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China building road to disaster in Gilgit-Baltistan

By Syed Iqbal Hasnain

China's high-stake poker game in Gilgit-Baltistan, a mountainous area that is part of the Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan, will have disastrous environmental consequences for the entire region and beyond. Reports in the local and international media indicate that, over the past few years, Beijing has been steadily undertaking many infrastructure projects in that ecologically fragile region.

Details of most of these works, some of them supervised by the People's Liberation Army, remain sketchy, as both the Pakistani and Chinese sides are wary of disclosing information, presumably fearing local and international opposition.

Before 1947, Gilgit-Baltistan, formerly known as the Northern Areas, was part of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, ruled by the Dogras. While Islamabad considers it separate from the Kashmir under its control, New Delhi sees the region—which is roughly a third of the size of Jammu and Kashmir—part of the overall dispute and deems any Chinese activity there unacceptable. There is also a vibrant homegrown movement within Gilgit-Baltistan that is demanding absolute autonomy, and even independence from Pakistan.

Among the few projects that China and Pakistan have publicly disclosed is the building of a 7,000 megawatt dam, at the place called Bunji, which was announced in September 2009. China is also reportedly financing and supplying skilled labor to build the controversial Diamer-Bhasha dam, which is set to destroy tens of thousands of ancient rock carvings and other priceless archaeological artifacts.

Five years ago, the two sides had agreed to expand the width of the historic Karakoram Highway, which connects Gilgit-Baltistan with the neighboring Xinjiang region in China, from 10 meters to 30 meters and triple its transportation capacity. The official Chinese agency Xinhua reported at the time that the state-owned China Road and Bridge Corporation would be in charge of the designing and reconstruction of the highway.

According to various reports, other projects China has undertaken in Gilgit-Baltistan include construction of roads and bridges; building of a high-speed rail system; and nearly two-dozen tunnels. It is also said to be involved in mineral exploratory activities by acquiring hundreds of mining leases from Islamabad. Satellite images reveal sporadic construction activities throughout the region.

A major reason behind these costly investment projects is commerce. Beijing has already built ports in Gwadar and Ormara, in southwestern Pakistan, for the purpose of transporting oil and gas from the Gulf and Africa through Xinjiang. The expansion of the Karakoram Highway and rail line could help cut down the time it takes to transport these resources from Gwadar to Xinjiang. China could also send its cheap manufacturing goods to the affluent Gulf market in express time through the same route.

Writing in The New York Times last August, U.S. scholar and journalist Selig

Harrison described the economic rationale for the increased Chinese presence in Gilgit-Baltistan. "It takes 16 to 25 days for Chinese oil tankers to reach the Gulf," he wrote. "When high-speed rail and road links through Gilgit and Baltistan are completed, China will be able to transport cargo from Eastern China to the newly Chinese-built Pakistani naval bases at Gwadar, Pasni and Ormara, just east of the Gulf, within 48 hours."

For China, with its global ambitions, the geopolitical importance of gaining access to an Arabian Sea port close to the Straits of Hormuz can never be overstated. Of course, there is also another strong, unstated, but highly apparent objective: weakening India's position on Kashmir and in the entire region by denying it a strategic depth.

Whatever maybe their motive, the Chinese construction activities in the area have huge environmental implications for the whole of South and Southeast Asia. Gilgit-Baltistan is on the western edge of the Karakorum mountains and Tibetan plateau, which is critical to water and food security of a large share of Pakistan's population. The area has dozens of peaks that tower above 5,000 meters, including K-2 and Nanga Parbat—respectively, the second highest and ninth highest peak in the world—and countless glaciers, among them, Baltoro, Batura and Biafo, three of the longest glaciers outside of the polar region.

Construction of mega dams and building of roads and tunnels in this mountainous area is an invitation to disaster. They are likely to lead to increased seismic activities and intensify the glacial melt, the two phenomena that are already occurring in the region.

In 2005, an earthquake of the magnitude of 7.6 had killed as many as 86,000 people in the Pakistani-occupied Kashmir just to the south of Gilgit-Baltistan. The epicenter of that earthquake was on the border of Gilgit and Pakistan, where the Diamer-Bhasha Dam is currently being built. Diamer-Bhasha will be a huge water reservoir inundating more than 100 miles of mountainous ravines. Such new dams will make earthquakes more probable, as the still water induces increased seismic activities. One can only shudder at the thought of what an earthquake similar to the 2005 tremor could do to the dams and the potential damage it could cause in the entire region.

The construction of mega dams in Gilgit-Baltistan is also unwise for another reason. The source of all the water in the region's rivers and rivulets is snow and glacial melt. As the melt is dependent on temperature, there is constant fluctuation in water-level. There is a danger that, when a glacier lake bursts out due to excessive glacier melt, or seismic activity, dam water could be over-tapped. When that happens, usually a huge flood wave is generated, resulting in large amount of debris and sediments getting deposited in the dam, which threatens its long-term stability.

The widening of Karakoram Highway and construction of rail line and tunnels will, no doubt, intensify the glacial melting and endanger the infrastructure of the region. The de-glaciation rate is already high in the western Himalayas because of the presence of black carbon, a result of increased human activities, including heavy movement of military. (Black carbon is seen as the second leading contributor to the climate change.)

Then there are other human costs. According to news reports, Diamer-Bhasha, with a proposed height of more than 250 meters, will displace tens of thousands of people and submerge habitable areas and thousands of acres of agricultural land. Another tragic consequence of this gargantuan project is the loss of countless archaeological relics, around fifty thousands in number, and dating

back to more than ten-thousand years.

It is clear that the risks that some of these behemoth Chinese projects pose far outweigh any potential economic benefit they are likely to bring to the people of Gilgit-Baltistan. In fact, all indications are that the sides that stand to gain the most economic benefits are the Chinese and other provinces of Pakistan, but not the local people.

Even the Pakistani gains may be short-term, when one considers the long-term environmental consequences of some of these projects. Pakistan, especially, the country's military that has historically called the shot, should rethink its policy of giving the Chinese a *carte blanche* to build, whatever it wants to, in Gilgit-Baltistan.



Syed Iqbal Hasnain

(Syed Iqbal Hasnain, a glaciologist, is a Distinguished Fellow at the Stimson Center, in Washington, DC. He is the member of several high-level committees, including the United Nations Environment Program Committee on Global Assessment of Black Carbon and Troposphere Ozone.)

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