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# PAKISTAN AND THE BELT & ROAD INITIATIVE

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## **Understanding the Susceptibility of Gilgit-Baltistan to Fifth Generation Warfare: The Case of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor**

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### **Abstract**

The study critically examines Gilgit-Baltistan's (G-B) susceptibility to the Fifth Generation Warfare (5GW), particularly in the context of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Novel technologies have altered how wars were waged in the past; now, states confront each other by using soft power and disseminating disinformation to achieve their desired goals. Major fault lines ignite 5GW in G-B, including disputed constitutional status, sectarian conflicts, ethnic divisions, separatist tendencies, and geostrategic significance. Qualitative research methods, including interviews with subject experts, are employed to gain insight into various dimensions of the subject. The study focuses on a comprehensive strategy to inculcate media literacy campaigns to mitigate the adverse repercussions of 5GW. It also provides original insights into the importance of understanding local perception and national narratives in the region and calls for regional stability and cooperation to counter external exploitation. The study concludes that Gilgit-Baltistan's instability has significant implications for regional and global stability and emphasizes the urgent need for proactive measures to address these challenges.

### **Introduction**

The mountainous terrain of Gilgit-Baltistan has long served as a formidable bulwark against attempts by external powers to exert their authority over this region. For centuries, the Chinese, Russian, and British empire, among others, have struggled to overcome the resistance of the indigenous people and establish control over the area. However, in the modern information era, the vulnerabilities of this once-unconquerable terrain have been exposed, and G-B faces new and evolving challenges that threaten its stability and security. Specifically, the emergence of 5GW tactics has opened up new regional fault

lines that the government must navigate to maintain peace and stability. These tactics leverage digital platforms to incite social, political, and economic instability and potentially exacerbate existing cleavages in the region. Therefore, it is essential to develop innovative strategies to address these challenges to pursue lasting stability and security.

The threat of 5GW and its potential impact on the social, economic, and political stability of G-B cannot be underestimated. 5GW is a war of information and perception (Nawaz, Zeeshan, & Akhlaq, 2023) in which adversaries use various non-kinetic means to achieve military objectives such as disinformation and social engineering (Dayspring, 2015). One of the key tactics used in 5GW is disseminating false information to sow confusion and disrupt social and political systems. This can take various forms, such as fake news, propaganda, and disinformation (Hoffman, 2015). Adversaries tend to capitalize on cultural, economic, ethnic, political, religious, and social issues in the opposing lands to attain their goals (Krishnan, 2022). In G-B, adversaries could use 5GW to manipulate public opinion and incite conflict. For example, G-B has a disputed constitutional status (Joshi, 2020), which has made it vulnerable to external forces seeking to exploit the situation. The lack of clarity regarding the region's political and constitutional status has created fertile ground for adversaries to use 5GW tactics to manipulate public opinion, incite conflict and delay in much needed national integration (Kamboh, Mustafa, & Rasul, 2021)

G-B has experienced numerous instances of internet suspension over the years, each time as a measure to maintain law and order amidst heightened tensions. For instance, on September 1, 2023, mobile internet services were suspended across Gilgit-Baltistan and restored after 18 days following escalating sectarian tensions. This temporary measure was aimed at restoring law and order and stopping the spread of malicious content by miscreants on social media (Ali, 2023). The repeated instances of internet suspension show the region's susceptibility to influence from social media.

Adversaries could spread misinformation to exacerbate sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims, who are already divided along sectarian lines (Hunzai, 2013). Resultantly, this could create an environment of distrust and hostility, leading to violence and unrest. Additionally, separatist, and nationalist ideologies could be exploited to incite violence and unrest. Given the strategic importance of G-B in the CPEC and its proximity to India and Afghanistan, it could be an attractive target for adversarial actors. By leveraging separatist and nationalist ideologies, adversaries could attempt to disrupt the project and sow regional instability. Ethnic differences could also

be exploited to stir up conflict in G-B. The region is home to distinct linguistic and cultural groups (Dad, 2016), making it vulnerable to misinformation and propaganda that plays into existing divisions and prejudices. Furthermore, 5GW could benefit from geostrategic and geo-economics concerns. For example, adversaries could use cyberattacks to disrupt the CPEC projects or spread misinformation to erode support for the project among the local population. Such tactics could lead to economic instability and political unrest, making the region more vulnerable to conflict.

These tactics often exploit a population by creating confusion, distrust, and fear. This can be particularly effective in G-B, where people are already divided along ethnic, religious, and political lines and where disputed constitutional status and its strategic significance make it an attractive target for adversaries seeking to manipulate public opinion and incite conflict by spreading false information. The potential consequences of such actions could have far-reaching implications, including the destabilization of the region, which could have a ripple effect across the broader South Asian region (Ahmad & Malik, 2017). To effectively address the threat of 5GW, the government and other stakeholders must invest in research and analysis to better understand the nature of the threat and develop effective strategies to counter it.

### **Conceptualizing the Fifth Generation Warfare**

The concept of hybrid warfare has gained much of its traction in recent decades because there has been an apparent shift in states' modus operandi pertaining to the 'how' aspect of their preferences of waging wars on soils that are not their own (Abdyraeva, 2020). Conflicts in the present day and age have shifted from battlegrounds and war zones to being contained within devices as small as mobile phones—because the employment of informational technology and cybernetics is also one of the primary tenets of waging war in a hybrid manner (Fatić, 2002). Hybrid warfare can thus be understood to include an amalgamation, an interplay, and a combination of both traditional and non-traditional as well as conventional and non-conventional means, which, for instance, include various diverse tools about subversion, propaganda, etc (Kasapoğlu, 2022). One of Sun Tzu's quotes in the 'Art of War' resonates with this particular context; the quote asserts something along the lines of, "The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting" (Griffith, 1971).

