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# STRATEGIC DEPTH AND SILENT EXPANSION: CHINA'S GROWING PRESENCE AROUND PAKISTAN-OCCUPIED KASHMIR

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**Strategic Depth and Silent Expansion:  
China's Growing Presence Around  
Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir**



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The recent development involving China's establishing new administrative county's near the tri-junction of Xinjiang, Afghanistan, and areas adjoining Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (POK) must be understood not merely as an internal bureaucratic adjustment but as part of a calculated and layered geopolitical strategy that carries significant implications for India's territorial sovereignty and regional security. While some narratives have loosely described this move as the creation of a "new county," a more precise and analytically grounded interpretation reveals that China has created a county, reportedly Cenling County, within its Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region<sup>1</sup>. However, the political meaning of this act extends far beyond its administrative label, particularly when viewed through the lens of India's long-standing concerns regarding territorial integrity and China's incremental assertiveness along contested borders.

The issue stems from the unsolved aftermath of the 1947–1948 India–Pakistan War, which split the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir along the Line of Control. India has always insisted that the whole region<sup>2</sup>, including the parts that Pakistan now controls, is an essential component of its sovereign territory. India has consequently considered Pakistan's governmental dominance over areas like Gilgit-Baltistan to be an unlawful occupation. The possibilities for resolving a conflict that India views as entirely

bilateral are complicated by China's growing participation in these areas, whether through infrastructure projects, geopolitical alliances, or administrative manoeuvres.

The establishment of a new county in Xinjiang, especially near POK and the Wakhan Corridor, is not an isolated move from an Indian strategic standpoint; rather, it is a part of a larger pattern of Chinese behaviour intended to strengthen its influence in delicate border areas. This trend is in line with what Indian observers have long recognized as China's "salami slicing" strategy, gradual, frequently inconspicuous actions that gradually change the status quo without causing an instant, widespread conflict. China uses bureaucratic normalization to strengthen its territorial claims while also improving its administration and surveillance capacities in border regions through the creation of new administrative entities. This is especially problematic in regions that are physically close to India's disputed territories.

China's official justification for the creation of this county centres on security concerns, particularly the need to curb alleged infiltration by Uyghur militants through the Afghan border. While internal security <sup>3</sup>is a legitimate concern for any state, the timing and location of this administrative restructuring raise important questions. The proximity of the new county to regions that are strategically linked to the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) suggests that economic and geopolitical considerations are equally, if not more, significant. CPEC, which passes through Gilgit-Baltistan, a territory claimed by India, has already been a point of contention between New Delhi and Beijing. India has repeatedly objected to the project because it violates its sovereignty. In this context, any move by China that strengthens its administrative or security presence near these corridors is likely to be interpreted as an attempt to further entrench its strategic footprint in disputed regions.

Moreover, the deepening China-Pakistan nexus adds another layer of complexity to this development. Pakistan's willingness to facilitate Chinese investments and strategic access in POK, particularly in Gilgit-Baltistan, effectively provides Beijing with a foothold in a region that is central to India's national security concerns. The establishment of a new county <sup>4</sup>in Xinjiang, adjacent to these areas, can thus be seen as part of a

coordinated effort to secure and expand this foothold. For India, this raises the spectre of a two-front strategic challenge, where coordination between China and Pakistan could potentially constrain India's operational flexibility along both its western and northern borders.

It is also important to recognize that China's administrative activism in frontier regions is not limited to this instance. Similar efforts have been observed in other contested areas, including Aksai Chin, where China has undertaken infrastructure development and administrative restructuring despite India's objections. These actions reflect a broader strategic doctrine that prioritizes the consolidation of control through a combination of physical presence, infrastructural integration, and bureaucratic formalization. From an Indian viewpoint, such measures are not merely defensive but are indicative of a long-term strategy aimed at reshaping territorial realities on the ground. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of April, India rejected <sup>5</sup>China's moves to rename and establish a new county.

