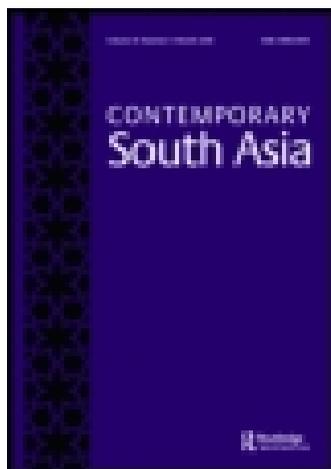


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Boundaries and space in Gilgit-Baltistan

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Boundaries and space in Gilgit-Baltistan

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Boundary-making in the Karakoram–Himalayan borderlands has found a diverse set of actors and expressions over time. Legacies from colonial borders are part of contemporary disputes about affiliation, participation, and space. Three aspects are addressed in this paper: first, the debate about ‘natural’ and ‘scientific’ boundaries for purposes of colonial territorial acquisition; second, postcolonial debates in the recent renaming game in Gilgit-Baltistan and its implications; and third, the attitudes of actors in exile and geopolitical players claiming to represent the aspirations of the inhabitants of Gilgit-Baltistan. The three perspectives reveal opportunities and constraints in border regimes that reflect power structures, internal and external modes of interference, and participation.

Keywords: Kashmir; Pakistan; conflict; colonial legacy; disputed territory

Introduction

Spatial perceptions and territorial divisions have changed significantly over time. Various actors have entered the stage: some colonial and postcolonial exponents have been driven by external interests, others are embedded in local politics and economies of exchange. Brenner (1999, 40) has stated that ‘globalization researchers have begun to deploy a barrage of distinctively geographical prefixes – e.g. “sub-”, “supra-”, “trans-”, “meso-”, and “inter-”, – to describe various emergent social processes that appear to operate below, above, beyond, or between entrenched geopolitical boundaries’. By overcoming a state-centrist perspective, he argues that a new global perspective leads to ‘the production of new configurations of territoriality on both sub- and supra-national geographical scales’ (Brenner 1999, 41). These new configurations are rooted in path-dependent developments with historical precedents. In ‘high mountain border regions’ (Bergmann et al. 2008, 210) of Inner Asia, contesting superpowers of their time such as Great Britain and Russia have shaped border demarcation and delineation.¹ The resulting borderlands experienced division and integration, hermetic closures and permeability, and refugee movements and emigration. Gilgit-Baltistan is a prime example of politico-territorial boundary-making and socio-economic transformations in space and time. Different actors have shaped a variety of attributions and interpretations. Gilgit-Baltistan is taken as an example of external and internal attempts at restructuring and boundary-making since colonial times. The ‘other’ beyond the border is often absent, but provides the reference arena for certain actions. During colonial times the gambit resulted in the demarcation of

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Russian and British spheres of influence. Since the independence of India and Pakistan, the contested borders have been located in the Kashmir realm. Within Pakistan the positioning of Gilgit-Baltistan seems to be a border-making process that is governed by a multitude of local and allochthonous stakeholders. In this paper, three perspectives on borders and territoriality are discussed: first, the colonial attempt to justify boundary-making from a positivist and scientific approach; second, post-independence regional negotiations about territorial divisions reflected in naming games; and third, external interferences by powerful stakeholders in the age of globalisation, perpetuating an arena of conflict.² Prior to the presentation of the three-dimensional results, some salient features of contemporary challenges and constraints in Gilgit-Baltistan's relationship with Pakistan's centre need to be highlighted in order to perceive the asymmetric circumstances.