The most interesting notion about 5GW is the fact that thus far, it has had no substantially clear definition that posits in complete clarity its tenets and parameters, and yet the concept in itself has changed the very dynamics of



conflict and war in the modern world (Reed, 2008). As per many reports, Pakistan is being subjected to 5GW as well based on eight different typologies of the concept mentioned above of war; for instance, (Tahir and Afridi, 2019):

1. Attacks on economy,
2. Propaganda,
3. Cyber-attacks,
4. Foreign-sponsored creation of unrest within Pakistan,
5. Averse diplomatic smear campaigns against Pakistan, to name a few.

In conflicts of the aforementioned manner, the primary target chosen by adversaries to carry out their onslaught is any given country's population. Now, this primary target can be attacked both physically or psychologically, and in some cases via a combination of both. The goal here is to break the willpower of the people as well as diminish their sense of nationalism and nationality to make their minds and thought processes relatively easily penetrable. This then builds the discussion that 5GW is primarily driven by data and supported by military action that is largely non-kinetic; it is further imperative to mention that the proponents of the concept posit that the actors engaging in 5GW tend to take advantage of the cognitive biases that exist in the territories and people that they intend to exploit and manipulate—this thus results in the establishment and formulation of relatively newer and advanced cognitive biases.

The technologies and tactics associated with the concept of 5<sup>th</sup> generation warfare (Murden, 2007) are as follows, to name a few:

- i. Social engineering
- ii. Misinformation/Spread of false information,
- iii. Manipulation over the social media sites,
- iv. Mass surveillance (often using satellite imagery and spyware technologies),
- v. Psychological warfare (with the employment and dissemination of meme content, fake news, etc.)
- vi. Cyber-attacks and electronic warfare,
- vii. Public opinion creation, etc.

However, this concept is still and ever involving, and as mentioned previously, its parameters are undefined. But the primary notion is that this typology of warfare broadens the notion of conflict to employ a multitude of the elements of national power to influence any given people to do the bidding of the aggressor or the adversary without the former faction even realizing their

subjugation. The techniques employed, as mentioned previously, are synchronized asymmetrically, and are taking place in a space that is largely multidimensional as they now virtually exist in all spheres, aspects, and walks of life.

**Media Landscape in Gilgit-Baltistan**

Comprehending the media landscape in G-B is crucial for the general public and policymakers to understand how information is produced, circulated, and consumed. It assists in assessing the quality of information, the miscellany of voices and the overall media ecosystem.

The Special Communication Organization (SCO) is an exclusive internet provider in the whole region of G-B. Yaqoob Abdi, the Marketing Manager at SCO, stated that there are around 1.2 million SCO users in the region. Meanwhile, there are 0.4 million users who actively use mobile internet service (Abdi, personal communication, November 6, 2023).

Table 1: Data of SCO Sim Users, Mobile Internet Users, Fiber to Home Connections, and DSL Connections in Gilgit-Baltistan.

Service	Users
SCO Sim Users	1,200,000
Mobile Internet Users	400,000
Fiber to Home Connections	13,000
DSL Connections	4,000

Explicitly, there is a lack of stark data regarding the social media users in the region to estimate what portion of the population is actively using social media platforms.

Table 2: Using the G-B population census of 2017 and the social media penetration rates of Pakistan, we derived a potential range of social media users in G-B.

Units	Population	Percent	Facebook	YouTube	Instagram	X/Twitter	Tik Tok
<b>Gilgit-Baltistan</b>	<b>1,492,685</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>285,699/19.14%</b>	<b>470,643/31.53%</b>	<b>90,158/6.04%</b>	<b>2,224/1.49%</b>	<b>119,862/8.03%</b>
<b>Baltistan Division</b>	<b>547,177</b>	<b>36.66</b>	<b>104,729</b>	<b>172,524</b>	<b>33,049</b>	<b>8,152</b>	<b>43,938</b>
Baltistan District	261,240	17.50	50,001	82,368	15,778	3,892	20,977
Ghanche District	156,608	10.49	29,974	49,378	9,459	2,333	12,575
Kharimang District	54,620	3.66	10,454	17,221	3,299	814	4,385
Shigar District	74,709	5.01	14,299	23,555	4,512	1,113	5,999
<b>Gilgit Division</b>	<b>580,246</b>	<b>38.87</b>	<b>111,059</b>	<b>182,951</b>	<b>33,046</b>	<b>8,645</b>	<b>46,593</b>
Ghizer District	172,763	11.57	33,066	54,472	10,434	2,574	13,872
Gilgit District	284,337	19.05	54,422	89,651	17,173	4,236	22,832
Hunza District	51,398	3.44	9,837	16,205	3,104	766	4,127
Nagar District	71,748	4.81	13,732	22,622	4,333	1,069	5,761
<b>Astore Division</b>	<b>365,262</b>	<b>24.47</b>	<b>69,911</b>	<b>115,167</b>	<b>22,061</b>	<b>5,442</b>	<b>29,330</b>
Astore District	95,422	6.39	18,263	30,086	5,763	1,422	7,662
Diamer District	269,840	18.08	51,647	85,080	16,298	4,020	21,668

It is worth mentioning that dwellers of this region actively use various social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and X/Twitter. Interestingly, the majority of the population has a robust presence on Facebook. People use Facebook for sharing information and content. Unfortunately, despite the region's growing number of social media users, there is no solemn digital policy.

