

Back in Play at the Frontiers of Hegemony: Gilgit-Baltistan in Comparative Historical Perspective

Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), a semi-autonomous region attached to the Kashmir issue, has been a highly contested space within the context of global power dynamics and hegemonic projects for centuries. Our analysis reconstructs the historical trajectories of the region as one marked by three distinct time periods. During the 19th century, GB was situated between British interests in South Asia and the potential challenges of primarily Russian but also Chinese influence. Ultimately, this frontier was explicitly closed and became a buffer zone to protect British hegemony and interests that lasted until 1947. During the second half of the 20th century, following the demise of British Empire, the region returned to being a contested space between regional powers but whose outcome was delegated to US oversight through nascent institutions such as the UN.

Using a framework outlined by Arrighi (1994) and Arrighi and Silver (2001), we argue these trajectories were shaped by different modes of accumulation which move back and forth in world historic context in a “pendulum-like movement” between extensive and intensive systems in the geographic expansion or consolidation of systemic cycles of accumulation. Thus, the 19th century saw GB at the frontier of the British systemic cycle which achieved the geographical expansion of the world-economy. In contrast, the latter part of the 20th century marked a successful demonstration of US neoliberalism where, the question of Kashmir, and the larger question of the entire region, including GB, was left ambiguous and largely sidelined to the internalized consolidation of the world-economy by the US.

Today, we argue that the current interregnum and the emergence of a ‘post-neoliberal’ order has returned GB to the frontiers of hegemony and contested space, precisely because the crisis of US hegemony and the potential extension of a new world-economic order has shifted the pendulum back to an extensive regime of accumulation and a development of a new silk road. In this context, GB has returned as one of the key frontiers of contested hegemonic space and a potential bell-weather between US interests and the ascendant possibilities of China and India.

Gilgit-Baltistan: Historically

Short History before 1840:

According to (Biddulph 2016) before 1840, the tribal unity of Gilgit remained shattered for frequently as the rulers from neighboring valleys such as Yasin (Suleman Shah and Gohar Aman), Punial (Azad Khan), and Nager (Tahir Shah) attacked and controlled Gilgit before the Sikh Empire's conquest in 1842. When Gohar Aman, the ruler of Yasin attacked Gilgit and killed the ruler Sikandar Khan in 1841, his brother requested the help of Kashmir state. (Sökefeld 2005), (Huttenback 1968) claimed Raja Ranjit Singh who extended his Sikh empire to Ladakh by 1834, attacked Gilgit and defeated Gohar Aman in a second attempt. Ranjit Singh installed Karim Khan as the new Ra (ruler) of Gilgit in September 1842. Chief of Yasin Raja Gohar Aman conquered Gilgit in 1848 and again in 1852 defeating the forces of Gulab Singh the new Dogra ruler of Kashmir. It was only possible for the Dogra rule in Kashmir to capture Gilgit when Gohar Aman died in 1860 leaving behind weak successors (Huttenback 1968).

Treaty of Amritsar 1846

After defeating Ranjit Singh, the British gave Kashmir to Gulab Singh and his dream of an independent Dogra empire came true in March 16, 1846 at the cost of 7.5 million rupees and diplomatically navigating in the Anglo Sikh war. The treaty was important for both British and Gulab Singh; the British established a buffer state between their empire and its potential adversaries, such as the Russian Empire, which was expanding in Central Asia while for Gulab Singh, the Treaty of Amritsar represented the fulfillment of his

ambition for an independent Dogra state. Hence the British laid the ground work of defending the plains of British India in the high mountains of Kashmir (Huttenback 1968). Article 1 of the treaty of Amritsar (Pakistan Horizon 2003)

“..... all the the hilly or mountainous country with the eastward of the Indus River and westward of the Ravi River including Chamba and excluding Lahore.”

Treaty of Amritsar only ceded territories east of river Indus River, this implies Gilgit that is situated on the northwest of Indus is not part of Kashmir. Federick Drew, a geologist who served Maharaja Ranbir Singh legitimized the control of Gilgit with the excuse of lack of knowledge about geography. He further legitimates the occupation saying Gilgit belongs to the conqueror (Drew 1980).

