THE SHAKSGAM SIEGE: CHINESE INTERESTS AND INTENT

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India-China security dynamics have never been the same as they were before the India-China standoff at Doklam in the year 2017. The Doklam standoff took place from June 16 to August 28, 2017 and lasted for a period of 74 days. The Chinese have, since August 2017, been in a state of overdrive all across the Indian northern borders, especially in terms of infrastructure build-up (dual utility), military posturing and presence. Seemingly, the intent is to venture into, and develop, the claimed areas. Developments, improvements and presence to and within the Shaksgam Valley remain one of these aims. Activities at and around this 'trans-Karakoram tract', also known as the 'Shaksgam Valley' commenced in mid-2017 and continue till date. This development activity has been more brisk post 2021. This tract of approximately 5,180 sq km, deemed to be uninhabitable land due to its remote location and harsh conditions, has now been breached. Habitats and habitations here, including of the military, are now on the anvil.

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The article intends to analyse the enhancements to infrastructure, in the Shaksgam Valley (controlled by China and claimed by India) post Doklam 2017 (the India-China standoff), the possible Chinese intent, and its strategic ramifications for India.

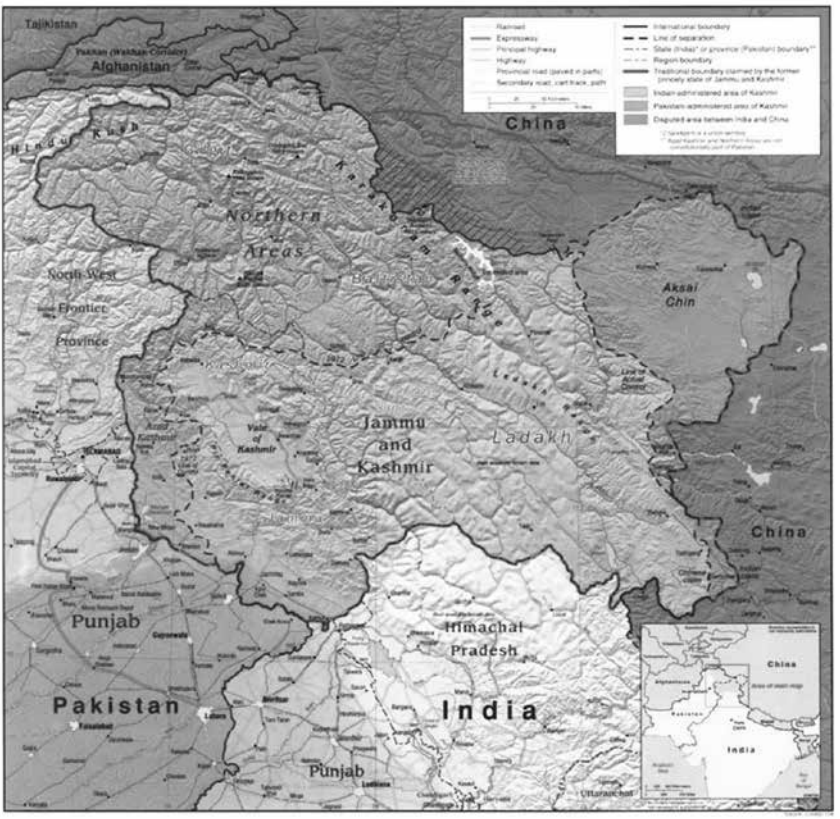
CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

The Shaksgam Valley is a desolate and arid high altitude desert valley with a breathtaking altitude ranging from 14,000 to 18,000 ft above sea level (the average Shaksgam Valley floor elevation being 4,500 m). The valley is bordered by the Karakoram Mountains to the south and the Kunlun Mountains to the north (Fig 1). It has within its expanse towering peaks, massive glaciers, glacier-fed rivers and deep gorges. The climate here is harsh and cold. The valley has been deemed inhabitable due to its inhospitable terrain, remote location and harsh living conditions. Historically, it served as a route for caravan trails during the summer months, witnessing occasional human activity. Bearing the same name is the Shaksgam River, which originates from the areas of the Shaksgam Glacier and Shaksgam Pass, moves in a northwest direction all through the Shaksgam Valley and is a tributary of the Yarkand River. This tract lies adjacent to the Siachen Glacier (the glacier is located southeast of this tract), the world's highest battleground. Control of the Shaksgam Valley provides a strategic edge to China (vis-à-vis India) in this region.