Table 3: The table below outlines some noteworthy digital media platforms in G-B.

Name	Facebook	X/Twitter	Instagram
Daily K2	137,000	8,000	1,774
Pamir Times	576,000	24,900	7,014
Gilgit Media Network	187,000		981
Skardu TV	166,000	117	1,229
Ibex Media Network	426,000	2,700	26,700
Gilgit-Baltistan Times	47,000	4,400	3,792
Worldroof Media	167,000	150	180
Hunza News	100,000	1,000	2,787
Daily Ausaf Gilgit- Baltistan	88,000	148	
Wateen Digital	74,000	836	
W TV	169,000	21,500	1,499
Daily Ghanche TV	167,000		
Markhor Times	70,000	19	
Voice of GB	56,000	1600	546

It's important to highlight that while these platforms exhibit a strong presence on specific social media channels, not all maintain active pages and/or IDs on every platform.

It is pertinent to mention that the print media also plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion and campaigns regarding any issue.

Table 4: Overview of some prominent newspapers in Gilgit-Baltistan, along with their circulation figures

Name of Newspapers	Circulation (PID Data)
Daily K2	61,500
Daily Ausaf	45,000
Daily Baad e Shumal	30,000
Daily Sada e Himalaya	13,000
Daily Wateen	18,000
Daily Waadi	37,000
Daily Rehbar	9,500
Daily Fairy Meadows	31,000
Newsmart	15,000
Himalaya Today	20,500
Daily Bedaar	11,000
Gilgit-Baltistan Express	15,100
Daily Panah	25,500
Daily Bang-e-Sahar	18,000
Daily Tarjumaan Gilgit-Baltistan	20,200
Daily Muhasib	15,000

This table serves as a snapshot of the print media landscape in G-B. It is important to acknowledge that the actual circulation of these newspapers may vary.

Meanwhile, FM and radio broadcasting are pivotal in disseminating information and news across diverse places in Gilgit-Baltistan.

Table 5: Radio and FM stations in G-B, along with their frequencies and coverage details.

Station Name	Frequency	Coverage Area
Radio Pakistan, Gilgit-Baltistan.	AM 1512 Khz	Covers entire GB and the border areas.
Suno FM Radio Gilgit-Baltistan	FM 89.4	20-25 KM
FM 91	FM 91	20-25 KM
FM 99 KIU	FM 99	20-25 KM
FM 93	FM 93	20-25 KM
FM 93.4	FM 93.4	20-25 KM

As per Iftikhar Ahmed, President, Cable Network Association G-B, there are approximately 124 cable networks in G-B, servicing around 0.15 to 0.2 million cable connections. Ahmed notes, "Most of the cable networks have their own local channels on which they share content at their own will" (Ahmed, personal communication, June 11, 2023).

Cable Networks in G-B	Cable Connections in G-B
124	Around 0.15 to 0.2 million

Source: Data from Cable Network Association Gilgit-Baltistan

The disinformation challenge is one of the gravest challenges confronted by states in recent years. There are a myriad of digital means and channels to spread disinformation and false news about any issue. Within a matter of time, the public's opinions and points of view can be shaped to divert the attention of the public and create social discord. For example, the false news of handing over the region of G-B to China for 50 years spread in diverse places of the region within a matter of time.





However, the region struggles with the deficiency of digital literacy and limited internet services, despite these issues the news reaches a huge audience. Now, a layman cannot discern between genuine and fake news due to the robust propaganda tools and means operated by external actors in a sophisticated way. In addition to this, an article published in the Eurasian Times falsely claimed that Pakistan may hand over the region of Gilgit-Baltistan to China (Ali, 2020).



False news can distort public discourse, undermine the general public opinions and have potential ramifications. Another specimen of a disinformation campaign has been revealed in the recent Twitter trend.

(#gilgitbaltistanwantsbharat) managed from India (Tweet Binder, n.d).

## gilgitbaltistanwantsbharat

FREE • 2000 POSTS • 2/26/2023

2000<sup>1</sup>  
Total  
Tweets ↕

MOST ACTIVE ↕		Tweets
	ankittiwari Ankit Tiwari	52
	radhikayad23661 Radhika yadav	38
	s_commando66415 surya roshan EEE	27
	priyam_raj21 Priyam Raaj	25
	PriyaJamwal_jmu Priyanka Jamwal	22

Source: Tweet Binder

It is crystal clear that these malevolent campaigns are aimed at creating cynicism and despondency among the population so that the CPEC project can be halted.



**PriyaJamwal\_jmu** | 5 days ago

This is how the students of Gilgit-Baltistan protesting against the hike in fee infrastructure. Feeling sad for these poor students who are barred from getting quality education just because of the govt's discriminative policies.

#GilgitBaltistanWantsBharat <https://t.co/MVbaiwPL1t>

Source: Tweet Binder



**BhatArushi** | 6 days ago

The people are already suffering from huge inflation, exorbitant rise in prices of basic commodities & now the unprecedented hike in fee adding to their woes, forcing them to leave their education in between. #GilgitBaltistanWantsBharat <https://t.co/hVFJ2vNiBa>

Source: Tweet Binder

Therefore, it is necessary to keep an eye on all these malicious activities and create a formalized media strategy.

