[**Procrastination**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1744087/procrastination)

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THERE appears to be a general consensus in Pakistan, across the political divide, that Gilgit-Baltistan be integrated as a provisional province. The GB committee set up by prime minister Nawaz Sharif recommended in March 2017 that GB be accorded a status akin to a province of Pakistan.

The Supreme Court of Pakistan, in its [judgement of January 2019](https://www.dawn.com/news/1458109), ordered the conferral of constitutional status and rights on GB residents at par with other citizens of Pakistan. The government of prime minister Imran Khan announced in November 2020 its decision to grant provisional provincial status to GB.

Yet, the people of GB have not been conf­erred this status of being de jure citizens of Pakistan. They have repeatedly expressed, through resolutions of the GB Assembly, their desire to formally join Pakistan as a province. Pending integration, they have also demanded internal autonomy.

One might argue that the reason for this procrastination has been because of possible implications for Pakistan’s stance on the Kashmir dispute. Since the Kashmir dispute has not been settled either in accordance with the provisions of the Indian Independence Act of 1947 or the provisions of the UN Security Council resolutions, GB’s constitutional status remains in limbo.

The people of GB are disappointed that successive Pakistan governments have focused more on governance and development-related issues, rather than finding ways to recognise the people of GB as full-fledged citizens of Pakistan.

Was it wise to deny the people of GB their desire all these years?

We must seriously ask ourselves whether denying the people of GB their wish to join Pakistan has been a wise course of action all these years. A strong legal, political and strategic argument can be made that further delay on this issue won’t serve our national interests.

Firstly, several territories within GB did not fall under the suzerainty of the maharaja of Kashmir and the people of these territories had already decided to join Pak­istan. Gilgit, for instance, formally acceded to Pakistan in November 1947. The government of Pakistan even appointed a political agent there. Likewise, for some other territories, original accession papers were handed over to the then president of Pakistan by the wife of Major Brown, who was commanding the Gilgit Scouts. This was reported in this paper in 2002.

Secondly, integrating GB into Pakistan would have no implications for the country’s legal position on the Kashmir dispute because the integration would be provisional and conditional to the final settlement of the Kashmir dispute. It is akin to the provision inserted in the Pakistan-China Border Agreement of 1963, which provided for the finalisation of the border subject to the settlement of the Kashmir dispute. This proviso would keep open the option of AJK and even the Kashmir Valley to join Pakistan if they so determine, and when circumstances permit.

However, facts on the ground suggest that the prospects of implementing the UNSC resolutions remain dim because India is not ready to hold the plebiscite, nor is the world willing to pressure it to implement the UNSC resolutions. India has also stonewalled bilateral efforts to resolve the Kashmir dispute. The Modi government has lately embarked on the project of changing the Muslim majority status of held Kashmir through demographic and electoral engineering. A wait-and-see approach is not advisable in the face of these fast-evolving ground realities.

Integrating GB would also effectively blunt the Indian argument that GB’s link with Pakistan is ambiguous because it finds no mention in the Constitution.

Thirdly, procrastination might constitute a strategic blunder in the context of the evolving regional geopolitics. GB is the only geographical link we have with China. There is a convergence of interests between India and a major power that is currently in competition with China, and this nexus would not mind disrupting China’s link with Pakistan through GB. A case in point is CPEC.

GB is central to CPEC. We need GB as an integral part of Pakistan to give full constitutional protection to CPEC investments in GB as well as to attract international investments into GB, which require sovereign guarantees. Given the recent rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, brokered by China, economic and commercial activity in this region is likely to grow. One should be ready when these opportunities arise.

All said and done, the moot point is the will of the people of GB, who have been living side by side with Pakistanis for seven decades without getting their constitutional rights as citizens of Pakistan. In geopolitics as in national affairs, time is of the essence. Let there be no doubt that further procrastination on integration might be our cost to bear.

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