

## **General**

A seminar was held on 26 July 2012 in the CLAWS seminar hall on "Appraisal of the Situation in Gilgit-Baltistan". The session was chaired by Lt Gen RK Sawhney (Retd). The speaker panel consisted of Capt (IN) Alok Bansal, Dr Ashok K Behuria and Ms Aditi Malhotra. Eminent personalities from the military, diplomatic and strategic community attended.

### **Opening remarks by Major General Dhruv Katoch, SM, VSM (Retd), Officiating Director, CLAWS**

The Offg Director welcomed all present. He thereafter appraised the audience about the strategic importance of Gilgit-Baltistan and the bearing the region has on India Pakistan foreign relations, especially in reference to Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK). The area of Gilgit-Baltistan has been in focus because of influence of Jihadi elements in a Shia dominated area and also because of the ingress made by the Chinese which will have security implications for India.

### **Chairperson: Lt Gen R K Sawhney, PVSM, AVSM, (Retd)**

Briefing about the state of J&K, the role of Jammu and Kashmir Rifles was explained with the contributions of General Zorawar Singh and Gulab Singh in the history of Gilgit-Baltistan area of Jammu and Kashmir. The strategic location of Gilgit-Baltistan, which constitutes more than 80 per cent of the area of PoK, acts as a connection between India and Central Asian Republics as well as the link up region between China and Pakistan. The region of Gilgit-Baltistan and the adjoining areas was the meeting point of three main empires during the 19th century namely British, Russian and Chinese. The British took the area of Gilgit-Baltistan on a 60 year lease. On 01 August 1947, Gilgit-Baltistan became a part of the state of J&K. India lost the region to Pakistan in the 1947-48 war. The strategic implications resulted in the Pakistanis giving away the Karakorum highway and other key locations to the Chinese on a platter. The area has been in international limelight due to sectarian violence, religious fundamentalism and Chinese expansion, which has direct impact on South Asia's regional security.

### **Capt (IN) Alok Bansal: Tumult in Gilgit-Baltistan - Causes of Alienation**

The recent violence in Gilgit-Baltistan of Pakistan occupied Kashmir (POK), where over 200 people were killed in ethno-sectarian fires and hundreds others were kidnapped by rival sectarian groups, has highlighted the critical fault-lines in this vital region. Gilgit-Baltistan, strategically the most significant part of the former princely state of Jammu & Kashmir, has been under Pakistani occupation for six and a half decades. During this period the region has been afflicted by internecine conflict from time to time. Before the current round of savagery that has hit the region it has been affected by similar ethno-

sectarian carnages in 1988 and 2005. The level of mutual mistrust and suspicion between the communities has risen to such a level that any minor spark can lead to complete polarisation of communities. The fact that people belonging to different parts of this strategic region speak different languages and follow different beliefs, gives the sectarian rift a distinct ethno-linguistic hue.

Amongst all the territories under Pakistani control, Gilgit-Baltistan is the only administrative unit where the followers of different strands of Shi'ism are in majority. Pakistani establishment especially since Zia-ul-Haq has been dominated by the Sunnis and has been extremely wary of this Shia majority region. As a result attempts have been made to change the ethnic and sectarian composition of this region since 1970s, when State Subject Rule enacted by the Dogra Maharajas to preserve the unique identity of the region, was abrogated by the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. The law barred outsiders from seeking permanent residence or becoming citizens of the princely state. The abrogation of the law has resulted in large-scale migration to this sparsely populated region. Incidentally, the rule is still in force both in Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir and in "Azad Kashmir" the other part of POK. This is one of the clearest manifestations of the intent of the Pakistani State to change the demographic profile of the region and has created the fears of ethnic marginalisation in the minds of Balti and Dardic people. This has manifested in violence, mainly against those who are perceived to be outsiders, particularly government employees. The administration suffers from a total lack of trust from those living in the area. The violence against outsiders has acquired a distinct ethno-sectarian dimension. Unfortunately, successive Pakistani regimes have not realised that grafting population in areas with distinct ethnic and sectarian beliefs is counterproductive and aggravates the alienation of the locals, fuelling rifts as is being witnessed.