Nevertheless, Dr. Muhammad believes that the ongoing CPEC projects could be a game changer for regional development and may ultimately help to counteract adversary propaganda campaigns. However, given the significance of these projects, it is likely that both regional and global powers will continue to oppose them, and may intensify propaganda efforts against G-B and CPEC in the long run. Therefore, finding solutions that prioritize regional development and ensure a balanced information domain is crucial.

### **Lack of Digital Literacy**

Digital literacy is rudimentary for thriving in a drastically evolving digital society, the effective utilization of various digital media platforms can inform and educate a society as a whole. These platforms are helpful for communicating and sharing valuable information in a digital space. It has been noticed that there is a lack of digital literacy in the region of G-B. The role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) cannot be undermined, particularly since it is of immense significance for the economic development and prosperity of any region. Dr. Faqeer Muhammad, who is the Director of the China Study Centre at Karakoram International University opined that the deficiency of digital literacy and comprehension of global dynamic forces is a concern for the region (Muhammad, personal communication, April 23, 2021).

The region requires a responsible and robust media landscape to shape positive public opinion about CPEC and its impacts on the whole region.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

The data collected through both primary and secondary sources was analyzed using a thematic and historical analysis approach. The thematic analysis

involved identifying and coding recurring themes in the data. This approach was chosen because it allowed for the examination of the rich and complex data collected through the expert interviews while also providing the opportunity to identify patterns and relationships in the data to find the major fault lines and their future implications for the region. Historical analysis also provided context and an understanding of how these fault lines evolved.



Figure 1 visually represents Gilgit-Baltistan's geostrategic significance and illustrates significant occurrences transpiring within the region Source: Map created by the author.

Gilgit-Baltistan, referred to as the "fulcrum of Asia" by John Keay in his work "The Gilgit Game: The Explorers of the Western Himalayas 1865–95" (Keay, 1979), holds great strategic importance due to its location at the intersection of three nuclear states: Pakistan, India, and China. Tensions between India and China have escalated in recent years, particularly in the Galwan region, while Pakistan and India have a history of conflict. The region also serves as a water source for Pakistan and provides a land link to China through the Karakoram Highway. The Wakhan Corridor connects Pakistan to the Central Asian Republics and offers potential access for India to Central Asia and China to Afghanistan's resources. However, the region's diverse demographics and socio-cultural and sectarian differences pose challenges and potential

liabilities, with India attempting to exploit these fault lines through propaganda tools. Regional and global powers with interests in the region may also seek to exploit these fault lines for their gain.

The security situation in Badakhshan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan, particularly in the Pamir region near the Wakhan border, is rapidly deteriorating. The increase in conflict, political instability, and the presence of non-state actors in these regions raises the risk of spillover and destabilization in Gilgit-Baltistan and surrounding areas. The Wakhan Corridor, linking G-B to Central Asia, is particularly vulnerable to these security threats, further emphasizing the need for regional stability and cooperation. The growing instability in Xinjiang and the Turkestan independence movement add to the complex security landscape in G-B. In conclusion, the intersection of multiple nuclear states, territorial disputes, and independence movements makes G-B a highly strategic and potentially volatile region with significant regional and global stability implications.

### **Major Fault lines**

Gilgit-Baltistan holds a critical position in South and Central Asia due to its significant geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geostrategic importance (Ullah, Ali & Hussain, 2023). This region serves as a gateway to the CPEC, a vital project labeled as a game-changer for the region. G-B also shares borders with Afghanistan, China, and India, which makes it a hotbed of regional and international competition (Tanwar, 2022). G-B's constitutional ambiguity, sectarian tensions, separatist movements, ethnic divisions, and strategic importance all present potential vulnerabilities. Understanding these fault lines and their underlying causes is essential for assessing the region's susceptibility to 5GW and developing effective strategies for mitigating the risks.



Table 6 highlights the major fault lines in Gilgit-Baltistan that make it susceptible to 5GW

Fault Line	Description
Vague and Disputed Constitutional Status	Gilgit-Baltistan's constitutional status remains ambiguous, and its disputed status between India and Pakistan creates political and security challenges.
Sectarian	The region has a history of sectarian tensions between different sects, which could be exploited by malicious actors.
Separatist/ Nationalist Ideologies	There are separatist and nationalist movements in Gilgit-Baltistan that could be used to sow unrest and destabilize the region.
Ethnic	Ethnic tensions exist between different groups in Gilgit-Baltistan.
Geostrategic/Geoeconomic	Gilgit-Baltistan's strategic location and economic potential make it a target for regional and global powers seeking to gain influence or control.

***Vague Constitutional and Disputed Status***

The first and foremost fault line that faces the people of G-B is one about the region’s constitutional rights—wherein the region’s constitutional future remains uncertain, based largely on the will of the Pakistani ruling elite, for which the people of the region have been raising their voice on several platforms ever since the region acceded to Pakistan—wherein they demand to gain due attention from a) Federal governments, b) Provincial governments, and c) International, national, and local media channels.

The vagueness of the region’s constitutional status to the Pakistani constitution, in addition to India’s claim over the land as being part of the Kashmir region as well as being surrounded by volatile neighbors such as India and Afghanistan, increases the region’s susceptibility to 5GW.