Gilgit-Baltistan and Pakistan – a burdened relationship

When general elections were held in Pakistan in May 2013, the event was celebrated worldwide as the first election within 66 years of independence in which an elected government was replaced by an elected government after a full legislative period. For the citizens of Gilgit-Baltistan it was 'business as usual'. Although the Government of Pakistan has always and repeatedly claimed that Gilgit-Baltistan is an integral part of Pakistan – either as part of the Kashmir dispute or as a separate issue – the perception of citizens varies when it comes to responses and signals from the capital. The simple formula 'no vote and no tax-paying' only vaguely describes the complex relationship between the down-country centre and the mountainous periphery. The inhabitants of Gilgit-Baltistan have remained disenfranchised; they again were mere spectators in the election campaign for the federal assembly and the senate. They seem to be marginalised as persons with limited citizenship situated at the northern border. In their peripheral location, a border pass regime gives them certain travel, trade, and tariffs-related privileges in cross-boundary exchange with neighbouring China. Thus, they relive a legacy in which 'theoretical boundaries of citizenship were delimited and fastened to geopolitical borders as part of the process of post-colonial state formation' (Shneiderman 2013, 34). In contrast to the permeable Pak-China boundary, the border citizens are living in a cul-de-sac when it comes to the hermetically sealed 'line of control' separating Pakistan-administered Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan from Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir. Only a few persons who can claim that their families were separated in the aftermath of the Kashmir wars and a number of selected businessmen are occasionally permitted to cross the border between Muzaffarabad and Srinagar, but not yet in Gilgit-Baltistan. These borders created distinct units that have developed separately and moved away from the notion of a common Kashmiri population living on both sides of the line. Not only have two generations of division changed lifestyles and affiliations, but the inner differentiation also plays a major role, especially when it comes to people who are neither part of the dominant Pahari or Kashmiri language groups. Gilgit-Baltistan is a region where other vernaculars prevail that appear minor in relation to the dominant languages (Kreutzmann 2005). The prevailing Kashmir stalemate acts as a rationale for the maintenance of military strength in the region. The 'other' across the 'line of control' has to play the role of enemy rather than functioning as a trading partner and/or a distant relation from a similar historical and societal background. Commonalities play a minor role when military and strategic interests override economic advantages, social relations, and cross-border communication and result in standstill at the negotiation table. In a recent interview with 'Tehelka', Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, Chairman of the Hurriyat Conference who '... represented Kashmiri interests during the dialogue process between

India and Pakistan from 2003 to 2007' commented on the process to break the stagnation from Kashmir's perspective:

One of the biggest incentives for us was demilitarisation. We thought demilitarisation would ease up the oppressive situation in Kashmir. Open borders would give Kashmir an access to 'Azad Kashmir' and from thereon to Central Asia with which Kashmir is connected by culture and history. This would have boosted trade and travel and uncaged Kashmir, a gamechanger. Just imagine the impact 10 years down the line. Kashmir would be a source of harmony between India and Pakistan rather than discord. But New Delhi's negative approach and Pakistan's internal problems prevented this promising process from reaching its logical conclusion. There were also other reasons that stood in the way of a possible breakthrough: Pakistan's reservation about putting Gilgit and Baltistan on the table and India's reluctance on Ladakh. (Wani 2014, 10–11)

From the Gilgit-Baltistan viewpoint, both Kashmirs seem to be entities that should be kept at a distance in order to allow self-determined participation in state affairs.

The term Gilgit-Baltistan was introduced as the official name of the former Northern Areas of Pakistan in September 2009.³ The change of name did not significantly alter the existing relationship with the Pakistani state, which could be described as a relation between the ruling centre and Gilgit-Baltistan characterised by 'peripherality and liminality' (Butz and Cook, forthcoming). Caylee Hong calls the 2009 event 'liminality in disguise'. Using this term to characterise the undecided constitutional status as well as the temporal status, she underlines the ambiguity of the Pakistan Supreme Court that –10 years earlier – gave a verdict on the status of the Northern Areas:

... the Supreme Court held that there is no legal obligation to grant the people of the Northern Areas representation in the National Assembly. Rather, the Court found that the federal government's only obligation is to provide regional representation and access to the High Court, not the Supreme Court. This two-fold decision reifies the liminality of the people in the region. It confirms that the people of Gilgit-Baltistan are citizens with fundamental rights yet lack the right to representation in the critical decision-making body. (Hong 2013, 80)

Besides endorsing disenfranchisement for the National Assembly:

... the 2009 Order relies upon and concretizes liminality by excluding Gilgit-Baltistan from the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court of Pakistan ... [and it] reifies the liminality of Gilgit-Baltistan by creating a legal-political entity that is similar to a province but is largely controlled by the federal government. (Hong 2013, 81)

But how has the legal and political position of the Pakistani state towards Gilgit-Baltistan changed the liminal limbo and what further actions could change the situation? Two prominent dimensions of relationship are located in the economic and the political spheres. The World Bank assessed the status in economic terms:

With its weak economy, GB has a very limited revenue base, and with its unique constitutional status, whatever modicum of taxes that are collected within GB's jurisdiction, is deposited into the Federal Consolidated Fund (though the ESGO [Empowerment and Self Governance Order] provides for the establishment of a separate GB consolidated fund). Hence, the GoGB [Government of Gilgit-Baltistan] has no revenue of its own, and relies solely on grants from the federal budget to meet expenditure needs. (World Bank 2011, vi–vii)

Overall dependency on the centre characterises the budgetary relationship of Gilgit-Baltistan with the centre. In order to gain some insight into the political framework, the