Expansion Beyond Gilgit

The Dogra expansion towards the north beyond Gilgit also favored the British to secure their lands in the plains therefore they also supported the Dogra rule over Gilgit and beyond until 1877 when the British saw poor administration and realized they should intervene in the internal affairs of Gilgit and pursue their interest with a British representative for effective administration therefore, the British Raj appointed Colonel John Biddulph as the first political agent in Gilgit in 1877 (Yasin 1984). This was the second violation of treaty of Amritsar for not interfering in the internal affairs but Gilgit not a formal part of Dogra rule was an exception. The second British political agent Algernon Durand posted in 1889 reshaped the British empire's relations in Gilgit and beyond and successfully placed it as a unique benevolent hegemonic structure between the oppressive foreign Dogra rule and cruel native Rajagi system. He discouraged corruption, favoritism in the administration and sent multiple hostages imprisoned in Gilgit back to Hunza and Nagar. He also organized an annual week long celebrations of British rule in Gilgit called “Jalsa” together Darbar (gathering) of notables and chiefs of the surrounding states (Durand 1999). As a compassionate administrator Durand used diplomacy to rule and after exhausting all the options of diplomacy sought to military might to guard the British interest in the mountains. When the Mir (ruler) of Hunza was considering an option to extend friendship with Russian forces, Durand defeated the forces of Hunza and Nagar at Nilt in 1891 and brought pro-British rulers to power.

The British adopted a policy of Pacification in contrast to the Kashmiri domination policy (E. F. Knight 2009). This policy made the British a wise, benevolent, and civilized ruler in Gilgit Agency compared to the Kashmiri. Once the British established Gilgit Agency, it limits the Dogra administration only to Gilgit Wazarat, which include areas in the subdistrict of Gilgit, Bunji and Astore. British indirectly controlled the rest of the regions in the agency, mainly the Hunza, Nagar and Yasin (Sökefeld 2005). The policy of pacification and indirect control is a testimony of British hegemony in the region. (Durand 1999) learnt from the Hunza-Nagar campaign and formed a military force called levies comprised of men from Hunza, Nagar and Puniyal in 1992 and transformed them to Gilgit Scouts in 1913 by recruiting additional men from remaining states of Yasin and Gupis. Thus, with this military might at hand, they allowed the Rajas of these states to rule independently, guaranteeing that they will cease any kind of relationship with Chinese and Russians. The British assert more power to control the entire Gilgit Agency by leasing the Gilgit subdistrict under Dogra control in 1935. Finally, the whole of Gilgit Agency became a colonial project in the mountains to defend the plains of British India. The Gilgit scouts now became regular troops with intense training from the British officers inculcating in them British military values. Furthermore, the material and nonmaterial benefits for joining the scouts were enormous; the scouts received monthly payment along with the honor for being part of the Imperial Service troops. It also allowed to further pacify the local population and accept British hegemony by rajas and local masses

(Chohan 1984). Similarly, (Dani 2001) adds the senior scouts used to enjoy immense respect within government, local people and the rulers (Rajas) of their state.

This unique multi multi-faceted hegemony enabled British to successfully defended the frontiers of British India till 1947, when it decided to divide India and leave. The freedom struggle from British was mainly an affair in the mainland India where Indian National Congress and Muslim League were engaged to win freedom. Congress wowed for a united India while Muslim league stood for a separate country for Muslims based on its two-nation theory. The British decided to leave Gilgit Agency and gave it back to Dogra rulers of Kashmir who opted to stay as an independent state among the two new countries.

Neutrality for a Muslim majority state with a Hindu ruler was a very hard to maintain in such a polarized political and religious environment. Soon uprising started within Jammu and Kashmir and seeing his state slipping rapidly, the Maharaja Hari Singh decided accession with India on October 27, 1947. The Muslim officers of Jammu & Kashmir rifles and senior members of Gilgit Scouts activated the course of action already planned in case the Maharaja ceded with India. They arrested the Dogra governor Ghansara Singh and the 6th Infantry battalion in Bunji got killed in the fierce battle, those left fled towards Baltistan or surrendered. On 1st November 1947, Gilgit became an independent state with a provisional government until 16th November 1947 when Muhammad Alam, the political representative from Pakistan landed in Gilgit. Major Brown the British commandant of scouts and his assistant Captain Mathieson sided with their fellow local scouts. Major Brown narrated the whole story of rebellion, formation of a provisional government after the successful military coup and the arrival of Pakistani representative in his memoir (Brown 2014). Major Brown noted that captain Mirza Hassan of the 6th Kashmir Infantry, head of the rebellion Muslim officers at Bunji and field marshal in the provisional government informed him in a meeting that the new Islamic state will be called “United States of Gilgit” and the intentions of not joining Pakistan and only but (Sökefeld 2005) claimed it to be the “Islamic Republic of Gilgit”.