The root of alienation of locals lies within the tumultuous events of 1947-48 that led to the annexation of this strategic region by Pakistan. Contrary to popular perception it was not British machination, but the influence of Muslim League on certain elements of Maharaja's army that led to this region's annexation by Pakistan, despite valiant defence put up by Major Sher Jung Thapa at Skardu.

Since then the region has been treated like a colony by the Pakistani military and bureaucracy. For a long time, people did not have any worthwhile say in the governance or any recourse to judicial review and this gave fillip to their alienation from Islamabad. The constitutional status of Gilgit-Baltistan continues to remain ambiguous and attempts have been made to subsume the distinct ethno-cultural identity of the people under an all-encompassing Islamic identity. Till recently, the people did not have any democratic rights and bureaucrats from outside the region lorded over the locals like colonial masters.

It has widely been believed that Pakistani intelligence agencies trigger sectarian and ethnic tension, whenever locals demand political and constitutional rights. However, after failing to create large-scale divisions amongst the people the government announced certain concessions to locals in the form of Gilgit-Baltistan (Empowerment and Self-Governance) Order in 2009. The order renamed the region as Gilgit-Baltistan, which was hitherto called the 'Northern Areas', fulfilling a longstanding demand of the residents of the region. It has also given the region a local administration headed by a 'Chief Minister', a post that did not exist in the region. It provides for the Chief Minister, to be elected by the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly, who would head a council of ministers, comprising six ministers and two advisors.

However, the current setup does not provide either the Chief Minister or the Legislative Assembly with any worthwhile powers; the real powers would be with the Governor of Gilgit-Baltistan, who is to be an outsider appointed by the President of Pakistan on the advice of the Prime Minister. Although a Legislative Assembly has been elected, the real powers vest with the Gilgit-Baltistan Council, whose Chairman is the Prime Minister of Pakistan and most of whose members are the appointees of the Pakistani government.

Lack of economic opportunities and absence of liberal education have turned Gilgit-Baltistan into a hotbed of conflict. Besides, absence of political rights and ethnic marginalisation has contributed to the alienation of population. The fact that the local administration is dominated by the bureaucrats from outside the region, makes it look alien to the locals. The region has enormous strategic significance and connects Pakistan with China. The region is also rich in natural resources and provides Pakistan with most of its fresh water resources. Unfortunately, the locals feel that their precious resources are being exploited by Pakistan, without any commensurate benefits for them. The local inhabitants also perceive that their unique languages and culture are being marginalised by the onslaught of radical Islam being promoted with state connivance.

Pakistan is keen to prolong its control over the region with the intention of eventually incorporating this part of Jammu and Kashmir, into its own territory. Any clamour for autonomy is dissipated by creating divisions amongst the local populace and instigating sectarian disturbances. The social divide along ethnic and religious lines has been exploited by the Pakistani intelligence agencies and security forces to weaken the demand for genuine political autonomy and basic human rights by the local populace.

The people of this region are looking towards India to ameliorate their genuine grievances and have demanded reservations in Indian educational institutions as they are legally and historically citizens of India. They have also demanded India to conduct elections in this region so as to get their representatives elected, to represent them in

Jammu & Kashmir Assembly and the Indian parliament. As the government of India legitimately claims this region to be an integral part of India, it must make sincere efforts to resolve the problems of its residents.

### **Dr Ashok K Behuria: Creeping Talibanisation and Widening Sectarian Strife**

The violence prevailing in the region is a gift of Pakistan to the people of Gilgit-Baltistan. The policies of Pakistan's leaders particularly Gen Zia-ul-Haq, have come to fruition. While ruled by Pakistan since 1947, Gilgit-Baltistan has never been formally integrated with the rest of the Pakistani state, and does not participate in the country's constitutional political affairs. On 29 August 2009, the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order, 2009, was passed by the Pakistani cabinet and later signed by the President of Pakistan. The order granted self-rule to the people of Gilgit-Baltistan, by creating, among other things, an elected Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly. Gilgit-Baltistan thus gained de facto province-like status without having so constitutionally. Officially, Pakistan has rejected Gilgit-Baltistan's calls for further integration on the grounds that it would prejudice its international obligations over the Kashmir dispute.