Kashmir conflict and connected boundary issues need to be perceived in the wider context. When the political economist Zaidi stated in a recent article that in Pakistan ‘events with unintended consequences have shaped developments’ (2014, 53), he was referring to a number of external actors and triggered events that have shaped internal politics within Pakistan. Among these are the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and 9/11, with their grave and adverse consequences for Pakistan. The longest lasting issue may be the Kashmir conflict in which initially only two contenders raised their voices: India and Pakistan. In the meantime more voices can be heard and a number of variations in opinions about the future of a contested space have been articulated. The territorial issue is characterised by some vagueness as interested parties address different spaces when presenting their claims. Akbar Zaidi gives a warning for those looking at actors in Pakistan. He despises the classical view of clear-cut interest groups composed of the army, the military, the landlords, and the bureaucrats. Instead, he emphasises institutions within and cross-cutting the classical groups. Beyond a stagnating state structure and beyond the often applied religious hiatus, a dynamism of varying actors needs to be acknowledged in order

... to examine the numerous and often contradictory issues and problems that emerge in trying to look at a statist or Islamist Pakistan. Both undermine the vast array of processes that are at work and feed into the nature of Pakistan’s state and society. (Zaidi 2014, 53)

From the perspective of Gilgit-Baltistan – being under Pakistan’s administration – it could be worthwhile to examine boundary-making from a historical perspective prior to the Kashmir conflict, leading to claims of different actors in recent times who promoted their visions under the umbrella of the United Nations Organisation for Unrepresented Peoples (UNPO). Affiliations and dominations have changed over time; conflicts and claims have remained.

The desire for ‘natural boundaries’

The late nineteenth century was characterised by a search for ‘natural’ and/or ‘scientific’ boundaries that could separate the spheres of influence of strong contenders in a manner enabling imperial strategies to be disguised by objective parameters and acknowledged standards. Geographical societies played a major role in stimulating the debate. Especially in the north-western part of the subcontinent, a discussion arose about the ‘Indian Borderland’ (Holdich 1909) and its boundaries. Nature and science were two aspects, but in the long run ‘desirable’ boundaries were sought that fulfilled a number of criteria and were defined as cost efficient. The British explorer Elias (1886) identified these boundaries as ‘hill frontiers’ in contrast to river boundaries. During the ‘Great Game’ he searched for

... a possibility of coming to an arrangement with Russia on the subject, under which each party should keep the territory he now possesses. ... For this purpose the three chief steps required are (1) to define the boundaries in every direction; (2) either to conciliate or thoroughly overawe the discontented inhabitants; (3) to make no embarrassing claims for more territory, but rather abandon old claims if more desirable boundaries can thereby be secured. They have a large tract of poor mountainous country divided into a number of petty provinces, the borders of which are still open to dispute. (Elias 1886, 71–72)

These ideas were promoted 40 years after the Dogra rule had been installed in Kashmir, whereas the British–Kashmirian relations were based on the Treaty of Amritsar. Those ideas did not remain unchallenged. Leitner became a stern advocate of non-interference and widespread colonial abstention:

The neutralization of the Pamirs is the only solution of a difficulty created by the conjectural treaties of diplomatists and the ambition of military emissaries. Left as a huge happy hunting-ground for sportsmen, or as pasturage for nomads from whatever quarters, the Pamirs form the most perfect 'neutral zone' conceivable. That the wanderings of these nomads should be accompanied by territorial or political claims, whether by Russia, China, Afghanistan, Kashmir, or ourselves, is the height of absurdity. As for Hunza-Nagyr, the sooner they are left to themselves the better for us, who are not bound to help Kashmir in encroaching on them. (1891, 73)

The *Zeitgeist* was split in a 'forward group' of territorial claims and control, whereas its opponent opinion promoted neutrality. The subsequent boundary-making was part of a strategy to consolidate spheres of influence across borders and significantly affected the areas which are nowadays part of Gilgit-Baltistan. The Karakoram principalities became entities that – in the case of Hunza and Nager – enjoyed a special status as autonomous states under the dual rule in the Gilgit Agency. The British Political Agent and Kashmiri *Wazir-i-wazarat* shared the dominance and controlled the administration of the governorships of Puniyal, Yasin, Kuh, Ghizer and Ishkoman, the Chilas, and Baltistan Districts. The three principles promoted by Ney Elias were not implemented at all. The boundaries remained vague, nor was the political status clearly defined by international law. Hunza continued to have exchange relations with China until 1937 (Kreutzmann 1991). The term 'suzerainty' was supposed to keep affiliations vague: 'Though these [Hunza and Nager] are under the suzerainty of the Kashmir State, they are not part of Kashmir but separate states' (India Office Library & Records, 'Crown Representative's Records – Indian States Residencies – Gilgit, Chilas, Hunza and Nagir Files (Confidential)' (IOR/2/1086/303)). In 1935, the Maharaja of Kashmir leased the Gilgit Agency to British India for 60 years. Even the lease contract was vague in its wording as it defined the territory as '... so much of the Wazarat of Gilgit Province as lies beyond the right bank of the river Indus'.⁴ The territorial entities forming the frontier consisted of a heterogeneous conglomerate. Something was formed over time that Chad Haines described as follows:

The construction of the Gilgit Agency was not a simple by-product of the colonial cartographic endeavor ... The colonial state produced the frontier region through a complex web of processes, enacted over a one-hundred year period of time, that were grounded along the routes the British built into and through the region. (Haines 2004, 536)

Even before Pakistan's independence, the 'Gilgit Agency' was handed over or returned to Kashmiri rule on 1 August 1947. In the aftermath a local uprising supported by a conspiracy of army officers caused the arrest of the Kashmiri Governor Gansara Singh and the abolition of Dogra rule in Gilgit and Baltistan. A short-lived 'Independent Republic of Gilgit' was established on 1 November 1947, preparing the way for a unanimous accession to Pakistan (Sökefeld 1997). Consequently, Kashmir, on the one hand, and the Gilgit Agency (Northern Areas/Gilgit-Baltistan), on the other, have been distinguished as separate units by Pakistan state authorities, a fact that is reflected in distinct constitutional affiliations (Figure 1; Kreutzmann 2013). Its boundaries have not remained the same either.

Negotiating for acceptance

The Pakistan–China Boundary Treaty of 1963 was never acknowledged by India. Thus, when territorial control of an area of 8800 km² passed from Pakistan to China, another spatial dispute was added to the main question (Lamb 1964). The Kashmir stalemate –

Disputed territories and constitutional peculiarities in Western High Asia



Figure 1. Disputed territories and constitutional peculiarities in Western High Asia.

Source: The figure is a modified version from Kreutzmann (2013, 42). Design and copyright: Hermann Kreutzmann.

meaning the Indian refusal to accept a referendum about Kashmir's future, the military confrontation along the 'line of control', and the constantly growing number of victims on both sides – has led to a situation where a number of actors and stakeholders attempt to seek other options that are widely discussed in the region. Outside political scientists such as Robert Kaplan perceive Kashmir as a pawn suiting power politics within India and Pakistan:

Kashmir, the contested region over which India and Pakistan have fought for decades, is where the two countries' different personalities are most in evidence. According to Indiana University's Sumit Ganguly, India requires the Muslim-dominated Himalayan territory to substantiate

its claim as a multiconfessional democracy, rather than as a Hindu-dominated state, whereas Pakistan requires Kashmir to substantiate its claim as the chief remnant of Muslim al-Hind. (Kaplan 2012)

For them, the ‘old school’ geopolitical thinking (Mayfield 1955) persists as a dual contest between two newly independent states. Besides their attempt to acquire administrative and political control over a resource-rich and valuable territory, internal conflicts based on religious competition and national identity narratives are held responsible for the stalemate. For members of the civil society in Gilgit-Baltistan and Kashmir, the stakes have multiplied during the long-lasting contest out of which no longer lasting resolve has emerged. Kashmirian activists have advocated a third solution of an independent Kashmir. Within Gilgit-Baltistan different voices can be heard. An articulated voice of the Gilgit-based civil society distinguished four sets of prevalent opinions for future developments:

Full integration with Pakistan as equal citizens, meaning representation in federal legislature (National Assembly and Senate), share in federal divisible pool National Finance Commission Awards (NFC) which distributes funds between provinces through a formula of population, revenue and remoteness, and participation and representation in all federal bodies, bureaucracy, foreign services etc. the right to access the Supreme court of Pakistan which currently we can't. And in the same vein a full-fledged provincial status with all resources and structures like other province of Pakistan. The second thinking is integration in Kashmir-AJK and the third is independent Kashmir including GB, and the fourth is a GB Banana Republic! For the first group, the majority, Shia and Ismailia, who wish to integrate with Pakistan, there are following key challenges that remain despite the so-called self governance and empowerment order:

1. Continue to strive to achieve genuine self-rule and self-determination, the right to govern our own affairs on our own land, and take control of our own resources including water, mineral and other resources through peaceful, non-violent and democratic means;
2. Restoration of the state subject rule to stop balkanization of the area by outside people and interests;
3. Settlement of border disputes with NWFP through settling the return of Shin-Kohistan and Chitral to Gilgit-Baltistan put under the administrative control of NWFP during colonial times;
4. Strengthening the institutional, legal and administrative capacities of the Gilgit-Baltistan administration, building the capacity of the departments to develop and implement pro-poor, pro-gender, pro-growth, pro-culture and pro-environment policies, programmes and processes;
5. Strengthen the capacity of the judiciary to dispense justice for all and develop the capacity of Gilgit-Northern Scouts, KSF and the Gilgit-Baltistan Police to take care of their internal security and control law and order situations. However, there is a need to merit and sectarian and regional balance in recruitments, postings and promotions in such institutions on proportional basis;
6. Strike a new social contract with the people, focus on poverty reduction, economic growth, democratization and social sector development and most importantly elimination of corruption through decentralizing the local government system and promoting holistic development at grassroots levels through community governments at village and union levels, and devolving powers and functions to Tehsil and district levels.
7. Finally and most importantly, maintain and strengthen the fragile peace and social harmony through inter-communal dialogue, respect for each other, promoting pluralism and relationship building at various levels especially engaging the youth and women.

Let's sound optimists and pacifists. Let plurality of views flourish in Gilgit-Baltistan, let peace, development and democracy prevail. Let the progressive and open-minded people take leadership roles in their parties, in government and in society. And let the young, who now represent over 70% of the demography take leadership and speak for themselves and for their future.

Can Islamabad and the establishment let this happen? It is a win-win situation for Pakistan, Gilgit-Baltistan, Kashmir and the region.

The international rights forums, the EU, UN and other rights groups, media and civil society in Pakistan must advocate for the legitimate rights of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan, who are at the marginal-end of state-periphery relations and constitute ethnic and cultural minorities in the mainstream Pakistan, besides disenfranchised of their rights to self-determination and local governance in a disputed territory.⁵

Striving for equality and enfranchisement has been a stated aim over long periods, but has never been fulfilled in an acceptable manner. In recent years, good governance and the quest for social harmony have been added to the list as a majority of opinion leaders see their stakes floating away. Terrorist attacks have reached Gilgit-Baltistan on top of sectarian clashes that have claimed hundreds of lives in recent years (Hunzai 2013). Being excluded from civilian decision-making processes, the citizens of Gilgit-Baltistan attribute existing problems and risks to external interests and agents. Regional and national power games have found an arena in its northern periphery. In September 2009, some hope was generated when ‘an order to provide greater political empowerment and better governance to the people of Gilgit-Baltistan’ was announced. The administrative act was seen as a further step to reach equality by providing a political status to Gilgit-Baltistan that would come close to one of a province with all judicial and financial rights. Subsequently, a number of events had detrimental effects on the realisation of these goals. First, the Atabad landslide and the formation of the Atabad Lake in 2010 interrupted the Karakoram Highway between Pakistan and China, severely affecting the infrastructure and hampering economic development (Kreuzmann 2010). In the following couple of years, sectarian clashes and the Chilas massacre led to a temporary closure of this lifeline in its southern sector: On 18 February 2012, 18 Shia pilgrims were killed in Kohistan district on the Karakoram Highway; on 3 April, 20 Shia community members were killed at Chilas; on 16 August, near Babusar Pass 22 civilians were killed by a mob targeting Shia Muslims, but also causing the deaths of four Sunni Muslims who had protested against killing innocent fellow Muslims (Hunzai 2013, 2). Travelling on the Karakoram Highway has become a gamble and a challenge to which the state authorities responded by sending convoys of private and public vehicles equipped with police protection. On 22–23 June 2013, the Nanga Parbat massacre of 1 Pakistani and 10 foreign mountaineers added another aspect to terrorist attacks which in this form had been hitherto unknown in Gilgit-Baltistan. All events contributed to an economic crisis, an increase in security costs, and a widespread depression among civil society activists. External masterminds and the fabrication of their terrorist and/or sectarian-inspired attacks in Pakistan’s mountainous periphery underpinned the helplessness within Gilgit-Baltistan and the discomfort at being part of a conflict between India and Pakistan that makes the people in the Kashmir arena suffer. Bouzas (2012, 867) termed this as the ‘lack of a common sense of belonging’. The theme of enjoying only limited rights as ‘border citizens’ is governing local discourses where deprivation is generally acknowledged and where residents do not possess much bargaining power. Probably this is one reason why so much emphasis is put on toponymic terminology in alleviating conflicting constellations.