In modern times, the first European expedition to the Shaksgam Valley was led by Francis Younghusband in 1887.[1] Subsequently, multiple diplomatic efforts were initiated by the British, aimed at establishing formal boundaries between Qing China and British India. However, Qing China did not respond. It is understood that the proposed borders were influenced by geopolitical concerns, particularly the Great Game. Britain sought to expand a buffer zone north of the Shaksgam River, partly in response to fears of Russian expansion southwards amidst Qing China's weakening state. During

1. Colonel Sir Francis Younghusband, "The Problem of the Shaksgam Valley", v. LXIX, n. 4, April 1926; Major Kenneth Mason, M.C., R.E., "The Shaksgam Valley and Aghil Range", Survey of India, pp. 225-235, https://www.claudearpi.in/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/1926-Problem-of-Shaksgam-Valley-by-Younghusband-from-GJv68-s.pdf. Accessed on March 8, 2025.

Fig 1: Kashmir Region



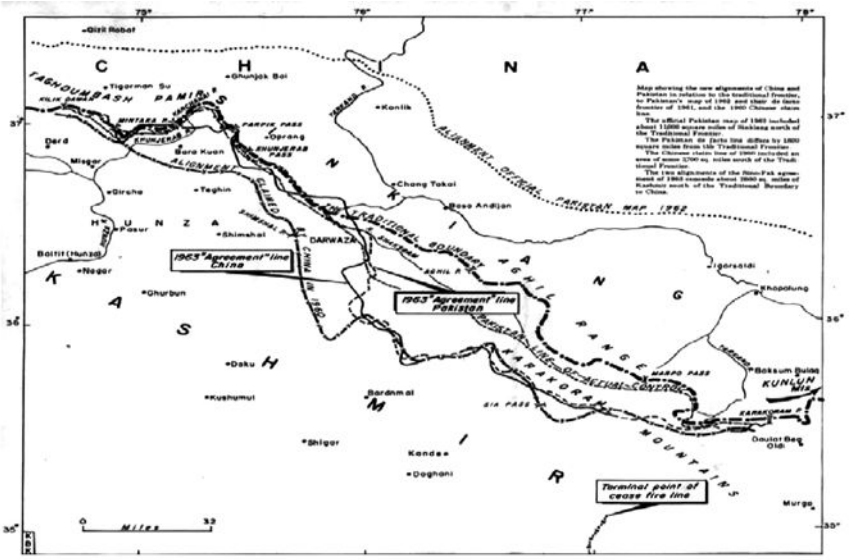
Source: Library of Congress Online Catalogue, Central Intelligence Agency, Washington, 2004, https://www.loc.gov/resource/g7653j.ct001188/?r=0.275,0.996,0.56,0. Accessed on May 17, 2025.
Note: *Purpose only to depict the geographical location of the Shaksgam Valley/ trans-Karakoram tract, with reference to neighbouring areas.

the British rule, different maps depicted varying representations of the border, leaving the status of the Shaksgam Valley virtually contentious. Following its independence in 1947 and the loss of Gilgit Baltistan, India lost physical access to the Shaksgam Valley. In 1959, as Chinese maps began illustrating areas within Gilgit Baltistan (then under Pakistan's control), and Pakistan reciprocated by claiming

the territory up to the Kun Lun Mountain range. Subsequently, negotiations between Pakistan and China commenced in 1962, resulting in the Sino-Pakistan Frontier Agreement of 1963.[2]

It is also a fact that the map of India has always included Aksai Chin (Fig 2), Pakistan Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (POJK) and the Shaksgam Valley as part of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Another historical fact is that the Kashmir dispute goes beyond the territory that is still under the illegal occupation of Pakistan, and includes both the Shaksgam Valley (5,180 sq km) in the trans-Karakoram tract ceded by Pakistan to China under their so-called border agreement of March 2, 1963, as well as Aksai Chin (38,000 sq km), illegally occupied by China.

