

Gwadar Port and Corridoristan

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ABSTRACT

Historically water-waves and their control has played important role in international politics. Today as a result of technological development sea power influences the course of political history more than ever before. Importance of maritime trade and naval security implies construction of seaports and maritime routes. In light of the evolving economic and security architecture in Asia due to regional and global realignments, Gwadar port has gained geopolitical significance for peace, security and economic development in the region. Connecting western China to Middle East and Africa by a shorter overland road and rail infrastructure projects of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and providing landlocked Central Asia an access route to the Indian Ocean, the port will promote regional economic cooperation and development. The changing geostrategic and Geo-economic landscape in Eurasian region due to great power shift, the unfolding New Great Game in the region, and the role of Asia to influence the growing prospects of multipolar world order, Gwadar port will impact the power equation in Eurasia and the broader Asian region. Connected with other six proposed economic corridors of China's Belt and Road Initiative, the region forms a economic Corridoristan, which will promote inter-regional and intra-regional trade and economic development. But due to its geostrategic location and relative advantage for Pakistan and China the project faces geopolitical challenges.

Keywords: **Gwadar Port, Geostrategic and Geo-economic Importance, OBOR, Corridoristan, Connect Central Asia, The New Great Game, Geopolitical Challenges**

Introduction

History reveals that great civilizations flourished and developed along coastal areas. Therefore, nations always have cooperated and competed for control of the world's water. In his influential study "The Influence of Sea Power upon History" Admiral Alfred Mahan wrote in 19th century that "whoever rules the waves rules the world". Today significance of naval power and maritime connectivity has increased manifold due to technological development and scientific innovations. Access and control of salt water is as important as fresh water. Choaking of waterways can cause breathing difficult for a country. Therefore, water has been playing an important geopolitical role since advent of maritime transportation. For centuries it has been used for maritime trade, voyages and cultural communications. The industrial revolution, technological development and

resulting phenomenon of globalization has further increased the importance of sea power in contemporary world.

In terms of area, water covers approximately 70% of the surface of Earth. Pacific Ocean as we know is the largest and Indian Ocean is the second largest Ocean in the world. The Indo-Pacific region combine accounts for “38 countries that share 44% of world surface area and 65% of world population, and account for 62% of world-GDP and 46% of the world’s merchandise trade” (Masudur Rehman, Kim, & De, 2020). It shows that security and economic cooperation in this maritime region is indispensable for global economy. Given the importance of maritime trade and naval security in the Indo-Pacific region, Pakistan is located in one of the world’s most important geostrategic maritime regions. Its 1100 km long sea-front along the Arabian Sea, stretching from Iran in the West to India in the East, is a maritime gateway to South Asia and beyond. After independence in 1947 Pakistan had two functional sea ports at Karachi and Bin Qasim. A third deep-water seaport at Gwadar in Baluchistan was deemed necessary for maritime trade and security but due to internal political instability, economic difficulties and great powers politics in the region, construction of the port remained suspended for decades (Kaplan, 2009). After much deliberation Pakistan in 1994 finally approved the Gwadar Port project.

Apart from being a maritime gateway to South Asia, Gwadar port has geopolitical and Geo-economic importance connecting China’s only Muslim majority and restive province of Xinjiang with the Indian Ocean through rail and road infrastructure projects of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The multi-billion dollars CPEC is a flagship project of China’s Belt and Road initiative (BRI). BRI is an economic development strategy of the Chinese government which will enable Beijing to develop trade relationships in Central Asia, South Asia, Middle East, Africa and Europe (Lim, 2016). Given the evolving economic architecture in Asia and the broader Eurasian region, Gwadar port, therefore, is of prime significance for Pakistan, China.

However given its geostrategic location and economic prospects in the context of great power shift to Asia and an important geographical link connecting China, Central Asia, South Asia and Middle East, the port project is facing opposition internally from Baluch insurgents and externally from India and United States. Although it is certain that Gwadar port has economic prospects for South Asia, China, landlocked Central Asia and Afghanistan, it is also seen in zero-sum perspective by New Delhi and Washington, because it said that the port will give Beijing direct access to Indian Ocean and address its Malacca Dilemma. Historically geostrategic location, maritime trade security and natural resources have lured great powers into this coastal region. Following the recent developments between China and US and US and Russia it is argued that a New Great Game is unfolding in the region for mastery in Eurasia. Therefore, apart from Geo-economic prospects the port project poses geopolitical challenges for Pakistan and China.