(Dad, 2016) believed that due to the absence of constitutional status, the political vacuum in G-B has been filled by sectarian outfits, separatist elements, and ethnic pressure groups. Recent developments suggest that India has shown a keen interest in G-B. A member of the Indian Parliament, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has proposed a bill in the Lok Sabha to reserve five seats in the Lok Sabha and one seat in Rajya Sabha for G-B (Sharma, 2017). Similarly, in Indian-occupied Kashmir, there are 25 reserved vacant seats for G-B (Reynolds, 2016). Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval has also acknowledged the country's interest in the region by stating, "We also have a 106 kilometers long non-contiguous border with Afghanistan (Wakhan Corridor)" (Ahmad Khan, 2020). Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi also highlighted G-B and Balochistan in his Independence Day speech in 2016, where he claimed that the people of G-B had thanked him for voicing their rights/human rights violations (Shah, 2022).

Yasir Abbas, who served as the Coordinator to the Chief Minister of G-B, pointed out in a personal communication on February 07, 2021, that the region's strategic importance to Pakistan is immense, as it provides direct road linkage to China and is also the primary source of Pakistan's hydro potential. However, the lack of legal clarity regarding the region's status has resulted in numerous challenges. Howe and Hunzai (2019) stated that G-B has no representation in the core committee of CPEC due to its disputed status, and the region will not get its benefits due to constitutional limbo. (Bansal, 2008) believes in his book "Gilgit-Baltistan and its Saga of Unending Human Rights violation" that the region is facing various issues, including human rights violations, due to its vague constitutional issues.

Recent reports suggest that India is making attempts to claim G-B as its own territory. The Indian government has started broadcasting weather reports of G-B and Azad Kashmir, showing these areas as part of India (Venugopal, 2020). Former Indian army chief, General V.K. Singh, has openly stated that "Gilgit-Baltistan belongs to India and will come to us at the right time" (Khan, 2020). This clearly indicates India's interest in the region and its plans to take over G-B. According to Shabir Mir, a leading journalist in the region (Mir, Personal Communication, February 10, 2021), the disputed status of G-B is primarily a matter of constitutional rights. He argues that the "Fault line" vague constitutional status in the region has not been addressed and that the lack of constitutional rights granted to the people since 1947 has resulted in widespread demotivation from the state. This demotivation, according to Mir, creates a vulnerability that can be exploited by external actors, who may seek to take advantage of the region's susceptibility to 5GW tactics.

## *Sectarian Divide*

In addition to the fault mentioned above line, one fault line that has proven to be inexplicably decisive and divisive is that of G-B's sectarian divide. Within these sectarian denominations, people tend to adhere rigidly to the tenets of their own sect's assumptions while also (at times) engaging in conflict with, discrimination of, and violence against those that fall outside of the aforementioned sectarian boundaries (Feyyaz, 2011). In January 2017, the G-B Inspector General reported that a plan, sponsored by India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), to sabotage the CPEC, had been foiled. The security forces arrested 12 individuals in the Yasin Valley of Ghizer district and seized a large quantity of weapons during the raid. The police officials confirmed that those arrested had received funds from RAW to sabotage CPEC and were also planning to attack a Jamat Khana (Ismaili Muslims Praying Place) in Ghizer and other parts of the region to trigger sectarian unrest (Nagri, 2017)

Syed Muhammad Abbas Mosvi, a local political and social activist, highlighted the impact of sectarianism on the political landscape of Gilgit-Baltistan. Mosvi noted that due to the geographical concentration of different sects, local election results are heavily influenced by sectarian demarcations (Mosvi, Personal Communication, February 18, 2021). Up until a certain point in the region's history, all communities lived with a sense of communal harmony amongst themselves, wherein tolerance about religion and sects was an appreciated characteristic of the people of G-B. (Feyyaz, *Sectarian Conflict in Gilgit Baltistan*, 2011). Associated further with the sectarian lines of division are political and doctrinal ones, which only tend to further instigate the conflict (Hunzai, 2013). The region's sectarian conflict, that has lasted several decades now, has damaged the societal fabric a great deal thus far—and if not curbed at the right time could become a threat that is existential to say the least. Rehan Khan (Personal Communication, February 16, 2021), a renowned columnist and religious scholar from G-B, emphasizes that the religious sectarianism, which has emerged due to various geostrategic factors, poses a severe threat to the religious harmony of G-B.

Kashif Hussain, a Security Analyst at the Strategic Studies Institute in Islamabad, highlights the long-standing sectarian conflict in G-B, which has hurt society in the region. In a personal communication on January 11, 2021, he stated that, despite efforts by the state, it has been unable to contain the unrest and discord in the region (Hussain, 2021). The constant unrest and sectarianism have contributed to the region's susceptibility to various forms of warfare, including 5GW. The support of certain factions, sometimes facilitated by the ruling elite for their interests, has added to the situation's complexity.

## **Separatist/ Nationalist Ideologies**

Separatism and nationalism both predominantly stem out of the concept of identity politics; identity politics refers to a form of political approach wherein people and/or groups of people belonging to various shared binaries (religion, race, social background, class, gender, orientation, etc.) develop political agendas based on those shared identities and binaries (Huysseune, 2009). The nationalists of G-B had been demanding the revival of state-subject rule and an autonomous state of their own till the resolution of the Kashmir dispute.

