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GILGIT- BALISTAN: POLITICAL ENCROACHMENT BY PAKISTAN

By

Lt Gen Rameshwar Yadav, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd)

The apex court of Pakistan, on 30 Apr, has given approval for amendment to government of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) 2018 order. It has facilitated to install an interim government and conduct of provincial elections, an unprecedented move of manipulative political import. Earlier in January 2019, **Pakistan Supreme Court had explicitly extended its jurisdiction** to GB in a written order on the province's constitutional status. This is despite the 1947 UN directives not to make any material change in the status of the occupied territories by Pakistan. Accordingly, initiating a process to bring GB under Pakistani constitutional jurisprudence even indirectly has no legal sanctity. It is more than obvious that the Pakistani judiciary has deviated from their professional ethics under pressures of Pakistani establishment.

The move to declare GB as the fifth province of Pakistan had started taking shape earlier, but it was in 2017 such a political intrusion was recommended by Sartaj Aziz committee to the government. Pakistan, in their well orchestrated design, has now used Supreme Court to create a façade of legal sanctity through conduct of elections by the federal

government in GB. Whereas, the GB already has its own local self governance mechanism to conduct elections. **Bringing GB under purview of Pakistani constitutional authorities amounts to direct defiance of the UN mandates.**

Consequent to abrogation of article 370 in J&K, Pakistani narrative has been impacted in a big way cutting down on their influence and options to disturb the public order in J&K. There has been a perceptible change in the environment in J&K due to developmental push and welfare schemes of the Government of India. India has published new maps in November 2019 depicting GB as part of UT of Ladakh and rest of POK under UT of J&K to assert her territorial jurisdiction.

If the Pakistan does not regain the lost ground of separatist strains in the current season then they probably would lose their plot of uprising in the Kashmir valley forever. Pakistan seems to be frustrated and trying to regain lost ground by reviving militancy. There is an increase in attempts of infiltration of Pakistan sponsored terrorists across the Line of Control alongside this renewed political move in GB. What is Pakistan trying to achieve is a matter of analysis as their intensions go much beyond what meets the eye. Pakistan by indulging in such a blatant illegal action seems to have multiple motives.

The Chinese scheme of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is their biggest political investment in recent times to take care of her insecurities of transiting through vulnerable sea routes, and at the same time facilitate her economic expansion at much larger scale. The CPEC is aligned astride old Karakoram road passing through GB which is integral to India. India has not accepted this intrusion as it amounts to violation of her sovereignty. Moreover, with the defiant attitude of the local GB population, there are going to be severe security issues in times to come. Add to above, is the prevailing insecure environment in Af-Pak region which is unlikely to get stabilized soon.

The GB also happens to be within operational reach of Indian armed forces, thus **providing military leverages to India increasing Chinese vulnerability like she has in Indian Ocean Region.** Any military action however small by India would impact on Chinese \$ 62 billion strategic CPEC scheme. It is not a happy situation for Chinese grand strategy in their ambitions of global leadership. Therefore, unless there is a legal cover

provided to this area of strategic import, there would always be apprehensions of India playing a spoilt sport.

China, in their economic pursuits, possibly cannot ignore large Indian markets besides legality of the CPEC infrastructure which is already rolling. China, accordingly, is keen that India joins the CPEC band wagon to facilitate their purposes. Whereas, India has consistently declined their offer. China in their desperation has gone to the extent of using coercive overtures to make India fall in line. Such a political intransigence, obviously, leaves a scope of speculations regarding Indian intentions from Chinese perspective. **It appears to have become unpalatable emotive issue for Chinese establishment, looking at their cultural make up and known political hubris.** Hence, anti India narrative continues to prevail in Beijing.

China, having failed to manipulate India, is now trying to do course correction albeit through deceitful and dubious coercive political ways. In that, Pakistan, in Chinese strategic lexicon, is being used and misused to facilitate Chinese political purposes. In that, according legal constitutionality to GB happens to be the best option to neutralize and negate Indian obstinate attitude from Chinese perspective. **The underlying philosophy appears to be to force India in accepting the non viability of confrontation by showcasing prospects of a joint threat which India may like to avoid.**

Interestingly, there has not been talks about changing status of GB openly in the Pakistani political circles till the time proposal of CPEC was in the air. Moreover, there is no such move in rest of the POK where there are no CPEC signatures, goes to prove the Chinese complicity in this game plan.

