



**Vivekananda
International
Foundation**

VIF Brief | March 2024

Kashmir-Xinjiang

Linkages in Modern
and Contemporary Times



Prof. K.Warikoo

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Published in 2024 by

Vivekananda International Foundation

3, San Martin Marg | Chanakyapuri | New Delhi - 110021

Tel: 011-24121764 | Fax: 011-66173415

E-mail: info@vifindia.org

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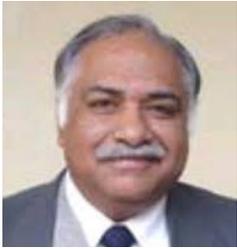
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Prof. Kulbhushan Warikoo is a renowned scholar and expert in Himalayan and Central Asian Studies. He has taught for over 30 years at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, where he also founded the Central Asian Studies Programme. He has authored/edited 23 books, including notable titles like *Himalayan Frontiers of India*, *Religion and Security in South and Central Asia*, *Xinjiang: China's Northwest Frontier and Eurasia* and *India: Regional Perspectives*, *The Other Kashmir: Society and Culture in the Karakoram Himalayas*. Prof. Warikoo has travelled extensively to conduct his research in Xinjiang and various Central Asian countries including Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and the Siberian republics of Khakassia, Buryatia, Tuva and Altai, among others. Besides his notable contributions as an author, Prof. Warikoo serves as the founder-editor of the quarterly journal *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies*, which has been in publication since 1997. Through this journal, he continues to promote and explore issues related to the Himalayan and Trans-Himalayan region in South and Central Asia.

Kashmir-Xinjiang Linkages in Modern and Contemporary Times

Due to its geographical contiguity and cultural affinity with Xinjiang and linkage with the Silk Route by means of much frequented Srinagar-Leh-Yarkand-Kashgar route, Kashmir played an important role in India's relations with Central Asia since early times. But in modern times, the extent and pattern of political and commercial contacts between Kashmir and Xinjiang was conditioned by the Anglo-Russian rivalry over Central Asia. Due to its strategic location vis-a-vis Central Asia, Kashmir and its frontier territories of Ladakh, Gilgit, Baltistan, Hunza and Nagar came to occupy a pivotal position in the British strategy of checkmating Tsarist Russia and later Soviet Russia. With the creation of Dogra State of Jammu and Kashmir in 1846 AD, the movement of trade and traffic between Kashmir, Ladakh and Xinjiang increased.

This study examines, records and reflects upon such a rich and productive experience and its implications for the ongoing border dispute between India and China in Ladakh-Xinjiang sector. China has not only brought the remote north-western frontier region of Xinjiang close to China's mainland both by air, rail and road network, but it has turned Xinjiang into a bridge to

** This paper is excerpted from the author's book *The Crossroads: Kashmir- India's Bridge to Xinjiang*. (New Delhi, Rupa, 2023.)*

extend its direct transportation links with adjoining Central Asia and also with Pakistan via Karakoram Highway and now CPEC. China's experience in this region offers important lessons for India. By Kashmir we mean undivided State of Jammu and Kashmir including Ladakh, Hunza, Gilgit, Baltistan and adjoining frontier territories. Throughout this study, the Chinese official name Xinjiang (Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region) has been used, which is interchangeable with Chinese Turkestan, Sinkiang, Eastern Turkestan, Kashgaria, Alty Shahr, which are invariably used in the accounts of the British officials, travelers etc. Author's experiences during his field *studies across the length and breadth of Xinjiang have been factored in the study, which focuses on the period beginning with mid-nineteenth century (i.e. founding of Jammu and Kashmir State by Maharaja Gulab Singh) up to contemporary times.

Kashmir and Xinjiang being at the crossroads of High Asia had active exchange of men, materials and ideas through history. Kashmir was the cradle from where Buddhism spread to Xinjiang and further to Central Asia, Tibet and China. Kashmiri scholars and monks who were held in high esteem, translated a number of Buddhist and Sanskrit texts into Chinese. Since many of these texts have become extinct in India, concerted steps need to be taken to retrieve these scriptures/texts which are still preserved in China, Mongolia, Buryatia etc. Xinjiang was virtually an extension of Indic cultural, literary and Buddhist space.