Crisis and 20th Century Détente

(the relaxation of strained relations, especially political ones, through diplomacy)

1947 -1971

(Sökefeld 2005) deeply analyzed the situation after winning freedom in Gilgit and handing it over to Pakistan. He reveals the objectives of freedom for which the soldiers sworn to lay their lives not fulfilled as Gilgit could not become “de jure part of Pakistan”

“During the very first days after the arrival of Political Agent Mohammad Alam, it became obvious to the local leaders of the freedom struggle that their ideas of freedom did not match those of Mohammad Alam. He deprived them of all authority and competence.” (Pg 959)

Major Brown described the arrival of Muhammad Alam in the following words in his book.

“As we approached the bridge, it was evident that Gilgit had risen to the occasion and the Pakistan Representative was about to be accorded a royal welcome. The local band was playing the Welcome tune and as we swung into the Bazaar, under the triumphal arch, we were joined by the pipes and drums of the Scouts in full ceremonial dress. The streets were lined with cheering crowds, restrained with

difficulty from invading the route. ‘Pakistan Zindabad! Allah Akbar! Mohammed Alam Zindabad! Qaid-i-Azam Zindabad! Zindabad! Zindabad!’” (Pg 332)

Sardar Alam soon grabbed all the power and controlled everything. The revolutionary forces slowly realized they have lost freedom somewhere on the way. Ali (1990) writes the Pakistani administration continued all the evils of British and Dogra Raj like Frontier Crime Regulation (FCR), dependence on local rulers, taxes and forced labor. FCR was a set of law British approved in 1901, and after independence in 1947, the Pakistani state added the provision of arresting anyone without framing the crime thus, the political activists called it a black law. During the initial years people accepted the excuse of strengthening Islam for not protesting and continued suffering. In 1951, after four years of independence people in Puniyal were forced to raise their voice against the oppressive taxation. The raja, who had forgotten the revolution and might not have felt the need of realizing his responsibilities in an independent state, ordered his troops to open fire to calm the protestors which ended with killing of six people. The Gilgit scouts who led the revolution from the front were called in to arrest the protestors for realizing they have won independence and to pay homage to the raja for killing six subjects (Baig 1967). A similar protest by Nagar people to demand more rights had the same outcome when the Gilgit Scouts attempted to maintain order. The protest took the lives of 9 people and wounded many others in 1970 at Chalt region. To transform the altern into subaltern again the scouts arrested the protest organizers (Sokefeld 1997b).

China India Border Issues

China and India border issues started soon after the British left, resulting in a war between the two countries in 1962 (Qureshi 1962). India claims the 2500 miles long border with China has been properly delimited citing agreements such as the 1842 Treaty between the Maharaja of Kashmir, Tibet and China, and the Shimla Convention of 1914 while the Chinese do not recognize the Himalayas as the natural dividing line between India and China, rejecting geographical arguments such as watersheds focusing on racial, cultural, historical, and legal bases for their claim. They cite instances of Tibetan tax collection missions and the acknowledgment of Tibetan authority by the Monba tribe in the Northeast Frontier Agency (NEFA) region as evidence that the Himalayas were not a barrier to their authority (McMahon line). When arguments failed, both countries sought to war to decide their border. During the Sino India war in 1962, Pakistan has the biggest chance of getting back Indian Administered Kashmir but United States pressured the later not to attack India and assured a peaceful solution of Kashmir issue on table once the war is over (Bhutto 1969). Bhutto the then foreign minister of dictator Ayub Khan claimed that US did not take Pakistan into confidence before military aid to India which shifted the balance of power each passing day. He noted that for USA the solution of Kashmir issue was strategically less important than weakening China in southeast Asia by providing military aid to India worth \$4 billion between 1959 and 1963 without any conditioning to plebiscite in Kashmir. He further claimed that Pakistan turned down an offer from Indian Prime Minister Nehru for a confederation against China and remained neutral during the Sino-India war. Hence Pakistan lost a once in a blue moon opportunity to liberate Kashmir accepting US policy for the free world including Pakistan to support India against the communist Chinese aggression.

