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# The Factor of Gwadar Port in Growing Interdependence between Pakistan and China

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*Due to the growing anti-China alliances in the Indo-Pacific region, China requires alternative routes for its trade and oil imports. Gwadar port complemented by China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) provides an opening to China to the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Since Pakistan is not part of any anti-China alliance, Gwadar port can decrease China's dependence on the strait of Hormuz and the strait of Malacca and can provide a sense of security in times of crisis. Pakistan needs CPEC for leveraging its geo-economic potential. Therefore, this paper analyses the factor of Gwadar port in the transition of relations between Pakistan and China from strategic partnership to interdependence. The research concludes that both Pakistan and China have long-term interdependent economic interests, therefore, Pakistan can better utilize its strategic location for economic gains. Given Pakistan's greater interest to exploit its maritime economic potential, this research also nullifies the apprehension that Gwadar port can*

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*be the next military base of China. This phase of interdependence in relations is an opportunity for Pakistan to claim more economic benefits from China's industrial and technological capacity and materialize increased exports to China for its economic stability.*

**Keywords:** *Pakistan, China, Gwadar port, CPEC, geo-economics, interdependence*

## **Introduction**

Pakistan enjoys the most constructive, stable, and friendly relations with China among all its neighbours. China is situated in the northeast of Pakistan and shares a border of around 600 km converging on the Karakoram mountain ranges. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were established in 1951. In the 1960s China-Pakistan relations expanded from the border agreement and military cooperation to cultural and economic domains. Due to converging geopolitical interests and through increased mutual understanding, relations between Pakistan and China consolidated into a strategic partnership. The patterns of reciprocity and reliability resonate in relations for decades now. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and cooperation in Gwadar Port led to a long-term interdependence between the two countries. For China, Pakistan maintained a significant place in its vision for the revival of the Old Silk Route through the mega project of regional and global economic connectivity, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

China considers CPEC a flagship project of the BRI because of the strategic location of this project which has an opening to the Arabian Sea. "China intends to yield considerable political gains from the BRI such as expansion of its export markets, promotion of Renminbi (RMB) as an international currency and decrease of trade resistances like tariffs and transport costs etc. It solves the 'Malacca Dilemma' for China."<sup>1</sup> Pakistan called CPEC a game changer to leverage its strategic location for long-term economic gains and regional connectivity.

CPEC is a result of the mutuality of interests between Pakistan and China. Pakistan had to address its energy and infrastructural needs to enable the operationalization of Gwadar port. In the evolving geopolitical tensions and competition in the Indo-Pacific region, China desired to connect with the Middle East, Africa, and Europe through alternative routes and also to ensure its energy security. China also desired the development of its north-eastern part of Xinjiang by connecting it to the Arabian Sea.

Pakistan's Gwadar port holds a key position in China's trade and energy security policy. CPEC complements the success of Gwadar port. Without the infrastructural development through CPEC, the full potential of Gwadar port could not be achieved. This piece analyses the mutuality of interests and increasing interdependence between China and Pakistan. China knows that Pakistan will not become part of any anti-China alliance and the trading corridor through

Pakistan proves a reliable alternative to ensure China's unhindered energy security and trade. Since it is now an interdependent relationship with long-term strategic interests, it is important for Pakistan to maximize its economic advantage through increased exports to China.

### **Growing Interdependence**

The positive relations between Pakistan and China over the decades resulted in the commencement of CPEC with great confidence, commitment, and surety. Despite the difference in size and strength between the two countries, there is not any visible asymmetry in demands and interests. China's relationship with Pakistan is the essence of its belief in value-based relations. Generally, a weaker or smaller partner in interstate relations cannot leverage more benefits from the stronger partner. The stronger partner can maximize benefits at the expense of the weaker partner. Pakistan and China do not calculate their relations in this traditional cost-benefit analysis. Facts can provide a different picture but the perceptions of both countries play a dominant role in their attitude toward each other. Inter-state relations are practised based on changing interests which means no relations can be constant. This is the unique feature of China and Pakistan relations that positive perceptions in their relations are not susceptible to changes in their interests.