Gilgit, Chilas, Chitral, Baltistan, Ladakh, Zaskar and other frontier areas of Kashmir have been important mile posts of the famed Silk Route. The preponderance of carvings and inscriptions of pre-historic and Buddhist period in Gilgit-Baltistan region provide sufficient evidence of the prevalence of Buddhism in this region in pre-Islamic times. The sites at Shaital, Thor, Thaplan, Shing Nala, Satpara, Kargah, Chilas etc. that still today, have high concentration of drawings of stupas, Buddhas,

Bodhisattvas, jatakas etc. besides thousands of inscriptions written in Kharosthi, Brahmi, Sanskrit, Sogdian and Tibetan scripts. Some 80 per cent are in Brahmi script. Prof. Karl Jettmar and his team in Pak-German Study Group did pioneering work on rock carvings and inscriptions in this region. The diversity and density of rock carvings (about 50,000 carvings and 5,000 inscriptions) in Gilgit-Baltistan turned the area into one of the most important petroglyph sites in the world. Unfortunately over 30,000 carvings and inscriptions are doomed to be inundated due to the ongoing construction of Diemer-Bhasha dam.¹ The world famous Gilgit Manuscripts (*Lotus Sutra*) written on birch bark were first discovered in 1931 just by chance in a ruined stupa near Gilgit. Obviously it was through this region, which was the crossroads of ancient routes and cultures and attracted travelers, traders and pilgrims, that Buddhism was transmitted to Xinjiang and beyond.

Kashmir was an eminent centre of Buddhist learning attracting Buddhist scholars, monks and pilgrims from Xinjiang and adjoining territories. Kashmiri scholars and monks were held in high esteem in Xinjiang and China. Young men from Kashgar, Khotan, Kucha and other places would come to Kashmir for higher learning. Buddhism spread to Xinjiang and beyond during Ashoka's time since third century BC. Small colonies of Indians had come up in parts of southern Xinjiang along the Silk Route. Chinese scholars confirm that a Kashmiri monk Virochana built a Buddhist shrine in Khotan in 80 BC, "which became the first Buddhist temple in Chinese history, and was worshipped mainly by Indian immigrants."² They also affirm that "Buddhist art, as an arm of the religion, was introduced in Yutian (Khotan) in Xinjiang from Kashmir, soon after the founding of the Yutian state".³ Buddhism spread from Khotan to Kashgar, Niya, Cherchen, Loulan, Aksu, Kucha, Karashahr, Turfan and to other parts of China. The Kushans and particularly Kanishka who had extended his rule to Xinjiang, spread Buddhism far and wide in Xinjiang, Central Asia and China.

Kanishka organized 4th Buddhist Council in Kashmir, in which around 500 Buddhist scholars are said to have participated.

To quote a Chinese scholar, “People of China know about Kashmir since ancient times. China has had a tradition of history writing since ancient times. Same tradition existed in Kashmir in the Indian sub-continent. Historiographical tradition of Kashmir is very ancient. The tradition of friendly and cultural relations between China and Kashmir is over 2,000 years old. These ties flourished during the Buddhist period. Buddhism spread in China from Kashmir. Chinese monks would come to Kashmir to learn Buddhist philosophy and literature. They have left a valuable record about Kashmir. Chinese have translated many such works.”⁴

A long series of Kashmiri monks and scholars, “who combined at the same time a high standard of learning, both linguistic and exegetic, with the audacity of explorers”,⁵ contributed to spread of Buddhism in Xinjiang, Central Asia and China through translation of Buddhist teachings and texts into Chinese language.

To name a few Sanghabhuti, Gautama Sanghdeva, Punyatrata, Dharmayasas, Vimalaksha, Buddhayasas, Dharmamitra and Kumarajiva played key role in the propagation of Buddhism in Xinjiang and China.

At the same time, Chinese pilgrims and scholars also traversed long distances through the inhospitable desert and high mountains to reach Kashmir