Fig 2: 1963-Government of India Map 3-1-Scaled



Source: "The Northern Frontiers of India", https://www.claudearpi.in/gb-sector/gb-maps/. Accessed on May 16, 2025.

2 "China Built Road in Shaksgam Valley Threatens Siachen Glacier", *StratNews Global*, May 15, 2024, https://stratnewsglobal.com/india/china-built-road-in-shaksgam-valley-threatens-siachen-glacier/. Accessed on March 2, 2025.

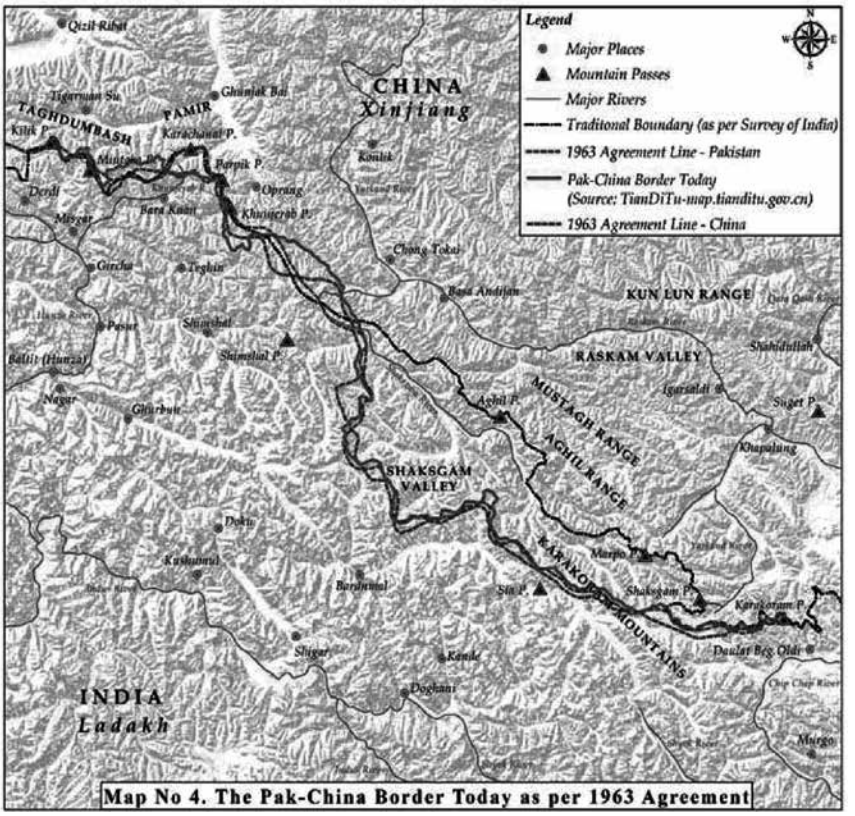
PAKISTAN CEDES INDIA'S TERRITORY[3]

On December 26, 1962, two months after the Sino-Indian border war began, China and Pakistan agreed to settle their mutual boundary issue. Under this so-called 'Boundary Agreement' which these two countries signed on March 2, 1963, Pakistan illegally ceded 5,180 sq km of Indian territory in 'Pakistan Occupied Jammu and Kashmir' to China (Fig 3). Pakistan recognised Chinese sovereignty over the trans-Karakoram tract of the Shaksgam Valley. This treaty is "provisional," pending the resolution of the Indo-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir.[4] 'Article Six' of the Sino-Pakistan Border Agreement of 1963 states: "The two parties have agreed that after the settlement of the Kashmir dispute between Pakistan and India, the sovereign authority concerned will reopen negotiations with Government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on the boundary, as described in 'Article Two' of the present agreement, so as to sign a formal boundary treaty to replace the present agreement, provided that in the event of that sovereign authority being Pakistan, the provisions of the present agreement and of the aforesaid protocol shall be maintained in the formal boundary treaty to be signed between the PRC and Pakistan".[5]