For Pakistan, China plays a balancing role in its strategic equation with India. China is also important to Pakistan for its

economic interests. The maritime economic potential of Pakistan is not fully exploited. The debate over the significance of Gwadar was initiated decades ago. The development work with China's cooperation was started in 2002. But Pakistan did not have the required land roads and rail tracks. With CPEC development, the infrastructural requirements for the operationalization of Gwadar port have become possible.

Gwadar port on Pakistan's Makran coast is situated at a distance of 600 km from the Strait of Hormuz. Gwadar port is at the crossroads of the oil-rich Middle East, Central Asia, and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The 3,000 km long corridor will make Gwadar port a regional hub port. It can be used for heavy transit trade among various regions. Under the CPEC, Gwadar port will be connected through modern land and rail routes with not only China but also the Central Asian Republics (CARs). Gwadar port will improve transportation to landlocked CARs and give critical access to Middle Eastern, African, and European countries, acting as a gateway to enhance their economies via booming trade and commercial activities under the regional connectivity concept.<sup>2</sup>

In 2013, Pakistan transferred the contract of operation of Gwadar port to China Overseas Ports Holding Company Limited for 40 years which was previously with the Port of Singapore. Under this agreement, 91 per cent of the port's income will go to the Chinese company and 9 per cent will go to the Gwadar Port Authority of Pakistan.<sup>3</sup>

Gwadar Port was included in CPEC in 2015 by pledging \$1.62 billion of investment in the construction of new infrastructure. As part of CPEC and BRI, its capacity would be further extended to cater to the needs of a regional hub port. "At present, it has space to berth two or three large ships with a capacity of 50,000 deadweight tonnage. By 2045, it is expected to berth 150 ships and hold up to 400 million tons of cargo."<sup>4</sup> Under CPEC, the construction of additional berths and cargo tunnels is enhancing the seaport's weight capacity of ships. The port also includes a "floating liquefied natural gas terminal with a capacity of 500 million cubic feet of gas per day, a desalination plant, and a 2,292-acre special economic zone."<sup>5</sup> An airport and major road connections were also part of the project. In April 2022, the logistics services began in Gwadar to facilitate one-window operations for businesses, exports, and imports.<sup>6</sup> All the modern facilities for trans-shipments, manufacturing, storage, and harbour services will be provided in Gwadar under CPEC and the Gwadar Development Plan.<sup>7</sup> The full potential of Gwadar port will be realized after the completion of all complementary CPEC projects including the transportation facilities and special economic zones (SEZs).

Pakistan's Gwadar port and overall CPEC project are immensely important for China's vision for the development of its autonomous region Xinjiang and also for connecting through another port to the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. China itself has around 14,500 km of coastline. Its major trade

network is spread over the East China Sea, the South China Sea, and the IOR. The straits of Malacca and Hormuz are an important chokepoint of petroleum and liquified gas transportation to China. The largest volumes of oil flow is through the strait of Hormuz which connects the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the strait of Malacca is the shortest passage for the sea-borne trade which connects West Asia with the Middle East and Europe. It is the vital waterway from which the world's second-largest volumes of cargo shipments, and oil and gas products are transported.<sup>9</sup>

CPEC also includes oil pipelines from Gwadar to Kashghar to give China quicker access to the Middle East in oil imports. Oil import from the Middle East to China is one of the key objectives of this corridor. The Gwadar-Kashghar oil pipeline will enable the import of one million barrels per day from the Middle East to China by taking 17 per cent oil import share from its South China Seas routes. To cater to this objective, the project also includes critical infrastructure for oil imports, the development of technical and logistical installations, an oil city, petroleum refinery zones, and industrial parks. In addition to providing a sense of security to China, this will save time, and millions of dollars for China by reducing the distance by 2,500 km and the land distance for Kashghar by 2,800 km. Through the South China Sea, the land distance for Kashghar is 4,500 km.<sup>10</sup>