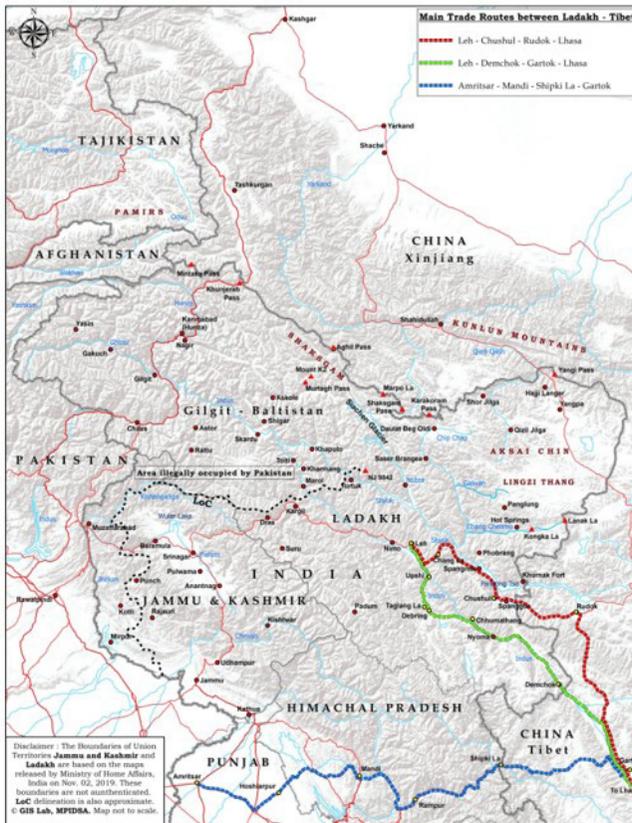
Author standing in front of Kumarajiva's Statue at Kizikaves

in their quest for knowledge. This vibrant exchange of men of learning and spirituality between Kashmir and Xinjiang continued at least till tenth century AD. To name a few Fa-Hien, Che-mong, Fa-Yong, Hiuen Tsang, Ou-Kong, Wu-Kong were notable Chinese pilgrims who travelled overland from China through Xinjiang to Gilgit, Ladakh and Kashmir.

Close political and cultural contacts between Kashmir and Xinjiang were witnessed during the rule of Karkota dynasty (625-855 AD) and Tang dynasty (618-690,705-907 AD) in China. Facing hostilities from the Arabs and Tibetan incursions in seventh century AD, Tang court had established “diplomatic contacts with at least three important kingdoms in the southern Hindukush area, Jibin (Kapisa, around the present day Kabul region), Xieyou (Zabulistan , present day Ghazni region) and Gushimi (Kashmir)”.⁶ Al Beruni speaks of a victory obtained by Lalitaditya (725-61 AD) over the Turks and that Kashmiris continued to celebrate this victory even in his time. Tang annals inform that in the eighth century AD, ambassadors were exchanged between Kashmiri rulers Chandrapida or Tchen-To-lo-pi-li in Chinese, and Lalitaditya or Muto-pi in Chinese and Tang rulers . In 720 AD, Tang court is reported to have dispatched an envoy to Kashmir to bestow the title of ‘King of Kashmir’ on Chandrapida.⁷ In 733 AD, the new Kashmiri ruler Lalitaditya Muktapida sent his envoy to Chinese emperor with a letter informing him about his military victory over the Tibetans, and his offer of continued support to China. To quote Tan Sen Sen, “Elated by Lalitaditya’s offer of support, the Chinese emperor praised the Kashmiri king and bestowed the title of ‘King’ on him”.⁸

Khotan was the last citadel of Buddhism, which fell to Islamic invaders in early 11th century. It had a colony of Kashmiri monks and settlers. Aurel Stein during his archeological expedition in Khotan was “struck with the resemblance of features between the Khotanese and the Kashmiris, a resemblance difficult to define, yet all the more noteworthy on account of

unmistakable peculiarity of type presented by the Kashmiris”.⁹ This author also noticed the similarity in the ethnic features of indigenous Khotanese and Kashmiris, during his visit to Khotan over two decades ago. I also noticed *mandala/yantra* symbols drawn/engraved on the wooden false ceiling of the hotel in Khotan where I stayed. This clearly indicates that the Khotanese people retain the memory of their pre-Islamic heritage.



Enjoying a central position in the network of caravan routes that were linked to the Silk Route, Ladakh acted as the gateway in India-Xinjiang exchanges. Leh, Ladakh was the terminal point of multilateral trade carried between India, Xinjiang, Tibet and Central Asia. Though Ladakh's place

in India-Xinjiang trade was only that of a transit emporium, bulk of trade passed through the Srinagar-Leh-Yarkand route. Movement of Ladakh's trade with Tibet and Xinjiang clearly shows that there existed no direct trade between Tibet and Xinjinag. Tibet received Chinese goods such as silver ingots (*yambus*), carpets, China silk, coarse cotton goods etc. from Ladakh which received the same from Xinjiang.