This completed the Chinese territorial grab. The usual Chinese unscrupulous manoeuvres since the colonial days, aimed at surreptitiously acquiring land that rightfully belonged to the erstwhile princely state of J&K and following its accession in October 1947, as a part of India, had now finally borne fruit and was (as per Pakistan and China) part of Xinjiang province of China.

3. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, External Publicity Division,"Sino-Pakistan Agreement, March 2, 1963, Some Facts", https://www.claudearpi.in/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/1963-Agreement-GOI.pdf. Accessed on May 16, 2025.
4. Eric Hyer, "The Pragmatic Dragon: China's Grand Strategy and Boundary Settlements", in *The Sino Pakistani Boundary Settlement*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015, p. 106.
5. n. 3., p. 39.

Fig 3: Sino-Pakistan Agreement, March 2, 1963



Source: Transposition by IDSA, https://www.claudearpi.in/gb-sector/gb-maps/. Accessed on May 16, 2025.

The UN Resolutions, UN Commission for India and Pakistan (UNCIP) of January 17, 1948, August 13, 1948 and January 5, 1949, had made it clear that "Pakistan cannot claim to exercise sovereignty in respect of J&K." In 1963, in a secret note from the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), India further clarified that according to the terms of the UN Resolutions, "Pakistan cannot purport to exercise even 'actual control' over the defence of these areas." Practically, it also means that the agreement signed on March 2, 1963, between Pakistan and China about the Shaksgam Valley of the Gilgit Agency being transferred to

China is legally invalid.[6] "The Shaksgam Valley, we consider it our own territory," said Randhir Jaiswal, the spokesperson of the Indian MEA during a regular press briefing on May 2, 2024. "We have registered a protest with the Chinese side against illegal attempts to alter facts on the ground. We further reserve the right to take the necessary measures to safeguard our interests".[7]

DOKLAM 2017: ON THE SIDELINES—DEVELOPING ANOTHER FLANK[8]