Pakistan realized the potential conflict in the Sino-India Border talks decided to negotiate with China to mark their border. The Sino-Pakistan border talks, which commenced in 1962, led to an agreement in principle on aligning their common border. India closely watched this development, as it had implications for the broader regional dynamics and India's strategic interests in Gilgit-Baltistan which it claims to be her integral part. Unlike India, Pakistan's negotiations with China were successful on November 26, 1962, the two countries agreed on a provisional border in Hunza and Baltistan regions in the present-day Gilgit-

Baltistan. This agreement was subject to the solution of Kashmir issue, and it was mutually agreed that in that scenario the sovereign authorities would renegotiate with China (Horizon 1962 & Dawn 1962). Claiming complete sovereignty on the territories of Dogra ruled Jammu & Kashmir state, India protested Pakistan's decision to cede the Shaksgam region alongside north of Siachen glacier with more than 2000 square miles area to China on all diplomatic fronts including in the United Nations highlighting its resolutions of January 17 and August 13, 1948, and January 5, 1949. After this friendly exchange of territory and border agreement China accepted Pakistan's stance on Kashmir issue while Pakistan lost its western allies on the issue. The western powers protested this boundary agreement, United Kingdom described it as unfortunate and untimely while United States of America viewed it as a precursor to destroy the slim prospects of solving the Kashmir Issue (Morning News 1963). The Indian government which was already reluctant and was forced by western powers for dialogue used the Sino-Pakistan border agreement as an excuse to opt out of any negotiations concerning Kashmir issue (Dawn 1963). It is by large this development that USA did not fulfill its promise to influence India. When nothing seems work, Pakistan planned covert military campaign "Gibraltar" to attack Indian Kashmir in 1965 to exert global pressure on India to hold long awaited plebiscite. Pakistan aimed at annexing a major portion of the Indian Kashmir and leverage that for a better bargain in negotiations, but India defended successfully.

During the early 1970s there were series of uprising called revolution of Gilgit against the Pakistani administration. When one such protest got violent, the scouts were ordered to open fire to which they either refused or only did an aerial firing to scare the protesters (Sokefeld 1997b). This rare and unique consciousness of scouts led to save the region from a Sunni-Shia clash in 1975 when they intervened and avoid bloodshed. The government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto listened to the local voices against the Dogra style hegemony. He took revolutionary steps by ending the rule of rajas (local rulers), taxation and forced labor and assign a new nameless name "Northern Areas of Pakistan" to the region. Bhutto was first to give representation to the people when he established an "Advisory Council" in 1970 with 14 elected and 7 official members. In 1975 this advisory council was renamed as "Northern Areas Advisory Council" with 16 elected representatives: 10 from Gilgit and 6 from Baltistan region. The regime of Military dictator Zia ul Haq changed the direction and destiny of northern areas during the Afghan war in 1980s. His Islamization agenda threw the region in the fire of sectarian conflict and produced a space of hatred along sectarian fault lines. This production of new space saw the massacre of Shia villages in 1988. The root of this sectarian space lies in the cold war. Zia adopted Islamization policy to produce Mujahideen (Holy Islamic Warriors) with the help United States, Britain, and Saudi Arabia to defeat Soviet Union in Afghanistan and build an iron curtain against the spread of communism. Pakistan was the implementing partner, and it recruited this private militia many of whom came from various parts of Gilgit-Baltistan too. Thus, to encourage people join the band of mujaheddins, the narrative of Jihad (Holy War) was used that changed the social relations in Pakistan including Gilgit-Baltistan.

(Rezun 1986) states during the cold war Soviet military presence in Wakhan Corridor; a narrow mountain valley in Afghanistan bordering China and Pakistan in the south, had a broader geopolitical impact, exacerbating the vulnerability of Pakistan. It placed Pakistan in a precarious position, blocking further Soviet expansion toward the Persian Gulf and South Asia, and controlling a southern avenue of attack into Xinjiang and Tibet. It gave Soviets a northern border with Pakistan, which could potentially encourage India to adopt a bolder stance against Pakistan regarding their dispute over Kashmir hence, the situation increased Pakistan's feelings of vulnerability. The strategic location of the Wakhan Corridor also allowed the Soviet Union to monitor and potentially disrupt the communications links between Pakistan and China, which used the Mintaka and Gardaneh-e Khunji passes through the Karakoram mountains.