Naming games and their meanings

In contrast to waiting for the bilateral resolution of the pending Kashmir issue and its related questions, voices from the mountains are making themselves heard. ‘Mountain nationalists’ are striving for a combination of different territorial units that supposedly have a common historical ground and cultural heritage. The smaller entity features under the acronym GBC,

meaning Gilgit-Baltistan and Chitral (Figure 2). Here colonial administrative intervention and boundary-making are supposed to have been overcome. The former principality of Chitral was incorporated into the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP, now Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa) in 1901, but remained semi-autonomous under the rule of the Mehtar of Chitral until 1969.

Gilgit-Baltistan in contrast was administered under the ‘Gilgit Agency’ which initially was established in 1878. After a temporary closure, it remained functional from 1889 to 1974 when it was renamed ‘Northern Areas’. Not only regional representatives see an attraction in this constellation, but the World Bank and other development agencies such as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature also treat GBC as one development unit (Abdul 2005; Hunzai 2013, 12–13). Greater territorial designs are advocated by the followers of the Balawaristan movement who adhere to Gilgit-Baltistan in a narrow sense, but who in some contexts expand the ‘mountain land’ beyond GBC across the ‘line of control’ into Ladakh. Mountainness and occupation by lowland powers seem to be the common cause of a movement that is denominating all sections considered as ‘occupied’ by China, India, and Pakistan. Balawaristan is supposed to be rooted in Boloristan and Bolor. Early writers such as Humboldt (1844, 1, 150), Cunningham (1854, 46), and Davies (1862, 23) trace Bolor back to seventh-century common era Chinese travellers and link it to a vaguely defined area full of mineral wealth close to the Pamirs. The position and extent of Bolor have remained an enigma through the ages. Among many authors, Karl Jettmar served the purpose of the ‘mountain nationalists’ and distinguished between Little Bolor as the Gilgit Valley and Great Bolor as Baltistan (Jettmar 1977, 414–415, 433, 1980, 6, 30). Dardistan was the name preferred by the nineteenth-century London-based lobbyist for a neutralised mountain zone, Leitner (1893, 1894), who commissioned several maps depicting the area with Gilgit as its centre. The ambiguity of Dardistan as a territorial



Figure 2. Gilgit-Baltistan and Chitral (GBC). Design and copyright: Hermann Kreutzmann.

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reference has provided interested parties with ample space for manoeuvre. Attempts to give roots to historical entities are accompanied by recent demands for namings. When the alleged confusion of the Northern Areas with the terrorism-stricken NWFP initiated a debate in the Northern Areas Legislative Council on renaming the Northern Areas, a whole set of suggestions was made by interested parties. Each term that was promoted reflected certain territorial claims or contained strong links to different communities except for ‘Arz-i-Gulistan’, the country of flowers. Burushaski speakers favoured Burushal, Dardistan took first place with Shina speakers, and Sargin emerged as the term preferred by residents of Ghizer District (Dad 2007). A third strain followed the construction of the name Pakistan and suggested newly developed acronyms. Their complex and constructive character supposedly has the attraction of being unbiased. Bahqahistan – containing ‘baqah’ (Arabic for life) with the ‘-stan’ suffix for area – can be resolved into ‘Ba’ for ‘bam-e dunya’ (roof of the world), ‘qa’ for Karakoram, and ‘hi’ for Hindukush and Himalaya. The same dual explanation was given for Kuhimir – a combination from the Persian terms ‘kuh’ for mountain and ‘mir’ for ruler – and its translation as ‘mountain leader’; Kuhimir can be broken down into ‘ku’ for Karakoram, ‘hi’ for Himalaya and Hindukush; in addition the second syllable from Pamir completes the new term (Beg 2007). The purpose of the latter was to address orographic features rather than referring to controversial ethno-linguistic connotations. Finally, a search committee suggested the hyphenated Gilgit-Baltistan as the greatest common denominator, and it was then announced in the aforementioned ‘political empowerment and better governance’ order of 2009. While terminological debates have calmed down since, the relationship between the centre in Islamabad and the Gilgit periphery remains opaque and is modified with every change in the federal government: ‘There is no permanent power structure in Gilgit-Baltistan. Rather it mutates in tandem with the new configuration of power in the centre’ (Dad 2013). After the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) government in Islamabad was replaced by Nawaz Sharif’s Muslim League, the direct links of Gilgit-Baltistan’s Chief Minister Syed Mehdi Shah suffered from being sidelined. He substantially gained in influence and acceptance from his affiliation with the PPP during the Zardari period when the Gilgit-Baltistan ordinance was signed in 2009. Internal battles are still focusing on the full incorporation of Gilgit-Baltistan into Pakistan and the granting of provincial status and enfranchisement. The former Pakistani ambassador Asif Ezdi judged that Islamabad wisely negotiated the narrow path between providing greater participation of Gilgit-Baltistan in province-level acting without giving up its international demand for an inclusive referendum about the fate of Kashmir (Asif 2009). This view is endorsed in the World Bank report:

At present, the granting of full provincial status to GB and enfranchising its people at the national level are not viewed as feasible by the central government due to constitutional constraints and concerns that this could be interpreted as an acceptance of the status quo on the Kashmir issue. (World Bank 2011, vi)

Beyond these domestic affairs, other processes have brought Gilgit-Baltistan back into a geopolitical context.

Outside stakeholders

When Selig Harrison, a renowned political analyst and journalist from the Cold War era, published an article in the *New York Times* (2010) titled ‘China’s Discreet Hold on Pakistan’s Northern Borderlands’, he stimulated a renewed debate on a ‘New Great Game’.

He identified Chinese engineers and labourers working on the improvement of Gilgit-Baltistan's Karakoram Highway as an 'influx of an estimated 7000–11,000 soldiers of the People's Liberation Army'. The attempt to access the warm waters of the Arabian Sea from Central Asia, first attributed to Soviet strategies during the Cold War era in Afghanistan and Baluchistan, was now applied to the Chinese Government's attitude towards Pakistan in the Kashmir corridor. Consequently, Selig Harrison advised: 'Precisely because the Gilgit-Baltistan region is so important to China, the United States, India and Pakistan should work together to make sure that it is not overwhelmed, like Tibet, by the Chinese behemoth.' The article was immediately reprinted in the Indian press, defence journals, and websites. Reflecting on the local perspective, Beg (2010) asked: 'What is in this story for us, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan?' He provided an answer motivated by expected economic prospects:

Many people here in Gilgit Baltistan are of the view that renewed closer economic ties with China and the Xinjiang province will benefit the people of Gilgit Baltistan and also create deeper strategic relations between China and Pakistan which is in the interest of regional peace and security and shall promote regional economic integration between South and Central Asia.

Leaving aside any questions of belonging and representation, he advocated a pragmatic judgement guided by creating social harmony through prosperity.

Selig Harrison stirred a controversial debate that played a major role when a conference was held in Brussels on 5 May 2011, supported by the (UNPO under the heading 'Gilgit-Baltistan. A critical but unknown pivot of South Asia under threat.' Originally initiated to find support by members of the European Parliament for the cause of Gilgit-Baltistan, the conference mutated into a platform for a variety of better or less-known organisations which claimed to be the 'true' representatives of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan. The leading role was played by the chairman of the Balawaristan National Front, Khan, who equates Balawaristan (highland) with Gilgit-Baltistan 'occupied by Pakistan, India and China' (2010, 1). While Hamid Khan has left Yasin and is residing in Brussels, an activist from Baltistan, Senge H. Sering, distributed the leaflets of the Gilgit Baltistan National Congress and business cards of the Institute of Gilgit Baltistan Studies. As president of the Washington DC-based Institute of Gilgit Baltistan Studies, he promoted the institute's demands for 'demilitarization of Gilgit Baltistan, political and judicial autonomy, genuine democracy, and elimination of extremism and terrorism from the region'. Strong language and accusations are used in their publications:

Pakistan's illegal presence, occupation, last colony, censorship, oppressive military rule, rights violation, molestation of local women by terrorists and Pakistani forces, involuntary disappearances, slaughter of local Shias and Sufis, oppressive policies, upholding cultural and religious identity, harassment, torture, abduction of local rights defenders demanding self-determination

which seem to be in tune with the Gilgit Baltistan National Congress, whose office is residing under the same address in the USA. Here, we have the case of another outside influence of a representative from Pakistan-administered Gilgit-Baltistan who prior to the foundation of the institute was 'in India for over a year until March 2010 as Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA)'.⁶ Other participants were Afzal Taher, Kashmir International Front, based in London and Mumtaz Khan, Canadian International Centre for Peace and Democracy, based in Toronto. Common to all activists was that none was residing in the region and all seemed to be sponsored through outside channels.