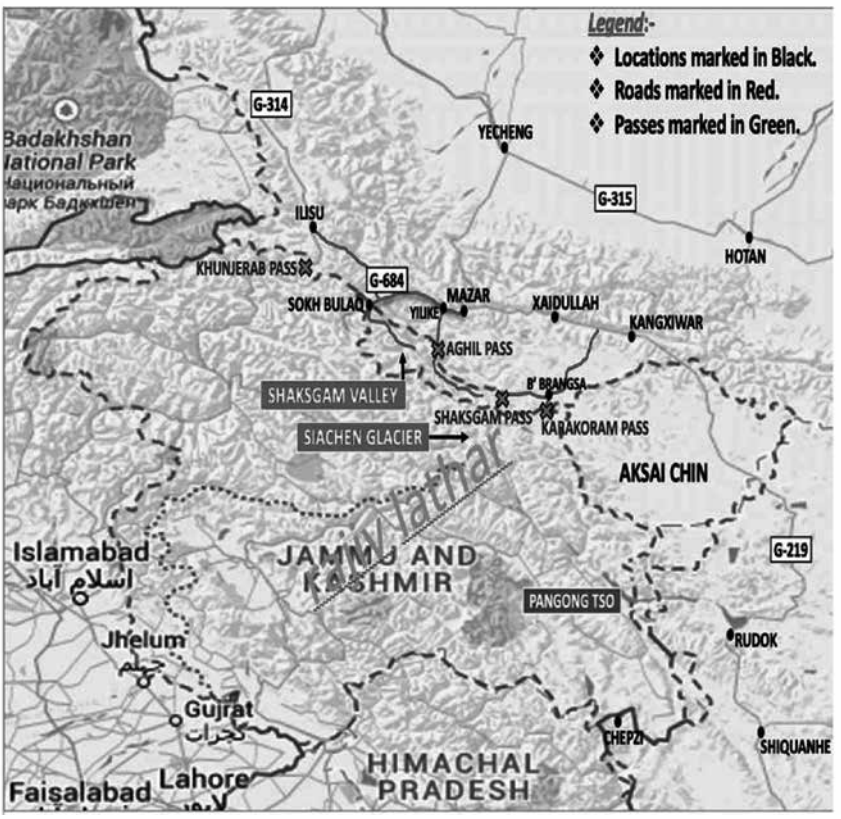
While negotiators on both sides were beginning to bring to an end the India-China 74-day standoff (June to August 2017), the Chinese had begun to construct a natural surface road, moving into the Shaksgam Valley (its first venture of road development inside the Shaksgam Valley). Before that, during the years 2016-17, China began constructing two prominent large size settlements on the now nomenclatured road 'G-684' (slated to join the Western Highway G 219 with the Karakoram Highway G 314); Mazar (on G 219) to Ilisu (on G 314). These were at Yilike and Toquzbulaq (northwest of Sokh Bulaq, en route to Ilisu). The purpose of these was to house labour/ construction parties, and migrated population, and had an obvious military utility in terms of billeting and storage. By mid-2018, the Chinese had completed the construction of a natural surface road of approximately 70 km length, along the Shaksgam River, within the Shaksgam Valley. This natural surface, unpaved road, commenced and entered the Shaksgam Valley from the northwest direction, at a place called Sokh Bulaq. From mid-2018 till date, this road stretch has continued to witness regular maintenance activities, to obviate the damage caused due to frequent landslides. But apart from this

6. Claude Arpi, "LAC vs IB: Why India's assessment of the length of border along China is misleading", *Firstpost*, February 15, 2023, https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/lac-vs-ib-why-indias-assessment-of-the-length-of-border-along-china-is-misleading-12157882.html. Accessed on March 20, 2025.
7. Venus Upadhayaya "The Trans-Karakoram Valley: Small Civilisational Corridor is China's Base to a Larger Geo-Political Game, Analysts say", *The Epoch Times*, https://www.theepochtimes.com/world/the-trans-karakoram-valley-small-civilizational-corridor-is-chinas-base-to-a-larger-geo-political-game-analysts-say. Accessed on May 16, 2024.
8. Refer to "Fig 4" for all names and locations of interest.

regular maintenance activity, there has been no extension of, or improvement to, this road. Six years on, this road stays at it is.

Therefore, there had remained only one point of entry into the Shaksgam Valley, which was from the northwestern direction, the place called Sokh Bulaq. Meanwhile, in early 2018, the Chinese also started constructing a road from Ilisu (on G 314, Karakoram Highway), moving eastwards towards Sokh Bulaq.

Fig 4: Developing Surface Infrastructure in the Shaksgam Valley



Source: Sibnai Kumar, "Google Map Marks Kashmir's 'Disputed' When Seen From Outside India", *WION*, February 16, 2020, https://www.wionews.com/india-news/google-maps-marks-kashmirs-disputed-when-seen-from-outside-india-280958. Accessed on May 17, 2025.

DECADE OF THE 2020s

With the beginning of this present decade, road development activities have gathered pace, with a clear aim to access/approach the Shaksgam Valley from the northern and eastern directions too. The first road construction activity began from the east, commencing in late 2021. A road began to be developed from Balti Brangsa (falling on the existing road of the Xaidullah-Karakoram Pass). This road has thereafter moved westwards, towards the Shaksgam Pass, the eastern edge of the Shaksgam Valley. This road was first seen to have entered the Shaksgam Valley from close to the north of the Shaksgam Pass, in late 2023. The forbidding and treacherous mountainous and glaciated terrain in the general area of the Shaksgam Pass forced the Chinese to keep attempting multiple alignments, till date. At present, this road is being developed as it moves westwards along the Shaksgam River, within the Shaksgam Valley.