Indian trade with the towns of Yarkand, Kashgar and Khotan in Xinjiang was carried through Kashmir and Ladakh. Xiniang's exports to Ladakh and Kashmir comprised gold and silver, hemp drug, shawl wool, carpets and felts, Chinese tea-cups, leather-ware, coarse cotton cloths, raw silk and ponies. Out of these items bullion, cannabis (*charas*), raw silk and shawl-wool constituted the major imports. The Yarkandi and Andijani traders used to bring these goods to Ladakh where they exchanged the same with their Indian counterparts. Occasionally these traders would move forward to Kashmir and Punjab in the hope of realizing better profits. Similarly Indian traders would also proceed beyond Ladakh towards Yarkand to make direct purchases at relatively lower prices. Indian traders brought to Leh, Indian and British made cotton cloths, brocades, Kashmir shawls, indigo, spices, dyed goat skins, opium, preserved fruits, coral, indigenous medicines, sugar and books.

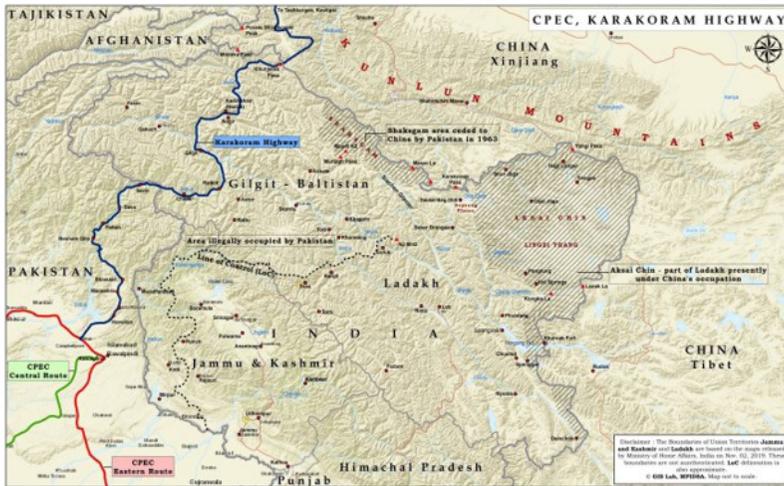
Indian exports to Xinjiang via Leh-Yarkand route comprised tea, indigo, dyes and paints, muslin, brocades (*Kimkhab*), velvet, cotton goods (both Indian and European), red dyed goat skins (*Lakhi*), otter skins and furs, sugar, spices, indigenous medicines, Kashmir shawls, coral etc., for which goods there existed a good demand among the people of Central Asia. Indian goods were consumed in southern oasis cities of Yarkand, Kashgar, Khotan, Maralbashi, Yangi Hissar, Karghalik and Aksu in Xinjiang. But for the direct export of its shawl produce, Kashmir's involvement in the India-Xinjiang trade was limited to being a transit station for the transmission

of Indian goods to Xinjiang. Hand-made books, mainly religious and historical in character, which were produced by Kashmiri calligraphists, were also exported.

During the years 1917 to 1931 goods worth about 28.5 million rupees were exported from India to Xinjiang through Kashmir and Ladakh of which European cotton goods and silks, dyed skins, indigo, spices and tea constituted the main items. In the same period, merchandise valued at about 33 million rupees was imported from Xinjiang into Ladakh and Kashmir of which cannabis (*charas*), Russian gold and paper rubles, gold dust, raw silk, carpets and felts were the main items. Balance of trade thus stood in Xinjiang's favour. India-Xinjiang trade through Kashmir and Ladakh, which had scaled an unprecedented height of more than 6.8 million rupees during the year 1920-21,¹⁰ began to decline in value soon after the opening of Russian overland trade with Xinjiang. From late 1930s onwards, internal disorders in Xinjiang began to act as a stumbling block to this trade which finally ceased to flow since 1949 following the Communist takeover of Xinjiang and subsequent closure of Xinjiang to outside traffic. This deprived Ladakh and Kashmir of their importance as emporiums of Indo-Central Asian overland trade that passed through a network of caravan trails criss-crossing Ladakh and Kashmir

Gilgit-Kashgar route was much less frequented than the Leh-Yarkand-Kashgar route. In 1936, total trade carried via Gilgit route was only 1 million rupees as against over 2 million rupees traded via Leh-Yarkand route ¹¹, i.e. less by 20 times. Yet this route has been built into a modern Karakoram Highway connecting Pakistan overland with China and has now been upgraded to be part of CPEC. It gives impetus to Pakistan's strategic depth in Central Asia. As against this, India is caged in the strategic bottleneck, lacking any overland connectivity with Central Asia. While as China is pursuing its BRI, India can engage China for reviving

the traditional Leh-Karakoram Pass-Yarkand-Kashgar and Leh-Chang Chenmo-Yarkand routes to Xinjiang and Leh-Demchok-Gartok-Lhasa route to Tibet. This will be a major confidence building measure between the two countries.