Examples of such groups being in existence in G-B are prevalent already in the form of:

### ***Balawaristan National Front (BNF)***

Balawaristan National Front exists within G-B as a political party and has been represented as such in Gilgit-Baltistan's Legislative Assembly by Nawaz Khan Naji—who, alongside Abdul Hamid Khan, founded the party in 1989. As far as BNF-H is concerned, the separation of the two parties took place due to Abdul Hamid Khan's views being relatively more nationalist, unlike that of Nawaz Khan Naji—based on the same principles, BNF-H was banned by the Government of Pakistan. Recently, Abdul Hameed Khan, the nationalist leader of the banned organization, returned to Pakistan and apologized to the people of G-B. He confirmed that he played in the hands of the enemy.

### ***Karakoram National Movement (KNM)***

This particular party was founded in 1984 by several Karachi-based student activists. Proponents of the ideology of the Karakoram National Movement express great dissatisfaction towards the reinstatement of the State Subject Rule as well, which has resulted in people from the rest of Pakistan being permitted to buy land in and move to the G-B region—this, they consider, is the Pakistani government's attempt to change the social demography of the region which then ought to tarnish their own cultures, traditions, practices, and way of life (Dad, 2023)

### ***Gilgit-Baltistan United Movement (GBUM)***

This particular party emerged from the Skardu region. It represents a political movement within the region that demands the region's complete autonomy, resulting in a fully autonomous state that consists of both Gilgit and Baltistan (Singh, 2013). The Gilgit-Baltistan United Movement (GBUM), founder

Manzoor Hussain Parwana, chairman of the GBUM was critical about a self-empowerment package for G-B. He asserts that, "the supposed provincial setup is fraudulent and a blackmailing that is being provided by the federal government in order to hide the political atrocities and brutal colonial management on the folks within the occupied region" (Hussain, 2021)

### *Ethnic Variations*

Gilgit-Baltistan is a region of multilingual and multiethnic diversity. In their study of ethnic variations in G-B, Butt and Abbas (2014) found that the demographic composition of the region is a mixture of immigrants from neighboring areas, including Turks, Kashmiris, Pathans, and Mongols. These communities migrated to G-B for trade and exploration and eventually settled in the region permanently. As per Khurshid Ahmed, President of the Press Club of G-B, communal conflicts have directly impacted the region (Ahmed, personal communication, February 2021). The unique geographical location of G-B has made it susceptible to multiple internal and external threats, and with the advent of technological innovation, traditional forms of warfare have become obsolete. Khurshid Ali Singay, an Assistant Professor of International Relations at Karakoram International University, Gilgit, observes that no known or remembered homogeneous collective government encompassed the present-day G-B throughout its history. This lack of collective governance has led to the emergence of different socio-political and cultural systems in the region (Singay, personal communication, February 16, 2021).

Zameer Abbas, a civil servant, and researcher based in G-B, highlights the ethnic variations in the region. According to Abbas, the primary division is between the Baltis and Gilgits, based on their race and language (Abbas, personal communication, February 19, 2021). These differences have caused tensions between the two communities, with the Baltis feeling aggrieved at what they see as the appropriation of resources by the Gilgits because of Gilgit's central location. The division along ethnic lines can also be observed in Hunza, where the upper, central, and lower Hunza areas are home to people of different ethnicities and language communities. Similar linguistic divisions leading to separate identities can be observed in Nagar and Ghizer districts, where Shina, Burushaski, Wakhi, Khowar, Kohistani, and Gujari communities coexist. These ethnic variations underscore the complex social dynamics of G-B and the need to understand the region's diverse cultural groups.



## *Geostrategic/Geoconomics*

Gilgit-Baltistan's historical importance as a gateway between South and Central Asia on the old Silk Route has been renewed in recent times with its involvement in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The region's location makes it a crucial node in the BRI's CPEC, which connects western China to Pakistan's Gwadar Port, facilitating trade and investment across the region.

The region of G-B has been noted for its geostrategic significance due to its proximity to Indian illegally occupied Kashmir, China, and Afghanistan (Khan, personal communication, March 7, 2021). According to Masud Ahmad Khan, a retired brigadier and defense analyst from G-B demonstrated that G-B has an area that is over six times larger than Azad Kashmir and is rich in minerals and hydroelectric power resources, making it a vital gateway to the CPEC and providing access to Gwadar and the mineral-rich Central Asian States. Urooj Jamal, a Nuclear Scholar Fellow at the Center for Security, Strategy and Policy Research, provided insights into the geo-strategic significance of G-B. According to Jamal, a mere glance at the map of Asia is enough to understand the crucial importance of G-B for various geostrategic and geo-economic reasons. Jamal emphasized that the Wakhan Corridor in the north of G-B, is the sole land-based route connecting South Asia with Central Asia. Consequently, the region is essential for providing Pakistan with a link with China and Central Asia, which is vital for Pakistan's geo-economic future (Jamal, personal communication, March 19, 2021). It ought to be noted that G-B holds a geo-strategically important position on the world map—it is geo-strategically important because it could benefit three of the world's nuclear powers (namely; China, Pakistan, and India) in a geo-economic sense (Hussain, 2018), even more so with the advent and emergence of CPEC.