Alongside the east-west road development from Balti Brangsa on to Shaksgam Pass, new road development work was also discerned from mid-2022 onwards, which was being developed in a north-south direction, approaching the Shaksgam Valley from the north. This road starts off from Yilike on G 684, and is now seen to have entered the Shaksgam Valley from the north at Aghil Pass (60 km as the crow flies distance from Indira Col) in mid-2023. This road, post entering the Shaksgam Valley, is seen to have turned eastwards, along the Shaksgam River, now being developed to be moving towards the Shaksgam Pass which falls on the eastern edge of the Shaksgam Valley. The road continues to be steadily developed eastwards, with a clear intent to reach the Shaksgam Pass. The presence of support encampments and labour/construction camps alongside, within the tract, are clearly discernible.

These two roads, from the east and north, now offer the second and third entry points into the Shaksgam Valley. China therefore, on date has simultaneous access to the tract from the west [north-west XUAR (Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region)]; east TAR; (Tibet Autonomous Region); and north (southern XUAR). Chinese deployments and positions in Aksai Chin are now almost connected with G 314 (Karakoram Highway) via the Shaksgam Valley.

Meanwhile, connectivity is now established between Ilisu (on G 314) and Mazar (on G 219), thereby connecting the Western Highway with the Karakoram Highway. This implies that the Shaksgam Valley is now independently accessible from both east and west, vide both these highways.

WHAT VALUE DOES THE SHAKSGAM VALLEY OFFER? AND WHY NOW?

The Shaksgam Valley is a coveted piece of real estate due to its strategic location between subcontinents that has been under Chinese control since 1963. While India has raised objections on the legality of this treaty and the ceding of the Shaksgam Valley to China by Pakistan, it has never made any effort or attempt to physically occupy the valley. It has been more than 60 years that the illegal and provisional Sino-Pakistan agreement of early 1963 was signed. Why are the Chinese so keen now on developing the Shaksgam Valley? Is it for economic, military or tourism reasons or is there something more to it? Does China want to threaten the Siachen Glacier and adjacent areas in this region via the Shaksgam Valley? Is China wanting to create a lateral surface communication link between the east and west (Western Highway – Karakoram Highway; TAR and XUAR) via the Shaksgam Valley? China is today building infrastructure on territory that is only temporarily and provisionally with it. It is clearly a provocation. What is the larger geopolitical game? The possible Chinese intent, aim, trajectory or the potential answers lie in the following:

Chips:[9] Microchips require two critical raw materials: sand and fresh water. A 30-cm silicon wafer requires almost 10,000 litres of fresh water for its manufacture. All of China's major rivers like the Yangtse, Yellow and Mekong are choked with effluents. The Taklamakan Desert (the largest in China) towards the north, provides sand in abundance and there is a huge reserve of water stored in the lakes, rivers and glaciers in the Himalyan and Karakoram Mountain ranges. The leading Chinese polysilicon wafer producer, GCL-Poly Energy Holdings, is completing a 1,30,000 metric tonnes (MT) polysilicon

9. Vikas Kapoor, "China's Insatiate Hunger", *DAILYEXCELSIOR.COM*, September 19, 2020. https://www.dailyexcelsior.com/chinas-insatiate-hunger/. Accessed on May 16, 2025.

plant outside Kashgar in the XUAR, which, when completed, would be the world's leading low cost, high quality polysilicon production base for the modified Siemens method polysilicon manufacturing. Is this what makes China more 'thirsty for water'? The far-sighted Chinese strategists have been interested in the Shaksgam Valley, which is home to 242 glaciers and considered to be the most heavily glaciated region in the world outside the two poles. The region's glaciers represent a critical fresh water reserve, which is vital, given the extensive requirements of water for microchip manufacturing industries. China's quest for water originating in the Karkoram-Himalayan region has resulted in the Chinese acquiring Aksai Chin in Ladakh by force and the Shaksgam Valley by an illegal treaty with Pakistan. This far-sighted Chinese planning has resulted in a windfall gain for them today.