Through its history, China has remained vulnerable in Xinjiang to domestic rebellions and external pressures. In Tang period, when China was faced with Arab, Turk and Tibetan attacks in Xinjiang, Tang rulers sought support of and alliance with the Kashmir ruler Lalitaditya. They received Lalitaditya's ambassador with honour and issued an imperial edict acknowledging Lalitaditya's kingship in Kashmir. Similarly in medieval and modern times, Chinese authorities sought friendship with and support of the Dogra rulers of Kashmir, chiefs of Hunza and Ladakh, against the Kyrgyz, Khoja and other rebels in Xinjiang. In contemporary times, China has found a subservient ally and partner in Pakistan which has been occupying Gilgit and Baltistan since 1948, to fulfil its strategic objectives through military alliance and now CPEC.

The Dogra rulers of Jammu and Kashmir, Gulab Singh and his son Maharaja Ranbir Singh, though subject to British paramourty, continued

to maintain their relations with Central Asia and Tibet. In 1865, the chief of Khotan Haji Mohammad Habibullah sent several emissaries to Ladakh and Kashmir in the hope of securing military assistance against attacks by Tungan and Chinese forces¹². However, all his efforts went in vain due to the British discouraging the Kashmir Durbar for having any dealings with the Central Asian chiefs. As Anglo-Russian rivalry gained momentum in mid-nineteenth century, the British became highly averse to any direct diplomatic contacts between Kashmir Durbar and Central Asian chiefs. For their part, Dogra rulers of Kashmir sought to retain their influence in Xinjiang, and therefore regularly exchanged envoys with the region, often without the knowledge of the British. The Dogra rulers would provide hospitality to the visiting nobility, chiefs and envoys from Kokand and Eastern Turkestan who visited Ladakh and Kashmir intermittently, besides regular visits by traders and Haj pilgrims. Occasionally, Central Asian fugitives would flee to Ladakh and Kashmir, either to escape reprisals from their rivals at home; or to bring their wealth (gold, silver etc.) out of Eastern Turkestan safely to Ladakh and Kashmir; or to seek moral and material support from the Maharaja of Kashmir and his representatives. So we have the families of Habibullah Khan, former chief of Khotan, Beg Kuli Beg, the son and successor of Yakub Beg, and Syed Yakub Khan Torah, the envoy of Yakub Beg and so many wealthy merchants and nobles seeking to stay or keep their wealth in Kashmir, without any threat to their lives and property. Most of these fugitives used Kashmir as their first stop over before they emigrated to Russian Turkestan or Turkey. However, Kashmir's ongoing contacts and friendly exchanges with the rulers of Kashgaria provided a readymade launching pad to the British for playing their 'Great Game' in Xinjiang and Central Asia. Kashmir and its frontier territories proved to be valuable listening posts for the British not only to monitor developments there, but also to launch their missions such as those of Robert Shaw, T.D. Forsyth, Ney Elias and many others to Xinjiang from Kashmir.

Britain focussed on securing the overland approaches to India through Hindu Kush, Pamirs and Xinjiang abutting the frontiers of Kashmir and Ladakh. The tightening of British control over Kashmir and its frontiers assumed special significance in the context of Russian advance in Central Asia. Due to its strategic location, Kashmir assumed importance in the big power game as it was used as convenient outpost for extending British control over the tribal territories and monitoring Russian movements in Central Asia and Xinjiang.