There is a known resentment of the locals against CPEC scheme as their prime lands are being acquired impacting their livelihood and economic interests. The locals have been deprived of jobs in the ongoing development projects as China employs their own workforce. It has lead to internal security issues in this region and elsewhere on similar grounds. Pakistan has been compelled to raise special army units to provide security to the CPEC related Chinese projects across the country including GB.

By conducting elections in GB, Pakistan probably intends to replace present local PML(N) ruling dispensation with Imran Khan's PTI lead government. Such a move would take care of political dissent, besides

showcasing federal administrative control over this region. It can be used as a political asset as **precedence exists wherein physical administrative control has been the criteria for territorial claims in some of the international mediations.**

It may also be intent of Pakistan to provoke and draw India into a new confrontation so as to **internationalize the issue** once again. This move when hyphenated with increase in firing on the Line of Control and acts of militancy in J&K coupled with recent anti India diplomatic rhetoric appear part of this integrated push. Pakistan may orchestrate further escalation of military situation, thereby making up a case for international intervention highlighting the dangerous prospects of war between two nuclear states. Indeed an old pattern, but with new approach.

Incidentally, all three big powers need geographical space of Pakistan for their own strategic purposes. US needs Pakistan as their frontline state to dominate the west and Central Asian region. China needs Pakistan for their CPEC scheme for their economic expansion and further her ambitions of global leadership. Russia is looking for access to the warm waters of Indian Ocean, an ambition since Czarist era. Therefore, if there is **any external mediation, it is expected to be influenced by national interests of the mediator(s) and not the logic and legality of the dispute.** Hence, mediation by external forces is not an appropriate option from Indian perspective.

The Pakistan army having initiated and lost four wars against India, coupled with poor economic state is not in a position of confronting India on their own. The Chinese proposal of CPEC came as a shot in the arm of Pakistani military establishment who saw strategic opportunity to level up with their arch rival. **The military accordingly is known to be the force behind Pakistan accepting the Chinese scheme despite the fact that it had potential of impacting on their sovereignty.** Pakistan is obliged to do the Chinese calling and their move to change the political status of Gilgit – Baltistan is part of their expression of solidarity with them. China, surely, is dictating their terms to Pakistan who is under their financial debt and political obligation of subservient strain.

Some of noted strategic analysts in India have linked the recent Sino-Indian confrontations in Sikkim and Ladakh with the Indian objections to illegal Pakistani political intrusion in GB. If it is true then, there is a sinister

political message to India conveying convergence of Chinese and Pakistani interests and political will to use coercive means to meet their objectives. While both the countries are playing down these episodes as routine incidences due to differing perception of the LAC, the political content cannot go unnoticed. Not to forget that China is indulging in aggressive military diplomacy in the South and East China Seas taking advantage of pandemic situation. So there is nothing out of way from known Chinese political conduct.

Similarly, the timings of this action on part of Pakistan also appear to have tactical political significance. The entire world is busy in fighting with the afflictions of Covid 19 and unlikely to pay attention to this kind of quasi political intrusion and get perturbed over it. India is also bogged down with issues of health disaster impacting on functioning of institutions of governance, industry, and individuals in a highly disturbed catastrophic situation. Accordingly, the issue of Pakistan indulging in unconstitutional acts would not be a primary national concern and likely to be left to the diplomatic assertions as of now. Hence, it is the best time and suits Pakistan all the way.

What is happening is not a **usual escalation of the political ante between India and Pakistan as there appears to be clear-cut Chinese foot prints in this new tranche of the Pakistani game plan.** In that, China in their own post pandemic economic interests may be seen to balance out her approach to deal with India. Whereas, Pakistan, as front man of China, is expected to pull out all stops to facilitate Chinese politico- economic purposes. Pakistan is expected to continue and further enhance her anti India narrative to destabilize her and achieve their politico-religious objectives. All above is likely to unfold with mutual support and political synergy with each other. India, accordingly, need to be vigilant to neutralize any adverse situations, if it so happens. Surely, there are difficult times ahead.

The challenge lies in managing the emerging situation in the backdrop of pandemic with problems of economic setback, displaced population, disturbed administration and inconsistencies in functioning of the national structures to handle a war like situation. Apropos, diplomacy needs to be pro active and assertive in conveying Indian concerns to the world body as regards to the inimical connotations of emerging political dynamics. Military

on their part needs to be alert and ready for any eventuality in case the battle indications so warrant, despite the pandemic situation.

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