Beg, Baig, & Khan, (2018) argued that G-B plays a pivotal role in the CPEC, which is a significant project that aims to improve economic cooperation between China and Pakistan. The authors highlighted the geographical location of G-B, which is situated in the border region between South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia, making it a critical nexus for economic and political integration. Dr. Faqeer Muhammad, Director of the China Study Centre at Karakoram International University (KIU), asserts that Western media, particularly Indian media, is engaged in propaganda against the CPEC (Muhammad, personal communication, April 23, 2021). Recognizing the potential for opposition to CPEC and its potential implications for G-B's development is important. The increased propaganda against the project and the region may hinder its progress and exacerbate existing tensions.

## **Future Implications of 5GW on Gilgit-Baltistan**

Due to the region's numerous fault lines, G-B remains vulnerable to 5GW threats. The lack of appropriate tools to identify and mitigate efforts that foment instability caused by these fault lines further exacerbates the vulnerability. As discussed by researchers such as (Murray & Mansoor, 2012) a nation or region that is engaged in such a decentralized and multi-pronged war needs an effective combined counter strategy against all facets of such warfare. This form of war is unique because conventional military wisdom may not necessarily apply. Kofman (2018) argues that mere territorial acquisitions and the elimination of fault lines may not help a country win in a battle of ideologies, where the perceived victim tends to gain sympathy among the masses. Therefore, a deeper understanding of the socio-political and economic factors that underlie the fault lines is necessary to address the underlying issues that perpetuate them.

Table 7: The following table outlines the potential future implications of 5<sup>th</sup> Generation Warfare (5GW) on Gilgit-Baltistan

Future Implications of 5GW on Gilgit-Baltistan	Description
1. Increased Instability	5GW could exacerbate existing fault lines in the region, leading to increased instability and potential violence. This could have significant implications for the security and stability of the region, as well as for neighboring countries.
2. Weakened Governance	5GW tactics, such as cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns, could undermine the government's ability to govern effectively, erode public trust in institutions, and destabilize the region. This could make it more difficult to address other challenges facing the region, such as poverty and economic development.
3. Economic Disruption	5GW could also have significant economic implications for Gilgit-Baltistan, particularly if it disrupts key economic sectors such as CPEC, tourism or agriculture. This could exacerbate existing economic challenges facing the region and lead to increased poverty and unemployment.
4. Polarization and Divisions	5GW tactics, such as social media manipulation, could exacerbate existing social and political divisions in the region, leading to increased polarization and a further erosion of social cohesion. This could make it more difficult to address other challenges facing the region, such as sectarianism and nationalism.
5. Regional Instability	Finally, 5GW in Gilgit-Baltistan could have significant implications for regional stability, particularly if it leads to increased tensions between neighboring countries such as India and China. This could have wider regional implications and potentially lead to further conflict and instability.

Head of the Soni Jawari Centre for Public Policy, government of Gilgit-Baltistan, Izhar Hunzai emphasized that the region's population of two million individuals, representing a broad range of ethnic, linguistic, and sectarian backgrounds, presents both opportunities and challenges (Hunzai, personal communication, July 15, 2021). Nawaz Khan Naji, a member of Gilgit-Baltistan's Legislative Assembly and founding leader of the Balawaristan National Front (BNF) (Naji, personal communication, August 20, 2021), asserted that despite the region's vague constitutional status and India's abrogation of Article 370, Pakistan has not taken major steps to address these issues. In this era of social media, people express their grievances and

frustrations more openly, creating fault lines that can be easily exploited through 5GW tactics.

As per Kashif Hussain, a security analyst at the Strategic Studies Institute Islamabad (Hussain, personal communication, February 11, 2021), in 5GW, the enemy uses various means, particularly media, to highlight issues that create rifts between the general masses and state authorities. As stated by Hussain, in the context of G-B, the enemy can capitalize on major fault lines, including but not limited to the vague constitutional status and disputed status of the region, which has led to concerns about the protection of human rights and representation at national decision-making bodies (Hussain, 2021). Munir Hussain Kazmi, academic and a defense analyst (personal communication, March 2, 2021), claims that the vague constitutional status and geopolitical importance of G-B make it susceptible to 5GW. Kazmi notes that the region's proximity to China, India, and Afghanistan is a significant fault line that could affect G-B in the near future. The region's strategic location places it in the middle of ongoing conflicts, including the Kashmir conflict, which has already had implications for its security (Kazmi, 2021).

As stated by Fehmida S. Bercha, a G-B based social and political activist (Bercha, personal communication, February 12, 2021), the population in G-B is particularly susceptible to ideological and informational vulnerabilities within the framework of 5GW. Bercha (2021) highlights that the region is confronted with 5GW threats from various angles, with adversaries seeking to exploit internal divisions. Moreover, Jonsson and Michael (2016) emphasize the critical role of perception, information, and national narratives in shaping a country's destiny in a 5GW scenario. In the context of G-B, the proliferation of social media has contributed to heightened societal polarization, leaving it open to manipulation by misinformation campaigns (Ramal, 2021). According to Lala Rukh Ramal, a Research Assistant at the Gilgit-Baltistan Policy Institute, the widespread availability of social media has exacerbated polarization, permeating into the general populace (Ramal, personal communication, February 5, 2021). Ramal observes that polarization, once limited to the political realm, is now prevalent among supporters of ethnic, sectarian, and nationalist movements. In 2019, the European Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), EU Disinfo Lab, uncovered a network of 265 fake outlets managed by an Indian group. The purpose of this network was to influence the European Union and the UN by inundating them with content critical of Pakistan. The EU Disinfo Lab in 2019 reported that certain NGOs, including some inactive ones, were allegedly utilized by individuals in India to influence public opinion against Pakistan. Retired brigadier and defense analyst Masud Ahmad Khan stated that India is allegedly using