During the Brussels conference, an Indian TV team interviewed a number of participants in order to support its thesis – based on Selig Harrison’s assessment – that China had conquered a part of Gilgit-Baltistan. Khan (2010, 87–90) presented so-called evidence of ‘Chinese built airstrips on KKH’ by printing photographs of sections of the newly built Karakoram Highway, including bends in the road and sections close to steep mountainous defiles. None of the commentators had any proof of armed presence apart from interpreting the road-builders and engineers as disguised soldiers. The Brussels event is only one occasion when it becomes obvious that outside interests and sponsorships are stimulating a conflict and battle for stakes in Gilgit-Baltistan. Consequently, it is not surprising that a young scholar and peace activist attributed different roles to a number of actors in the game for dominance.

Aejaz (2007) presented a ‘Gilgit-conflict mapping’ (Figure 3) in his thesis on ‘Sectarian conflicts in Northern Areas, Pakistan’ as an arena in which he identified 10 actors and players.⁷ Within the Gilgit-Baltistan realm, he put Sunni and Shia groups on the battleground with Jihadis and the Pakistan Government present. Shia groups are depicted as being in conflict with all others who form a Sunni alliance. All four actors rely on outside support from religious organisations and from governments such as India, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. While other religious groups watch from outside along with NGOs, media, and human rights groups, only arms traders are singled out as additional active players. The sketch reproduces a perspective that is linked to the Isma‘ili policy of ‘non-interference’ in conflicts as demanded by their spiritual leader the Aga Khan. The ‘Isma‘ili Himalaya’ (Steinberg 2011, 109) does not seem to be part and parcel of the conflict situation: a notion which is shared by many observers and reflected in the dominant conflict constellations. In a list of 22 major ‘sectarian clashes’ that took place in Gilgit-Baltistan between 1982 and 2012, three cases involved Ismailis.⁸ Outside interference and especially external funds and weaponry are often referred to as being responsible for bringing a conflict into the mountains that has its main arena and actors in the forelands.

Conclusion

The common denominator of all three examples is that regional stability was never reached, but external interests have persisted. The colonial search for scientific borders and natural boundaries never materialised in tangible results. In contrast, colonial boundary practice created far-reaching postcolonial legacies. Besides ethnicity and sectarian issues, the wide range of unresolved conflicts regarding the administrative and political status interferes with a missing consensus on what territorial part has which allegiance to either country and with adverse economic effects. Sara Shneiderman’s view – derived from another Himalayan border section – that ‘... the same boundary may appear as a site of closure and one of opportunity for different citizens at the same time’ (Shneiderman 2013, 27) does not necessarily hold true for the residents of Gilgit-Baltistan, but may be true for some activists who operate either from the other side of the ‘line of control’ or from a third foreign country. In this respect, colonial boundary-makers have been replaced by other external actors. Along economic lines the inhabitants of Baltistan have been identified as profiteers from a military-stimulated economy. The poorest section of the Maharaja of Kashmir’s dominions has managed to significantly reduce the welfare gap with neighbouring districts (Khan 2009, 138). Overall, Gilgit-Baltistan has profited from its strategic location in terms of infrastructure and development efforts. Yet for activists within and outside of Gilgit-Baltistan, the present situation is often perceived as stagnant, rather detrimental in economic terms and unacceptable from the self-determinist perspective.

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Notes

1. For a broader discussion of borderland issues at the ‘edge of nation states’, see Diener and Hagen (2010, 4–11); Kreutzmann (2013); and Schendel (2005).
2. The three perspectives are based on different source material. Colonial material is mainly derived from the collection of the India Office in the British Library. Ney Elias is introduced as a representative of his time who articulated his ideas in such a manner that they were taken up in the ‘Zeitgeist’ and discussed in colonial and diplomatic circles. The other material is mainly based on my own fieldwork collections and interviews in Gilgit-Baltistan since 1981 by introducing a few voices from the region that are embedded in public discourses within news media. No comprehensive analysis of the variety of ideas and interpretations is attempted here.
3. Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas (2009, to be published in the next issue of the extraordinary gazette of Pakistan Part-II), 61 pages. In the course of this contribution, Gilgit-Baltistan and Northern Areas describe the same spatial entities in different time frames and can be used interchangeably in certain contexts.
4. The quote is taken from the so-called Rumbold Report which summarised the investigation of the situation in Gilgit for the UK Government (India Office Library & Records 1948).
5. Personal communication with Ghulam Amin Beg on 15 April 2011.
6. The quote is taken from an article in the ‘Hindustan Times’ (2010); see Sering (2010).
7. The author is grateful to Aejaz Karim for allowing the reproduction of his sketch. It is one of the few spatial expressions of the conflict-setting in Gilgit-Baltistan and therefore reproduced in its original version.
8. Based on the list in Kreutzmann (2013, 54–57). It is worth mentioning that conflicts with Ismaili involvement have been more frequent in Chitral.

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