That Hunza exercised rights in the trans-Karakoram tract in Taghdumbash Pamirs, Shimshal, Shaksgam and Raskam Valleys , is established beyond doubt. Hunza is believed to have conquered Raskam, Oprang, Taghdumbash, Dafdar, Erijilga and Wakhijir in 1760 AD during a campaign against the Kyrgyz incursions, and started levying taxes on the people of these places.¹³ The successive Mirs of Hunza believed that they could retain their rights in the trans-Karakoram tracts through maintaining cordial relations with the Chinese authorities in Xinjiang, which they did by exchanging annual presents with Kashgar. On their part, the Chinese authorities in Xinjiang were in awe of the Hunzakuts due to their strong fighting capacities and their raids on the Pamirs and the trading caravans. Hunza exercised its rights of cultivating lands in Raskam and collecting taxes in Taghdumbash at least till 1937, when the Mir stopped sending his annual customary present of gold dust to Kashgar. Even during the warlord regimes in Xinjiang, Hunza exercised its cultivation rights in Raskam and collected taxes from Taghdumbash Pamirs, as heretofore. During Chiang Kai-Shek's Nationalist Government, the Hunza envoys and General Zhao Xiguang, Nationalist Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Xinjiang Garrison Force in southern Xinjiang, signed an agreement to restore the old connections between Hunza and Xinjiang in early 1948.¹⁴ But due to the ongoing armed conflict between India and Pakistan in Kashmir and occupation of Gilgit including Hunza by Pakistan, now all

external relations of Hunza were conducted by Pakistan.

Due to their pre-occupation with their broader imperial interests, the British did not pursue the matter of definition of Hunza's border with Xinjiang, as their priority remained to secure consular status for their representative at Kashgar. With the result, India-China border in Hunza and Ladakh sectors skirting Xinjiang was not demarcated. The British policy of appeasing China meant abandoning Kashmir's claims on Shahidulla, and keeping Hunza claims on Raskam and Taghdumbash at the back burner. The British encouraged the Chinese to occupy the 'no man's land' in the Taghdumbash Pamirs to forestall Russians from occupying the same. It debunks the Chinese narrative describing British Raj's expansionism as the source of Sino-Indian border dispute. In reality, the reluctant Chinese were made to occupy the vacant territory in the trans-Karakoram area, by active British inducement in order to keep Russians at bay.

After 1949 China continued to evince interest in Hunza, showing parts of its territory within China in its maps.¹⁵ In late 1950s, reports came in about Chinese troops entering Hunza border and taking away cattle from there.¹⁶ Concerned over Chinese actions, Pakistan approached China for boundary negotiations. After Pakistan supported China's admission to the United Nations and declared its support to One China policy, China withdrew in January 1962 its earlier disputed maps.¹⁷ China and Pakistan signed the Sino-Pak Boundary Agreement on 2 March 1963 in Beijing. Whereas Pakistan recognized Chinese sovereignty over thousands of square kilometers in the trans-Karakoram areas of Raskam, Shaksgam and Taghdumbash Pamirs, it claims to have gained about 750 square miles of territory including the salt mines of Oprang.¹⁸

Though Xinjiang's border abutting the Pak-occupied Hunza, Shigar and Ghanchi districts of Gilgit-Baltistan west of the Karakoram Pass, is 438

kilometers (272 miles), the rest of the boundary is between Indian Union Territory of Ladakh and China's Xinjiang. Pakistan described itself as the gainer by entering into this agreement, which eliminated the potential source of conflict between the two countries. It laid the foundation of all-weather friendship and strategic alliance between China and Pakistan, with India being their main target. By accepting Ladakh area to be under the Chinese authority, Pakistan sought to give an upper hand to China over India. That China refused to discuss during the Sino-Indian border talks held in 1960, the alienation of Ladakh-Xinjiang border west of the Karakoram pass, it being under the occupation of Pakistan, points to the pre-meditated design of China on this issue. This was followed by concrete steps in forging the Sino-Pak strategic alliance through the building of Karakoram Highway and now the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, which pass through the Pak-occupied territory of Gilgit and Baltistan. Reports have also come in about China having built feeder road eastward through the Shaksgam, Raskam and Shimshal Valleys linking Gilgit with Khotan, which is an important military base situated at the cross-section of the Tibet-Xinjiang Highway and Hotan-Golmud Highway. As such, China shrewdly utilized the historical legacy of Xinjiang-Hunza linkages to its great strategic advantage vis-à-vis India. India needs to draw lessons from the well calculated Chinese strategy of extending its reach across the Xinjiang borders into Gilgit, which came in handy to Pakistan for forging a strategic alliance with China. While strengthening its military defences and border infrastructure in Ladakh sector, India needs to weigh diplomatic option of meaningful engagement with China to resolve the Ladakh-Xinjiang border issue with a set goal of gaining the strategic heights and passes in the area.

