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China's Strategic Access to Gwadar Port: Pivotal Position in Belt and Road

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Synopsis

The vital role of ports to both security and development has enabled Pakistan and China to blur the distinction between economic and military purposes. The development of the Gwadar Port seeks to introduce economic progress while improving both their strategic environment in the Indian Ocean.

Commentary

AS THE gateway and the base of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the Gwadar Port has renewed interest among scholars in Chinese strategic access to the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea. China is taking decisive steps to improve its overall geopolitical position by developing extensive transport networks of roads, railways, ports, and energy corridors in its neighbourhood besides securing natural resources.

Gwadar holds a pivotal position in the CPEC, which is a pilot project of China's ambitious One Belt, One Road (OBOR) Initiative. Why is Gwadar so important for Pakistan and China. The Gwadar port aspires to transform Pakistan into a vibrant hub of commercial activity among the energy-rich Western and Central Asian States.

Gwadar's Vision

The development of the port is being undertaken in two phases. The first phase of this mega project, constructed by Chinese Harbour Engineering Company, is already completed and operational. Currently, its second phase is in the process of development. Labelled as a "jewel in the CPEC crown", the port is expected to play a pivotal role in Pakistan's future trade and cargo activities.

For Pakistan, the economic returns from Gwadar port stem from its location near the Strait of Hormuz, through which 40% of the world's oil passes. Gwadar could emerge as a key shipping point, bringing Pakistan much-needed income, and when combined with the surrounding areas could become a trade hub, once road and rail links connect it to the rest of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia.

On the economic front, in the case of China, such investment is important for boosting its manufacturing sector, absorbing its domestic production overcapacity and stimulating domestic economic growth. However economic benefits of the Gwadar port for China appears limited. The *Global Times* reported that "Gwadar will not become China's main trade hub with Persian Gulf countries, nor serve as an alternative route to Malacca Strait". Further, the proposed Gwadar-Kashi pipeline is also not viable due to high cost and complicated geographic conditions. Therefore, it is pertinent to ask what led to such a huge Chinese commitment? What are the converging interests of Pakistan and China which are driving this agenda?

The Motives for Strategic Access

Pakistan at present has only two commercial ports, Karachi and Bin Qasim, catering largely to the domestic needs. The Karachi Port deals with both military and trade interests and is already overloaded. A blockade of Karachi Port could affect Pakistan's trade as well as naval manoeuvrability. The need for an alternate port became apparent soon after the 1971 blockade of Karachi Port during the Indo-Pakistani War.

However, the idea could not be realised due to lack of a funding source, till Pakistan's "all weather friend" China came forward not only to provide funding but also to construct the port at Gwadar. Pakistan's objective to develop an additional port matched China's growing naval power in the Indian Ocean. Indeed, some Pakistani scholars see Gwadar Port as "Pakistan's alternate strategic, economic and military base" and a "strategic maritime outpost" which is "indispensable for the very existence of the country".

Also, some Chinese strategists view the development of overseas ports/bases vital to safeguard commercial interests and regional security. In fact, support facilities are required not only to protect China's growing global economic interests, but also to enable People's Liberation Army (PLA) participation in peacekeeping activities, ship escort deployments, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations. Moreover, access to Gwadar could be helpful in replenishment of consumables, intelligence and communication, repairs, and direct combat support for the PLA Navy.

With the administrative control of Gwadar Port for a period of 40 years in its hands, China is all set to get its foothold in the Indian Ocean. Although, China and Pakistan deny speculations of a naval base, given the close strategic relationship between the two countries and expanding naval cooperation in recent years, such a possibility could not be ruled out.

China's Growing Naval Projection

China is today more dependent on the seas than ever before in its history. Therefore, Beijing is bound to invest heavily – in diplomatic and military terms – in the management of the order in the Indo-Pacific region. Commitment to develop Gwadar Port is a good example of steady expansion of Chinese maritime interests and influence.

Chinese strategic access to Gwadar is aimed at building a blue water navy. The economic prospects of China's large population are dependent on access to vital natural resources and markets in distant lands. A powerful blue water navy, then, becomes inevitable for the rising China. Further, it is imperative for China to make arrangements for friendly ports and turnaround facilities in other nations that will increase the range, flexibility and sustainability of Chinese maritime endeavours.

No great power has built a blue water navy capable of projecting force without strategic access and political arrangements for forward presence. The vitality of ports to both security and development has allowed Pakistan and China to blur the distinction between economic and military purposes and to introduce economic progress while improving their strategic environment in the Indian Ocean.

By virtue of its excellent location, strategic access to Gwadar would not only give a powerful new springboard for spreading economic and political influence throughout the Middle East and Southwest Asia but would also radically alter the military balance in the region. While China is trying to enhance its safety and security through strategic access to Gwadar, regional countries are concerned at these developments and are apprehensive of Chinese intentions.

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