of that State.” Hence legally and constitutionally it is not a part of Pakistan. Even the Sino-Pak Agreement of 1963 states in Article VI that “after the settlement of Kashmir by India and Pakistan, the sovereign authority will reopen negotiations with the People’s Republic of China...” Thus, both Pakistan and China admit that presently they do not exercise sovereignty over Gilgit- Baltistan till a final settlement is reached. (Lambah, 2016; Behera, 2007)

India’s Policy on PoJK since 1947

The issue of PoJK has not been emphasised upon much in political and strategic discourse of India. Immediately after it was illegally occupied by Pakistan India did pursue the case. India sought help of UN which proved to be strategic blunder. With the passage of time, the issue of PoJK got pushed into backfoot. The issue did not receive as much political and intellectual attention as it was required. The issue has been conspicuously absent from intellectual discourse for a very long period of time. (Behera, 2007; Singh, 2017)

The end of cold war brought about a paradigmatic shift in the geopolitical and geostrategic situation of the world. India also shifted its stance. On 22nd February, 1994 the parliament passed a unanimous resolution declaring Jammu and Kashmir including PoJK as integral part of India and asked Pakistan to vacate the territories illegally occupied by it. The issue of PoJK did receive some attention but still not enough. The change of government in 2014 brought about a strategic shift in India’s position on PoJK. The government firmly declared PoJK to be an integral part of India. India resolved to take back its occupied territories at the appropriate time. (Singh, 2017; Mir, 2014)

Kashmir and United Nations

On 1st January, 1948 India approached United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and lodged complaint against Pakistan under article 34 and 35 of the UN charter which provides, “any member can bring any situation whose continuance is likely to endanger the maintenance of international peace and security”. On January 20, 1948 UNSC formed three member UN Commission on India and Pakistan (UNCIP) to resolve the conflict. The commission called for immediate ceasefire between India and Pakistan and resolved that after complete withdrawal of armies of India and Pakistan from Kashmir, plebiscite will be carried on in Kashmir to decide its destiny under UN supervision. Pakistan refused to withdraw its army. Ceasefire came into force on 1st January, 1949. Further resolutions were passed by UNSC in 1949, 1950 and 1951 but no solution could be reached. (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, n.d.; Mir, 2014)

Security Concerns for India

Due to its geographical location the region of PoJK is very important for India’s security. The region and its towering mountains act as military watch towers to keep a watch on troops movements and to gain strategic high ground in a situation of conflict. Since the region is not under India’s administrative control right now it creates certain challenges for India. As has been observed during various conflicts against India, Pakistan has taken advantage of strategic location of these territories against India. The China-Pakistan alliance and growing presence of Chinese military in the region further complicate the security situation for India. It not only violates India’s sovereignty but also compromises India’s security. Both are hostile neighbours for India and any strategic or military convergence between the two create serious security challenge for India. (Kalis & Dar, 2013; Raj, 2020)

PoJK has been the breeding and training ground for terrorists in Pakistan. Many terrorist organisations based in Pakistan have established their headquarters and training camps in PoJK. This was observed during ‘operation Sindoor’ when India carried out strikes on terrorist camps in Pakistan. These were Markaz Ahle Hadith, Barnala, Markaz Abbas, Kotli, Maskar Raheel Shahid, Kotli, Shawai Nalla Camp, Muzaffarabad, Syedna Bilal Camp, Muzaffarabad. PoJK has also been used as a launch pad to infiltrate terrorists into India by Pakistan. Due to religious and cultural affinity across the Line of Control it becomes very difficult to trace these infiltrations. Besides rivers, forests and harsh terrain makes it difficult to keep an eye on these border infiltrations. (Ramachandran, 2025)

Way Forward

India needs to consistently rake up the issue of PoJK to counter Pakistan’s narrative on Kashmir issue. India needs to adopt a proactive approach towards Kashmir to balance false narrative on Kashmir and to raise awareness about the issue. India needs to take an active stand on PoJK issue and convey its concerns to both Pakistan and China bilaterally as well as trilaterally. India needs to raise domestic awareness about PoJK its history, political challenges and issues, political disenfranchisement, human rights violations and demographic changes happening in the region. The issue needs to be brought forth in strategic discussions and policy formulations. India must expose all the heinous and barbarous atrocities Pakistan and Pakistani army have inflicted upon the residents of PoJK and expose Pakistan on international stage. India needs to expose how Pakistan treats its minorities Balochs, Pashtuns, Sindhis, Muhajirs and the people of PoJK. While dealing with PoJK issue China is as important player as Pakistan. It has been occupying 5000 km² of India’s territory and has been involved with Pakistan in the region. (Singh, 2017; Behera, 2007)

II. Conclusion

The instrument of accession signed by Maharaja Hari Singh clearly mentioned the integration of whole of Jammu and Kashmir with India. Accordingly, under Article 1 of the constitution, PoJK is an integral part of India and reclaiming it is an issue of integration. The parliamentary resolution of 1994 further made this position clear. The abrogation of Article 370 in 2019 was a major step in the right direction. PoJK has not just been a civilisational focal point but also a very important geostrategic buffer, military outpost and trade transit point. PoJK remains significant in the backdrop of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and emerging Himalayan geopolitics. Its historical legacy has become even more important in the current geopolitical environment in the region. The region needs to be seen through strategic lens. It represents India’s security architecture since ancient times, cultural epicentre with linkages to ancient silk road trade route and current geostrategic repositioning with growing China-Pakistan convergence. The residents of PoJK are constitutionally citizens of India and they have been subjected to coercion, abuse, their human rights being repeatedly violated and are being denied basic human dignity. It becomes India’s constitutional and moral duty to raise their concern at the international forum and expose Pakistan’s tyranny and misrule for the past seven decades. Pakistan has propagandized the Kashmir issue and has been relatively successful in its agenda. India needs to counter that false agenda and take control of the narrative on Kashmir. For India reclaiming this territory is not

only aimed at correcting a historical wrongdoing but is integral part of military robustness, water security, trade corridors and reclaiming its place in changing Asian geopolitical order.

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