The Shahidulla affair exposes the British duplicity of sacrificing Kashmir's claims over Shahidullah situated about 70 miles across the Karakoram Pass. Since the Chinese had established their frontier posts on the north

side of Kilian and Sanju passes and also at Kokyar leaving Shahidulla outside their jurisdiction, Kashmir authorities had established a frontier post at Shahidulla. Kashmir State had a vested interest in the free flow of trade that passed through the Leh-Yarkand route, particularly because the bulk quantities of fine shawl wool imported from Turfan, Yarkand and Lhasa sustained the lucrative shawl industry in the Valley. Dogra rulers were conscious of the need to insulate northern frontiers of Kashmir from any possible alien incursions following political strife and instability in Xinjiang. Shahidulla was thus sought to be used by Kashmir Durbar as a forward outpost in the fringe of Central Asia for monitoring developments in that quarter. Chinese authorities in Xinjiang continued to deem Shahidulla outside their jurisdiction even as late as 1888. Though Kashmir authorities were anxious to reoccupy Shahidullah, they were dissuaded from doing so by the British representatives in Kashmir and Ladakh.

As the British priority was to join the two ends of Afghan and Chinese frontiers at the Pamirs in a bid to create a wedge to separate the British and Russian empires in Asia, the reluctant Chinese authorities were induced to extend their control beyond the Kuen Lun upto Karakoram. As such, the British did not allow the Kashmir Durbar to reoccupy Shahidulla. The British also wished to use this concession to China for securing the latter's consent to station a representative in Xinjiang. Soon after this 'inducement', the Chinese pulled down the fort at Shahidulla and built a new one, eight miles further south near the summit of Suget pass. Later in September 1892 they erected a boundary pillar 64 miles to the south of new fort and a notice was set up at the Karakoram pass asserting it to be the boundary. The British not only did not lodge any protest to Peking, but they felt relieved to see the "Chinese asserting their claims to Shahidulla and the tract between Kuen Lun and Karakoram ranges."¹⁹

Shahidulla ceased to attract any further attention particularly after the Pamirs Boundary Agreement of 1895 which delimited the frontier limits of British and Russian possessions in a manner that their borders were not coterminous. The Shahidulla affair provides concrete historical evidence to show that Chinese jurisdiction in Xinjiang never extended to the south of the Kuen Lun range. That the Chinese had not exercised their administrative jurisdiction over Shahidulla until 1928 AD, was admitted by the Chinese official delegation in 1960 during their talks with the Indian side.²⁰ Subsequently, we do not hear anything about Shahidulla, because it was not a factor in the Sino-Indian border dispute. Due to its strategic importance, China has developed it as an important strategic military station.

As the British were desperately looking for an opportunity to monitor developments in Xinjiang and to come at par with the Russians who



Chinese description of the former British Indian Consulate at Kashgar (Now turned into Hotel)

already had a Consulate in Kashgar, Macartney was posted in 1890 at Kashgar and 3 years later formally appointed as Special Assistant to the Resident in Kashmir for Chinese Affairs. But he continued to be unrecognized by the Chinese as a British representative, till 1904 when his appointment as British Consul at Kashgar was notified. However, following the Communist takeover of Xinjiang, the

Indian Consulate at Kashgar was closed and India handed over to China on 25 September 1953 the building and other properties in Chini Bagh premises in 1949.

One wonders as to why India agreed to abandon its Kashgar Consulate, given the strenuous efforts made over decades in its establishment and its invaluable first hand feedback on developments in that remote frontier. India could have bargained for the continuation of Indian Consulate at Kashgar, while agreeing to Chinese position on Tibet and Panchsheel Agreement of April 1954. On its part, China demonstrated its astute diplomacy and resolve by closing India's only window in that region, focusing on the occupation of Aksai Chin, construction of highway through Aksai Chin to connect Tibet with Xinjiang, followed by the Sino-Pak boundary agreement of 1963 and construction of the strategic Karakoram Highway linking Kashgar to Pakistan through Pakistan occupied territory of Kashmir. Clearly, Chinese moves were premeditated and part of a bigger plan to shift geopolitical balance of power to its advantage vis-à-vis India.

Following the establishment of Soviet power in Central Asia and increasing Soviet influence in Xinjiang, Kashmir and its frontier territories, which commanded overland routes from Xinjiang to India, once again came into



Author standing in front of old tree at Chini Bagh, Kashgar Consulate

sharp focus of new British strategy in the region. The British now wooed the tribal chiefs of the Kashmir frontier dependencies and started dealing with them directly through the British Agent at Gilgit, which resulted in the erosion of Kashmir Durbar's authority over its frontier territories. The British used the circumstances of domestic political pressures caused by Muslim upheaval and riots in Kashmir, to coax the Maharaja of Kashmir to hand over Gilgit Agency to the British in 1935 for 60 years lease.