Gen Zia-ul-Haq's rule saw a great degree of Islamisation of Pakistan's polity and governance. Gen Zia had his hands tied to a great degree till 1979 because of the formidable Shia resistance within the country. The policies initiated post 1979 i.e. the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan by Gen Zia also targeted the Shia communities. The war in Afghanistan provided Gen Zia with the pretext to introduce a more radical version of Islam which had strong Sunni undertones to it. The influx of immigrants from other parts of Pakistan into Gilgit-Baltistan was also a deliberate action on part of the Pakistani state to balance out the demographics in the region, particularly the Shia influence.

The Shia and Sunni sects used to live in harmony pre-1970s and used to intermarry without any prejudices. In 1979, the region had a 50-50 ratio of Shia and Sunni populations, which is greatly skewed in favour of Sunnis currently with the statistics presenting a 65-35 ratio. This has led to flaring up of violence and demands for greater autonomy for the region. The state of Pakistan has come down heavy on these protests which have further fuelled the fires of dissent. Another issue at stake is the imposition of the Sunni version of Islam on the Shia population of Gilgit-Baltistan. The issue came to fore with the textbook controversy in 1999 where Sunni tenets of Islam were given priority over Shia beliefs.

India should keep itself updated on the prevailing conditions within the region and try to communicate its stand to the people of Gilgit-Baltistan. The situation in the region is on a boil and presents an opportune moment for India's leaders and foreign policy elites to further our national interests in the region and promote India's aims to find an amicable

solution to the problem of state of Jammu and Kashmir. The area of Gilgit-Baltistan is critical towards India's endeavor to promote lasting peace in the South Asia region.

### **Ms Aditi Malhotra: Chinese inroads into Gilgit-Baltistan**

The geographical location and geostrategic importance of POK and Gilgit-Baltistan (G-B) makes it a critical area of vital importance. Almost after five decades of existence KKH, POK and G-B, a region that is constitutionally regarded as a part of India remains the focal point of attention. The region of POK and Gilgit-Baltistan sits at the confluence of Afghanistan, China, India and offers China a link to the Central Asian Republics. Various sources have cited different numbers of Chinese presence in the region. The numbers range from 4,000 as confirmed by General V K Singh, former Army Chief of India to 11,000, a number Selig Harrison revealed in the first ever report on Chinese presence in the region.

China is continuing to project its power from the centre to expand its frontier zone across Eurasia through the New Silk route and also through Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Beijing fears that an India's growing power would eventually threaten China's security along its south-western frontiers. As China becomes more powerful economically and militarily, Beijing is devising new strategies to keep its southern rival in check. From Beijing's perspective, India's rise as an economic and military power would prolong American hegemony in Asia, and thereby hinder the establishment of a post-American Sino-centric hierarchical regional order in the Asia-Pacific.

China is reasserting itself as a neo-imperial power in the new global order. As analysts have averred, China is following the policy of Stealth Imperialism, which includes the following three phases:

- Investment in economic infrastructure & extraction of natural resources
  - Military deployment to protect economic interests & supply lines
  - Socio-political absorption by means of governance through puppet governments
- China is building a New Silk Road via its Eurasian land bridges and militarizing its transport corridors. This Iron Silk Road is designed to deal with the incredible logistics of Chinese sea freight, which is expensive and time-consuming when shipping cargo from Asia to Middle East and Europe.

One of the most strategically important parts of POK is Gilgit-Baltistan (also referred as the Northern Areas) and a necessity for China's grand strategy. Gilgit-Baltistan is a pivotal part of the only road link between China and Pakistan, i.e. the Karakoram Highway which passes through G-B. The 1,300 kms road, links the Havelian rail-head in

Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan with Kashgar, in the Xinjiang province. The highway passes through Gilgit-Baltistan.