Geographically Pakistan's coastline along the strategically important waters of Indian Ocean has served as an important maritime link between oil rich Middle East, Central Asia and China. For centuries the coastal region remained a corridor for trade and cultural exchanges. Therefore, close political and economic interregional relations existed in the region long before. This region was one of the main maritime routes for ancient Silk Road trade and communication (Nicolini, 2002).

Gwadar Port: In a Larger Perspective

Gwadar, a town in Baluchistan, is a hammer-shaped sandy peninsula covering an area of about 307 square miles. This strip of land is about five miles long and half to one miles wide projecting into the Arabian sea. Meteorologically the region is characterized with aridity. As a result, vegetation is very poor and sea, especially fishing, is the main source of income. But despite limited administrative and commercial value during the 19th century Gwadar region remained a strategic observation post for British India. Today this ancient terra incognita has once again gained much importance due to China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and China's Built and Road Initiative (BRI).

After 2008 global financial crisis and its spillover effects on China's economy, the Chinese government in 2013 announced to revive the ancient Silk Road to help improve global trade and spur economic growth. This ambitious economic development strategy (BRI) aims to enable China develop trade and economic links in Asia, Africa and Europe. It is believed that given its immense scale and investment capital, when fully materialized, this mega trade project will create a sphere of "coprosperity" and economic interconnectedness across regions in Asia, Africa and Europe (Lim, 2016). Although critics of China, especially Washington, has termed the project as debt trap set by Beijing to expand its influence in other countries, China argues that it will create a prosperous future of win-win for all.

BRI is also an economic diplomacy initiative which aims to promote China's soft power in the world. The two main geographical components of the project are Overland Silk Road (OSR) and Maritime Silk Road (MSR). Both these trade routes emanate from different parts of China and traversing along economic hubs in East Asia, South Asia, Central Asia and Middle East, will end at the trading markets of Europe. This idea of economic integration is based on historical trade and cultural relations between East and West. The BRI overland and maritime Silk Roads when fully developed have the potential to promote economic integration and cooperation in the Eurasian region.

The Overland Silk Road, following the ancient camel and pony caravan trade routes, originates in Xian region, capital of Shaanxi province of China. Replacing camels and ponies with high-speed trains this route passes through northern China, Central Asia, Middle East and Eastern Europe reaching Germany, the heartland of Europe. On the other hand, the Maritime Silk Road originates at the eastern coast

of China along the East China Sea. While connecting the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean this maritime route passing through Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea will end in the south of Europe in Italy. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is an overland link-road from Gwadar port to western Xinjiang province which can connect these 21st century Silk Roads. CPEC providing a secure land connection between the Overland Silk Road and the Maritime Silk Road, therefore is important to the overall scheme of the BRI future success.

China is a nation of manufacturers producing the world's largest furnished goods. Its surplus production needs new markets. However, Beijing has maritime and land connections with many states in the region, the transportation connection provided by CPEC and BRI are instrumental because of shorter travel time compared to the existing global supply chains and its comparative security addressing China's concern regarding its oil supplies. To establish a Chinese centric global supply chains the BRI project has proposed six major economic corridors in the Eurasian region. These corridors are (1) China-Pakistan; (2) China-Magnolia-Russia; (3) New Eurasia Land Bridge; (4) China-Central Asia-West Asia; (5) China-Bangladesh-India-Myanmar; and (6) China-Indochina Peninsula (Lim, 2016).

The six economic corridors, when fully developed, will connect Southeast Asia, South Asia, Middle East, Central Asia and North Asia with Europe and form a Corridoristan in this broader geographical region. It will help regional states to promote peace and economic development. If this Corridoristan succeeds in formulating a Free Trade Area, given the presence of the world's fastest growing economies and industrializing states, it will be one of the most prospective and dynamic economic regions in the world. Compared to Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), now Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) after US withdrawal from the free trade agreement, the suggested BRI Free Trade Area will be the largest free trade agreement in human history.

The geopolitical integration of Afghanistan into South Asian political and security architecture through its membership in SAARC has further expended the geographical contours of Gwadar port and CPEC. According to Cline (1975) Afghanistan borders three regional geographical "politectionics plates", the South Asia, Middle Eastern and Central Asian including Eastern Europe. Peace, security, politics and stability in Afghanistan impacts developments in these regional politectionics and vice versa. Given the proximity of the port to landlocked Afghanistan, and good relations of post US withdrawal Taliban setup in Kabul with Pakistan and China, Gwadar port can help pour out instability and funnel economic development and trade into the war-torn country which will promote peace and stability in the region (Chandran, 2017). Therefore, it is a historic opportunity for China, Pakistan and other regional countries to stabilize Afghanistan through regional economic integration.