The strategic outpost of Gilgit, where three empires of Russia, Britain and China met, became the priority in the British plans while transferring power to the Dominions of India and Pakistan. With Lord Mountbatten advancing the deadline for transfer of power to 15 August 1947 from the earlier target date of 30 June 1948, George Cunningham's appointment as Governor of NWFP for third time from 15 August 1947, and shifting of Major Brown as Commandant of Gilgit Scouts, all point to the British moves to execute their master plan of secession of strategic Gilgit region from Kashmir and its merger with Pakistan. Colonel Roger Bacon who was appointed as the Political Agent at Gilgit in early 1947, served as the main link between Pakistan government, Major Brown and George Cunningham. The secret operation codenamed Operation Datta Khel, aimed at organizing the rebellion of frontier tribes led by Gilgit Scouts against the Maharaja of Kashmir and incorporation of Gilgit into Pakistan, was executed so perfectly by the British officers positioned in Kashmir, Gilgit Agency and Peshawar, thanks to the indifference and apathy of newly independent government of India to the critical developments taking place at the vital and strategic Indian frontier. Unmindful of the gravity of situation, Government of India took no steps to prevent the fall of Gilgit in November 1947 and later Baltistan in August 1948. Many records leave no doubt about the British partisan policy of making the NWFP, Kashmir and particularly its frontier territory of Gilgit as part of Pakistan. When in August 1948, the United Nations Commission for India and Pakistan

(UNCIP) proposed the withdrawal of Pakistani troops that had entered Kashmir (which would include Pakistani withdrawal from Gilgit also), the British opposed the proposal. They also persuaded the US to follow the British line. Ernest Bevin, the British Foreign Secretary spoke to George Marshall, the US Secretary of State on 27 October 1948 during a meeting of the UN Security Council stating : “The main issue was who would control the main artery leading into Central Asia. The Indian proposals would leave that in their hands”.²¹ The British succeeded in their master plan to prevent India from accessing Central Asia, for which the possession of Gilgit region was crucial. In an ironic twist of history, Pakistan which was considered to be a bulwark against Communism and Soviet Russia, became all-weather and strategic partner of Communist China. And both Pakistan and China have developed the ‘main artery’ through Gilgit to Xinjiang first as the Karakoram Highway and now as CPEC, providing China easy access to the sea.

Political turmoil and anarchic situation in Xinjiang resulted in several migrations of refugees, including the fugitives from Xinjiang to Kashmir. Whenever such migrations did take place to Kashmir or its frontier territories of Gilgit, Hunza and Ladakh, the Indian government not only took firm steps to discourage such immigration but also refused to get involved in any manner in the internal politics of Xinjiang. This policy was dictated by the desire to maintain good relations with China and to discourage the provincial administration of Xinjiang from leaning heavily on Soviet support. At no point of time, the post-independent government of India showed interest in making any political capital of the deep hurt and sufferings of these refugees due to Communist Chinese takeover of Xinjiang. 2



A group photo of some Xinjiang refugees in Kashmir in 1949. In the 3rd line from right Mr. Mohd Amin Bogra is the 5th and Mr. Isa Yusuf Alaptekin is the 6th.

Few years ago, India denied visa to few Uyghur activists who desired to visit India for participation in a conference in Himachal Pradesh. Government of India has followed a consistent policy of being sensitive to Chinese concerns over Xinjiang and has never used the Uyghur card to counter Chinese provocations whether on Kashmir, Masood Azhar-the terrorist or border incursions in Ladakh. The foregoing conclusions drawn after a micro study of Kashmir-Xinjiang relations, provide some lessons to both India and China, to bridge their differences in the interest of regional peace, tranquility and security.

Endnotes

1. "Threatened Rock Carvings of Pakistan". *Dawn* 18 May 2011.
2. Shen Fuwei, *Cultural flow between China and outside world throughout history*. Beijing, Foreign Language Press, 1997. p 49.
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VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

3, San Martin Marg, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi – 110021

Phone: +91-11-24121764, 24106698

Email: info@vifindia.org,

Website: <https://www.vifindia.org>

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