various media platforms to discredit Pakistan by disseminating false information through paid individuals. Furthermore, it has been noted that individuals from China working on CPEC projects have reportedly faced targeted attacks in G-B. These incidents emphasize the importance of addressing security concerns in the region and ensuring the safety of all those involved in the project. Muhammad Khawar, a prominent social media influencer from G-B, said (Khawar, personal communication, March 19, 2021) that during a time of sectarian conflict and social media polarization in the region, a security official approached him for help in promoting sectarian harmony and peace. In response, Khawar created a video that quickly gained significant attention, amassing over 200,000 views, 13,000 likes, and 1,500 shares in just two days. The video received over 3,000 comments, with the majority supporting peace and denouncing sectarianism. This incident highlights the potential of social media as a tool for countering 5GW tactics in G-B, where disinformation, propaganda, and other forms of non-kinetic warfare often used to sow discord and distrust have emerged from various fault lines.

In the same light, Asif Saeed Sakhi, a former candidate for the Gilgit-Baltistan legislative assembly from Hunza of the Awami Workers Party (AWP) (Sakhi, personal communication, June 12, 2021), which has one of the most active social media presences and is active in running trends on social media in G-B, has expressed his concern regarding the absence of ethical journalism in G-B and the misuse of media platforms, particularly social media, for political and sectarian agendas. As presented in this chapter, the analysis and discussion of fault lines and their future implications in the age of 5GW offer valuable insights into the complex socio-political dynamics of G-B. These findings have important implications for policymakers and scholars working in contemporary warfare and regional security. In order to ensure a more peaceful and stable future for G-B, it is essential to address the root causes of these fault lines and develop comprehensive strategies to promote regional stability and development.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The geo-strategic position of Pakistan makes it a crucial player in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly in the CPEC project. To reap the boundless benefits of this project, it is indispensable to mitigate the adverse repercussions of 5GW. Both external factors and internal discord are creating unsurmountable challenges in effectively implementing this project. Major fault lines such as vague constitutional status, separatist/nationalist ideologies, sectarian issues, geostrategic/geo-economics significance, ethnic division, and



lack of digital literacy are creating loopholes for the external actors to exert their power and influence to hamper the progress of CPEC In G-B. The proliferation of digital communication tools has made it easier for hostile foreign actors to manipulate public opinion and destabilize regions, including G-B. Disinformation campaigns and propaganda can be particularly effective in a region with a history of ethnic and sectarian tension, as fake news and propaganda can easily stoke tensions and exacerbate divisions. Therefore, the government of Pakistan needs to develop a comprehensive strategy that includes media literacy campaigns, fact-checking initiatives, and efforts to promote media diversity and independent voices in the region to counter disinformation and propaganda.

Overall, this study has significant implications for the future of G-B and the wider region. It highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of the complex fault lines and strategic interests at play in the region, as well as the importance of addressing these issues proactively and constructively. Such efforts must consider the geostrategic significance of G-B and its linkages to neighboring countries, as well as the potential for 5GW to undermine the successful completion of CPEC. The study's findings have significant policy implications for policymakers and security practitioners in Pakistan and the broader international community. The findings are significant for policymakers, security experts, and academics who seek to understand the region's security dynamics and take measures to address the susceptibility of 5GW in the context of CPEC. The unique challenges posed by 5GW require a comprehensive and multifaceted approach. In the case of G-B, the government of Pakistan must take steps to address the local population's concerns, promote inclusive policies, and counter disinformation campaigns.

The following recommendations can help counter the threats of 5GW and promote stability in the region.

- i. Effective strategic communication tactics are essential to cope with potential disinformation and misinformation campaigns regarding the CPEC. Robust communication between the local communities, federal government, and international stakeholders can lessen the deleterious consequences of 5GW in the G-B region.
- ii. External actors use propaganda tools and channels to ignite religious intolerance among communities and achieve their interests. Therefore, the government needs to foster religious harmony and tolerance through empowerment initiatives and community engagement. The local communities should be involved in the decision-making process regarding the CPEC project so that it can be successfully completed.

- iii. The government should consider cybersecurity measures to protect the critical infrastructure of the CPEC project.
- iv. The Government of Pakistan should amend its constitution to incorporate G-B as a provisional province until the resolution of the Kashmir dispute in order to address the concerns of residents about the region's disputed status.
- v. To address the exploitation of local sentiment by nationalist movements, the government should prioritize addressing constitutional issues and protecting the basic rights of G-B's residents.
- vi. To ensure that the region's leadership is involved in national decision-making and receives a fair share of benefits from large-scale development projects, the government should involve local leaders in national forums and provide an equitable distribution of resources to G-B.
- vii. To counter disinformation and propaganda, the government should implement a comprehensive strategy that includes media literacy campaigns, fact-checking initiatives, and efforts to promote media diversity and independent voices in the region.
- viii. To strengthen defense against 5GW, the government should foster strong relations with neighboring countries and regional organizations.
- ix. The government should encourage research and studies on the topic to better understand the dynamics of 5GW and develop countermeasures.
- x. The government should launch a comprehensive public awareness campaign to raise awareness about the dangers of 5GW and the importance of protecting G-B's sovereignty.

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