Gwadar Port: Geo-economic Importance and Geopolitical Challenges

There is no denying this fact that economic independence brings political sovereignty. Although given its close location to Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf from where approximately 50% of world's oil supply passes (Maritime Transport, 2002) Gwadar port is also located in a strategically important but volatile region. The geographic vantage location of the port connecting Middle East and Africa to Central Asia and western China can also potentially push the region into great powers politics having consequences for Pakistan and South Asian security. The Baluch insurgents' attacks against Chinese and CPEC infrastructure and Indian involvement in Baluchistan is a clear sign. However, it was a coincidence that after China showed its interest in Gwadar Port development, soon 9/11 attacks happened, and America invaded Afghanistan. But later on, Washington expressing its concerns about China gaining access to Indian Ocean is an issue for US-Pakistan relations.

But despite US and Indian concerns and Baluch insurgents' opposition, Beijing is investing billions of dollars in Pakistan to improve rail and road infrastructure connecting China to Gwadar port. CPEC is a nodal part of this project. Beijing intends to connect its underdeveloped and volatile Uygur dominated western Xinjiang province to the Indian Ocean through CPEC. Although the US and other Western countries have accused China of human rights violations in Xinjiang, Beijing says that its strategy is based on Chinese principle of countering terrorism with economic development. But India is opposed to this idea and says that the proposed CPEC route passes through disputed areas, Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan and that Chinese access and presence in the Indian Ocean is a threat to its national interests in the region (India's Objections to CPEC, 2015).

China is the second largest economy and the largest oil importer in the world (Mcspadden, 2015). Most of its oil supply comes from Middle East and North Africa. For its oil supply China is dependent on Strait of Malacca. It is estimated that approximately 80% of China's oil imports and more than half the world's annual maritime trade passes through this strait (2017 Handbook of Statistics, 2018). Historically China has always tried to maintain stable and cooperative relations in the Asia Pacific region for security of its maritime trade and oil supply. But since the aftermath of Second World War when American military established presence in Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Philippines has created a sense of insecurity in Beijing. To address its insecurity of oil supply and maritime trade Gwadar port provides China a shorter overland route to reach the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf. Thus, CPEC is a secure and stable alternative to China's Malacca Dilemma.

But as Chinese influence and presence in the Eurasian and Greater Middle Eastern regions grow, opposition from India and America increases and their strategic entente strengthens. The civil nuclear deal and defence agreements

between Washington and New Delhi are apparent. India sees Chinese access to the Indian Ocean and Pakistan's naval development in zero-sum perspective. India's former Defense Minister A. K Antony said that "we are concerned about the project" while the current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi termed it "unacceptable" (The Express Tribune, 2015). Therefore, contrary to the logic of idea of regional economic integration New Delhi is opposed to Gwadar port despite Pakistan repeated assurance that it welcomes development of Chabahar port in Iran by India (Dawn, 2017).

India, a growing economy, is the third largest importer of crude oil in the world. Domestically it produces approximately one third of its oil demands. For the rest it is dependent on Middle Eastern and North African oil supplies (2017 Handbook of Statistics, 2018). To sustain economic growth and feed its second largest population in the world, India needs energy resources and access to Central Asian markets. Therefore, to factor in the New Great Game for mastery in Eurasia while pursuing its "Connect Central Asia" policy New Delhi is funding and developing Iran's Chabahar port. This port will provide India much needed access to landlocked Central Asia and Afghanistan (Dawn, 2018).

Given their strategic location near the Strait of Hormuz and close proximity of both Gwadar and Chabahar, these ports can facilitate regional trade and economic integration if China, India and Pakistan cooperate. The presence of Hasil Bizenjo, Pakistan's Minister for Maritime Affairs, at the Chabahar project inauguration in 2017 was a clear message that Islamabad and Beijing welcome Indian participation in CPEC and BRI. China even has proposed an economic corridor, Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar economic corridor, which will promote trade relations among these states (Lim, 2016). But India continues to see Chinese economic initiatives in the region in security and military prism and did not attend BRI conference in Beijing last year despite invitation by China (Tiezzi, 2021).