The narrative that China is creating a "new country" in this region, while factually inaccurate, nonetheless captures a deeper anxiety about the erosion of established norms of sovereignty and territorial integrity. In international law, the creation of a new country requires recognition, independent governance, and a distinct political identity, none of which apply in this case. However, the concern for India is less about the administrative unit's formal status and more about the strategic intent behind its creation. The establishment of new counties, villages, and infrastructure in border areas can, over time, alter demographic patterns, strengthen logistical networks, and create facts on the ground that are difficult to reverse.

There is another angle to this new establishment. While Afghanistan is important for China due to its role in controlling terrorism in Xinjiang and its strategic location on the BRI route, offering a direct route to Central Asian countries, China is growing and is in desperate need of natural resources to sustain its growth, especially when it is in direct competition with the US. Further, as this will increase the stakes in India, it makes a collision between India and China more likely. This, therefore, will not only affect the

border aspect but also other aspects of the bilateral relations.

From a policy perspective, this development emphasizes the necessity for India to take a thorough and proactive approach to regional diplomacy and border control. This entails improving diplomatic relations with neighbouring nations and international partners in addition to bolstering military readiness and physical infrastructure along its borders. India's focus on territorial integrity and sovereignty must be accompanied by a sophisticated comprehension of China's geopolitical calculations and a readiness to react in a measured but robust way.

Additionally, India must maintain its stance that any projects or administrative operations carried out in these territories without its authorization are an infringement of its sovereignty, and it must continue to draw attention to the illegality of external engagement in POK at international forums. To boost local resilience and uphold the legitimacy of Indian administration in these regions, it is also necessary to engage in the socioeconomic development of border communities on the Indian side.

China's creation of a new administrative county in Xinjiang, close to the same disputed border and India's recent Delimitation Bill <sup>6</sup>(2026), which calls for the redrawing of constituencies in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, can be compared analytically because both actions represent similar strategies of territorial assertion in a shared geopolitical space. China is being forceful, but India's proposal works within a legal and constitutional framework. While China is normalizing its existing power through local governance institutions, India is institutionalizing its future claim through legal measures. This interaction highlights a more profound dynamic of competing sovereignty, in which administrative-territorial practices and symbolic-legal measures interact to alter the strategic terrain of the larger India-China-Pakistan tri-junction.

The establishment of a new county close to this delicate area is by no means a standard administrative procedure, even if China has not created a "new country" in POK. It is a

calculated action that supports China's larger goals of economic growth, border consolidation, and geopolitical dominance. This development reminds India that the problems it faces along its northern borders are always changing. Navigating this intricate and ever-changing geopolitical environment will need a clear-eyed, tactically sound, and steadfastly pro-sovereignty stance.

#### **DISCLAIMER**

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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Desk, TOI World. “China Sets up New County near PoK, Afghan Border to Curb Uyghur Infiltration.” The Times Of India, April 12, 2026. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/china/china-sets-up-new-county-near-pok-afghan-border-to-curb-uyghur-infiltration/articleshow/130207335.cms>
- <sup>2</sup> Outlook News Desk. “China Creates New Xinjiang County near PoK, Afghanistan to Boost Border Security.” Outlook India, April 12, 2026. <https://www.outlookindia.com/international/china-creates-new-xinjiang-county-near-pok-afghanistan-to-boost-border-security>
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- <sup>5</sup> Nandini, Navashree . “India Rejects China’s Attempt to Give ‘Fictitious Names’ to Places in Arunachal Pradesh.” Wion, April 13, 2026. <https://www.wionews.com/world/india-rejects-china-s-attempt-to-give-fictitious-names-to-places-in-arunachal-pradesh-1776062589506>
- <sup>6</sup> Jain, Aishvarya. “Centre’s New Delimitation Bill Has Provisions for Pak-Occupied Kashmir Too.” www.ndtv.com. NDTV, April 15, 2026. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/2026-delimitation-bill-centres-new-delimitation-bill-has-provisions-for-pak-occupied-kashmir-too-11362759>