During Zia's dictatorship in the 1980s, no political activity was allowed, let alone the opposition. After Zia's unexpected death in an airplane crash, the newly elected government of Benazir Bhutto, daughter of the former prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, introduced legal framework order in 1994 and replaced the Northern Areas Council with Northern Areas legislative council which increased the number of elected representative seats from 16 in previous council to 26 giving more representation to the people. The subsequent governments could not focus on the plight of Gilgit Baltistan due to political unrest during the 1990s. In 1999 General Pervez Musharraf toppled the elected government and became the military dictator, since he enjoyed strong grip on power which benefited Gilgit Baltistan. He created Northern Areas Legislative Assembly (NALA) with more powers to exercise under the shadow of a cabinet minister of mainland Pakistan. He was the only ruler in history closest to strike a deal with the Indian government on Kashmir Issue. Musharraf, the all-powerful president of Pakistan started a peace process with India on all fronts in 2004 and offered an out of the box solution for Kashmir; the four-point formula. In this interview (Ali and Bhat 2011) of the renowned professor Abdul Ghani Bhat claimed the formula of self-governance, demilitarization, making borders irrelevant, and joint management of Kashmir was a practical roadmap to solve the issue of Kashmir. Self-governance involved allowing both sides of Kashmir to govern their internal affairs without full independence, the demilitarization of both sides of Kashmir envisaged withdrawing military in steps, making borders involved free movement of people on both sides of Kashmir and finally joint management visualized a region jointly administered by Pakistan, India and both sides of Kashmir concerning common interests like trade. The prime minister of India Manmohang Singh visit was scheduled in early 2007 to sign the deal but Musharaff was embroiled in domestic politics starting in March 2007 and constantly lose his political power before resigning in August 2008. (Yousuf 2023) shed light about the potential reasons of this failure in one of the leading newspapers express tribune.

Some believed that even Musharraf's own generals were not happy with him at the time the way he sought the settlement of Kashmir. They were of the view that those generals used the lawyers' movement to discredit their own boss in order to make sure Musharraf could not strike any deal with India on Kashmir.

After a decade long rule of a dictator democracy returned to Pakistan, the government of Pakistan People Party (PPP) who has a good history of legislations for the region, moved one step forward to finally give northern areas a name "Gilgit-Baltistan" and end the centuries old colonial denial of "name". The PPP's prime minister Yousuf Raza Gilani introduced Gilgit Baltistan Empowerment and Self Governance Order." It gave GB a Provincial political structure with a governor and chief minister and renamed NALA as Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly (GBLA). However, the formation of "Gilgit-Baltistan Council" enjoying greater power than the elected members of GBLA and the prime minister of Pakistan on top as its chairman again shifted the balance of power away from the region. In 2018 the government of Pakistan Muslim League (N) to give more empowerment to the region introduced "Gilgit Baltistan Order" in 2018 but it too did not change the status co and maintained the same colonial structures of hegemony. A year later, when this order is challenged in supreme court of Pakistan, the chief justice Saqib Nisar ordered to provide greater autonomy to Gilgit Baltistan equal to other citizens, but it stuck in the bureaucratic circles (Shigri 2020). The prime minister of Pakistan Imran Khan promised the people of Gilgit Baltistan to grant provisional provincial status in response to India's unionization of its side of Kashmir in 2021 but then he faced a vote of no confidence and lost his government in April 2022.

Currently, the state of Pakistan is administering Gilgit Baltistan with the 2018 governance order.

The people protest for their full constitutional rights and the nationalist demand a similar status for Gilgit-Baltistan given to Pakistan administered Kashmir (Azad Kashmir). The multi-level crisis that comes with

political, economic, and constitutional crisis in Pakistan impacted Gilgit Baltistan more deeply compared to mainland Pakistan. When Pakistan removed the subsidy on wheat that it sends to the people due to its special political status in November 2023, the people hit the roads. Awami action committee; an indigenous union of various political and religious activists and other rights groups are rallying people for the restoration of wheat subsidy (Ahmad 2024). Apparently, these protests aimed at wheat subsidy but analysts claims that it is a proxy for demanding political rights. Earlier in September 2023, an amendment in criminal laws in Pakistan's parliament triggered a sectarian conflict and brought Sunnis and Shias close to a catastrophic clash which later resulted in an attack on a bus killing 11 people (Editorial 2023).

In this situation, Pakistan seems to have two options acceptable to the people of Gilgit Baltistan, either give the autonomy status given to Azad Kashmir or integrate it into the federation as its fifth province by signing a new social contract with the people.

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