China is now the largest trading partner of Middle East and Africa. Beijing is also investing billions of dollars in Central Asia to extract energy resources and get access to markets in these regions. But besides India, Washington and its other allies have also voiced concerns about increasing Chinese activities in Eurasia (Frankoan, 2015). A classified report "Energy Futures in Asia" by US Department of Defense highlighting such concerns said that "China is building strategic relationships along the sea lanes for Middle East to South China Sea in ways that suggest defensive and offensive positioning to protect China's energy interest, but also to serve broad security objectives" (MacDonald, 2004). Therefore, US and India have adopted a cautious approach to CPEC and BRI.

The landlocked energy rich Central Asian countries are still largely dependent on Soviet era Gazprom owned pipeline networks for oil and gas export. Washington's attempt to de-Sovietize the economic and security architecture in the region and Russia's resurgence deteriorating its relations with the West has provided China and Pakistan an opportunity to gain access to oil and gas in Central Asia. As the first great game was a struggle for establishing empire in Central Asia

(Hopkirk, 1992). This New Great Game is about access and control of oil, gas, lithium, uranium and other rare-earth minerals in the region.

Geographically Central Asia is the focus and heartland of this new great game. Afghanistan, a landlocked country, is located near this heartland. The country shares close proximity with three most important geostrategic and geopolitical regions – the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia. It is believed that the country has untapped natural resources and Lithium reservoirs. The American Afghan War and US military presence in Afghanistan had disturbed geopolitical landscape in the region. American withdrawal from Afghanistan and de facto approval of the current Taliban government by regional countries now provide an opportunity to shift from geopolitics to Geo-economic s. Afghanistan needs development. Therefore, extension of CPEC and access to Gwadar port will integrate Afghanistan into regional economy.

Although Gwadar port and CPEC are the focus of Chinese overland access to Indian Ocean, Baluchistan remains at the center. The crisis in Baluchistan dates back to late 19th century when Czarist Russia advances in Central Asia caused British India measures to subordinate local interests in Baluchistan to great power politics (Nicolini, 2002). Since then, Baluchistan is a troubled region. The arrest of Indian spy agency Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) agent Kulbhushan Jadhav and “Free Baluchistan” and “Free Karachi” campaigns in US, UK and Switzerland have geopolitically transformed the crisis into part of the larger New Great game. The Baluchistan insurgency is fast transforming into an externally supported anti-state subversion. The externalization of Baluch insurgency has economic, political and security implications for Gwadar port, CPEC and Pakistan. The unrest in Baluchistan is now an externally supported security challenge for Islamabad.

The agenda in Baluchistan is global. The stakes are high. America is backing India as a challenger to China in the Indian Ocean region. The competing interests of China’s BRI, America’s Indo-Pacific Strategy and India’s Connect Central Asia have added new geopolitical dimensions into Baluchistan crisis. The rising clouds of a struggle between the “Indo-US Entente” and “China-Pakistan Axis” has created geopolitical and geostrategic challenges for Gwadar port and CPEC. In the coming years Baluchistan will remain important. According to Robert D. Kaplan “one key to Pakistan’s fate is the future of Gwadar, a strategic port whose development will either unlock the riches of Central Asia, or plunge Pakistan into a savage and potentially terminal, civil war” (Kaplan, 2009). Therefore, Islamabad needs to address the problem in Baluchistan.

Conclusion

Given the importance of sea ports for maritime trade and the influence of naval power, especially in contemporary world due to technological and navigational modernization, Gwadar port has Geo-economic , geostrategic and geopolitical significance for Pakistan. The convergence of political, economic and security contours in Indo-Pacific Oceans and the linking of Gwadar port to China’s western Xinjiang province through rail and road infrastructure projects of CPEC has increased the importance of the port for regional economic integration and maritime security in the region. In the backdrop of evolving economic and security architecture in Asia because of possible regional and global realignments, Gwadar

port has geopolitical significance for peace, security and economic development in the region.

The proposed energy pipelines and six Chinese economic corridors connecting many states in the region under Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) initiative will help regional states to establish peace and stability. This Corridoristan will help promote economic cooperation, improve inter-regional and intra-regional and trade. The geopolitical integration of Afghanistan into South Asia has further expanded the geographical role of Gwadar port for regional economic connectivity and development. But due to hostile states – US and Indian – opposition and their competing interests and goals in the region, the port faces geopolitical challenges. It is necessary that Pakistan with the help and support of regional friendly states address these challenges for the economic betterment of the whole region.

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