Silos to Store 'Spent Nuclear Fuel':[10] SD Pradhan, the former Deputy National Security Advisor (NSA), told *The Epoch Times*, that he believes the road could actually be leading to arms silos, like the nuclear silos that China has built.[11] He points out that the extreme cold and the desolate location of the Shaksgam Valley are ideal for storing Spent Nuclear Fuel (SNF). "China, which is producing every year a large number of nuclear weapons, must be finding it difficult to keep the SNF safely. The SNF can be reused until all its uranium is exhausted. Thus, it cannot be thrown away as waste," adding that the SNF must be kept in storage pools for at least a year to allow it to cool down before being recycled or disposed off. "I think China is using this region for keeping its spent nuclear fuel. In that cold environment, SNF can be safely kept for the required periods".

Exploration of Nuclear Resources:[12] SD Pradhan also opined to *The Epoch Times* that the Chinese are exploring mineral resources in this area, including nuclear resources like uranium. Indirectly, the region is a source of plutonium, which is extracted from uranium. "It is certain that uranium is there, including in [larger] Gilgit - Baltistan. The Chinese are badly in need of plutonium for their nuclear reactors," he said.

10. Upadhayaya, n. 7.
11. Ibid., p. 7.
12. Ibid., pp. 10-11.

Untapped Water and Mineral Resources: The trans-Karakoram tract is known for being one of the world's highest glacial regions. Its 242 glaciers and significant water resources contribute to its allure and great interest to China, according to experts. Control over water resources is important for industrial development. The region's glaciers represent a critical fresh water reserve, which is vital given the extensive requirements of water for industries in XUAR such as microchip manufacturing. Additionally, research indicates the Shaksgam Valley is under the complex influences of both the Indian monsoon and dry arid climate systems. Due to the presence of many glaciers, the area is rich in water resources and contributes significantly to the regional hydroelectric power generation. The area feeds the Yarkand river, a tributary of the Tarim river.

The mineral resources have been largely untapped here. Due to its unique geology, this area has abundant precious stones, metals, oil, and hydrocarbons. This adds to the allure of this region. Chinese infrastructure development activities in this region, of late, are also driven by economic interests, including the exploitation of mineral resources. However, as per a recent article,[13] there is no serious mining activity in the trans-Karakoram tract itself, due to its remote location and a breathtaking altitude that ranges from 14,000 to 18,000 ft above sea level. The only publicly known mine was in the Raskam Valley, a few kilometres away from the confluence of the Raskam and Yarkand Rivers and it was closed in 2018, according to a report by the Chinese state media, Xinhua. Whoever, therefore, controls the region will control those abundant resources and tap the potential of this resource-rich land.

Adventure Tourism—A Cloak: The new roads and entries into the Shaksgam Valley facilitate easier access to the glaciers of the upper Shaksgam Valley for tourists and researchers. As the distinguished Himalayan mountaineer Harish Kapadia highlights in his book *Siachen Glacier: The Battle of Roses*,

> The situation in the Shaksgam Valley today is similar to that on the Siachen in the 1970s. China has allowed several mountaineering

13. Ibid.

> expeditions to climb in this valley. Many teams have attempted the north face of K2 from here and groups have trekked freely in the valley without liaison officers. In recent years, the explorer Kurt Diemberger has spent much time in the area and crossed the Kyagar Tso Lake in an inflatable boat, raising the possibility of such a crossing by an army, should it be required. A French team led by Bernard Odier reached almost all the way to the foot of Indira Col. With a little more time and effort, they could have traversed Turkestan La and looked onto the Siachen Glacier.[14]

The fact that this could happen should make the Indian authorities give the Shaksgam Valley the importance it deserves. The critical aspect is that we should remain vigilant. The possibility of military reconnaissance attempts, military look-out teams or detachments, or such like escapades, in the garb, or under the cloak, of a mountaineering expedition, cannot be ruled out, and need to be critically watched out for.