The China Road and Bridge Corporation (CBRC) and Pakistan's National Highway Authority are jointly working on upgradation of KKH width from 10m to 30m. Additional MOUs have been signed between the countries to build a 165 km Jaglot-Skardu and 135 km Thakot-Sazin roads in Gilgit Baltistan.

Pakistan and China are working towards a road link that connects the Gwadar port to China's western border. The road network will include the Karakoram highway which links China and Pakistan across the Karakoram mountain range through the Khunjerab Pass. The link is pivotal for the transportation of cargo to the port, and oil and gas from Africa and the Gulf. Undoubtedly, any link between China and Pakistan is bound to be dependent on the area of PoK, forming it a part of the Great Game through the revival of the Eurasian Corridor.

China and Pakistan are also cooperating in rail projects. Railways have always acted as the key to expand one's areas of influence because of the speed with which military personnel and goods could be transported in bulk. Interestingly, military requirements are a part of China's rail development and PLA actually participates in design & planning of the same. According to PLA's General Logistics Department (GLD), over 1,000 railway stations have been equipped with military transportation facilities, thereby establishing a complete railway support network that enhances the PLA's strategic projection capability.

Following are other areas of G-B, in which China's participation is unprecedented:

- China specific industrial and economic zone in Gilgit and along KKH
- Mining projects- Extracting Mineral and precious stones - especially in Hunza-Nagar district, which is rich in uranium.
- Hydropower Projects & Dams: Sadpara Dam and Land Development Project, Minawar Land Development Project; Bunji Dam (7000 MW), Yulbu Dam (3000 MW), Diamer Dam (4500 MW); Naltar power project, Shagarthang power project, Concrete bridges over Indus River, Pratab bridge.
- 22 tunnels in Gilgit-Baltistan which could be used for missile storage
- Planned Chinese consulate in Gilgit city
- Sost dry port- Potential as a key channel of trading activity for CAR.
- Chinese banks opening branches in Gilgit-Baltistan

- These projects will remain under supervision of more than ten thousand Chinese workers including civilian contractors and construction corps personnel of PLA. China has also stationed a unit of PLA soldiers near the Khunjerab Pass, which may assist their workers and provide security in case Pakistani security apparatus fails.

Also, Chinese telecom companies like ZTE, Zong, Huawei are involved in the management of the telecommunications sector of Gilgit-Baltistan.

It is important to note that China's need to secure passage through its own troublesome provinces of Xinjiang and Tibet to Pakistan makes it unlikely for China to ignore the Kashmir dispute. China's development activities in the area are likely to facilitate speedy and enhanced deployment of Pakistan army to complement China's military and thus outflank India.

## **Discussion**

The area has seen a spike in the number of immigrants who have distorted the existing demographics of the region. Gilgit-Baltistan was Shia dominated pre Zia-ul-Haq's rule, and now has approximately equal number of Sunni immigrants from other parts of Pakistan. This has led to sectarian tensions and political turmoil which have paralysed the region.

The influx of Jihadi elements across the Af-Pak border has also affected the region. The current turmoil in the area has created opportunities for India to exploit the situation as anti-Pakistan sentiment is rife in the region. India should not let this opportunity pass and use every diplomatic and political means to bring the territory into international focus.

As the region forms a passage between South Asia and CAR countries the strategic and economic importance of the area cannot be underestimated. In order to enhance its comprehensive national power and economic might, China has aggressively expanded its influence into various parts of the world including the natural resource rich region of CAR. How these CAR countries view Chinese presence was a point of consideration which was also debated upon.

## **Concluding Remarks: Major General Dhruv C Katoch**

There needs to be recognition of the strategic importance of the Gilgit-Baltistan area and measured responses should be formulated so that we do not make the same mistake as was made in the 1947-48 war. The arrival of Sunnis and jihadi elements to the Shia dominated and peaceful area of Gilgit-Baltistan has not only changed the demographics of the region but also the security matrix. Chinese footprints in the region also need to be watched, especially in terms of infrastructure being developed and

presences of both Chinese military and non-military persons in Gilgit Baltistan. India needs to pay particular attention to improving its logistic network in the border areas to have any meaningful impact in the region.