Consolidation of Claims: The development of infrastructure in the Shaksgam Valley is part of a larger strategy and a step towards the consolidation of Chinese claims over the illegally ceded territory. The Chinese undoubtedly intend to develop more infrastructure and roads in the inhospitable region to solidify their control over the territory. China intends to expand its influence in this region. A central piece of Chinese strategy with India has always been that when it comes to border discussions, maximise its position and negotiate from there.

Military Vulnerabilities: The region's strategic location and the development of roads to and within the trans-Karakoram tract have significant military implications, including the potential for China to project power into India and the surrounding region. Roads are now being developed entering the Shaksgam Valley from three cardinal directions (west, east and north—in the order of their development). Surface connectivity has also been established between Ilisu (on G 314) and Mazar (on G 219), thereby connecting the Western Highway with the Karakoram Highway. This implies that the Shaksgam Valley is

14. Harish Kapadia, *Siachen Glacier: The Battle of Roses* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2010).

now independently accessible from both these highways. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) also gets multiple avenues of approach for forward deployments into the tract through the tract. Connectivity to the frontier/border areas, opposite the Indian northern borders gains new momentum. This enables rapid deployment, switching of reserves and faster move of logistics to the forward areas, which affords the PLA the capability to create vulnerabilities, particularly opposite the Siachen Glacier, at short notice. The PLA may now resort to having permanent camps or outposts, which has not been the case for the last 60 years plus. There can be a possibility of infrastructure for better, more frequent patrolling and movement of troops, if required. The new infrastructure could give a tremendous advantage to China in case of a new conflict with India in the region. The possibility of a military threat in the future depends on the Chinese objectives. In the future, these Shaksgam Valley roads may also be connected to areas opposite Indian positions in Sub-Sector North (SSN) via the Shaksgam Pass. These developments are a matter of national security concern. They have the potential to create regional instability, including the risk of conflict with India. India needs to respond to such possible developments by building up credible capabilities in terms of infrastructure. It is also prudent to monitor developments in the illegally occupied Shaksgam Valley due to its strategic significance in the broader context of Sino-Indian relations and future boundary settlement negotiations. There is a need to assess the implications of all these Chinese actions and develop strategies to address the resulting national security concerns and regional instability.

Sino-Pak Collusivity: The Sino-Pak collusion is most pronounced in this area. Tom Hussain, a Pakistani journalist, in his article in *The South China Morning Post*, talks about the Chinese motivation: "Pakistan is looking to develop new overland border crossings with China that would potentially boost the allies' military interoperability against Indian forces in Ladakh and the rest of Kashmir."[15]

15. Claude Arpi, "As PoK Rises in Revolt Against Pakistan, China Continues Infra-Building in Shaksgam Valley", *Firstpost,* May 19, 2024, https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/as-pok-rises-in-revolt-against-pakistan-china-continues-infra-building-in-shaksgam-valley-13772430.html. Accessed on May 16, 2025.

CONCLUSION

The threat is real. The Chinese are finally here after a long hiatus, with an intent to stay. Indian concerns across the northern borders might have shifted further west, to now cover the Chinese escapades in the trans-Karakoram tract. The final outcome, by the end of this decade, in all likelihood, will be a mix of economic activity and military presence with a permanent foothold. Chinese activities towards solidifying this tract will also tie up a certain amount of Indian resources (including military), which is a possible Chinese intent. As the Chinese steadily move on their path to national rejuvenation by the year 2049, they certainly want to keep a strong neighbour like India tied down and occupied, by opening up new unexplored options (like the Shaksgam Valley). India needs to stay alert, aware, and carry out a predictive analysis of the possible trajectory, which these infrastructure developments in the Shaksgam Valley are likely to take—not trusting the Chinese in what they say, but observing what they do.