## **Challenges to China's Sea-Borne Trade and Energy Security**

Given its economic size and energy needs, China is highly dependent on the imports of oil and liquified gas. In addition to purchasing large volumes of oil and gas from Russia, about 70 per cent of oil and gas are imported from the Middle East. From the energy security point of view, both chokepoints of the Strait of Malacca and the Strait of Hormuz have strategic and economic significance for China. China is overly dependent on the Strait of Malacca because 60 per cent of its trade passes from this chokepoint as compared to the global 20 per cent trade flow from there. The two straits are the lifelines of the Chinese economy.<sup>11</sup>

The security of sea lines of communication (SLOCs) is immensely important for the unhindered trade and export/import of hydrocarbons. During the First World War, the blockade of sea lanes and supply cut off by the enemies through seas was a major tool used by both British and Germany. The attack of German submarines on British passenger and merchant ships was the reason for the United States' entry into the war in 1917. Since then, the US has not only advocated for free and open market systems but also the freedom of navigation of international trade. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) has been enforced to delineate the territorial limits of countries in the seas. Against China's incremental claims over the South China Sea in which other neighbours also have territorial claims, the

US considers it legitimate to conduct routine Naval Coast Guardship and aircraft freedom of navigation operations in this ocean region.

The US also provides a nuclear security umbrella to most of China's neighbours. The islands of Diaoyu/Senkaku are disputed between China and Japan. The presence of rich natural resources and fishing areas in the South China Sea notably in the Spratly islands is the reason for competing claims on islands between China and its neighbours, including the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Brunei, and Taiwan. The South China Sea area has "estimated 11 billion barrels of untapped oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas."<sup>12</sup> Besides, free trade and unhindered navigation are significant for all East Asian countries. Around "3.4 trillion dollars of trade goods are shipped through the SCS, and over 80 per cent of crude oil destined for Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea transit this area."<sup>13</sup>

China's economic rise and its assertive behaviour in the South China Sea have provoked the US containment strategy against China. For a long time, the US considered the Pacific region vital to its national security and interests. The US maritime priorities have expanded to IOR and so India has joined it as a comprehensive strategic ally to contain China. The purpose is to prevent China's influence in the ocean region of important chokepoints of sea lane communication. The presence of the Indian and the US fleet in the Strait of

Malacca raises severe security concerns and, in the event of any unexpected moves, can have an impact on China's commercial and economic supplies.<sup>14</sup> China is also encircled by the growing anti-China alliances cobbled together by the US such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, another trilateral between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the US named AUKUS, and the grouping of India, Israel, United Arab Emirates, and the United States named I2U2 are threatening China's core interests. The commonality in all these groupings is the increasing security cooperation in the Pacific and the IOR aimed at protecting the vision of a free and open Pacific region. Military clashes in the Pacific region can threaten 80 per cent of China's oil imports and critical minerals that flow from Africa and the Middle East, as well as exports to India and Europe.<sup>15</sup> That is one of the main factors that increase the importance of Gwadar port. The Gwadar port can provide a secure alternate route to China that can protect Chinese trade and economy from any unexpected blockage on the Strait of Malacca.

### **The Significance of Gwadar Port for China**

Gwadar Port complements China's vision of geo-economic expansion through the BRI. Interests of both countries converge on geo-economics instead of strategic bargaining. The port, which is close to China geographically, is also close to the Indian Ocean, the Strait of Hormuz, and the

Persian Gulf. It is also crucial in providing military security for China's business interests. Furthermore, Gwadar is an excellent alternative for China to strengthen ties with Pakistan and create a regional balance in contrast with India's growing ties with the US.<sup>16</sup>

Many western scholars consider Gwadar port the next military base of China.<sup>17</sup> But this assumption is narrowly construed. Gwadar port cannot become a military port because it is more significant for China's economic and energy security. Pakistan is not part of any anti-China alliance. But at the same time, Pakistan also maintains its strategic autonomy. China-led economic activities and developments in Gwadar port do enhance Pakistan's maritime capacity vis-à-vis India's growing power in the IOR. This does not mean, however, that China and Pakistan are making any parallel maritime military alliance.

The security of trade through Gwadar port is also immensely important for Pakistan. Therefore, any cooperation on maritime security between Pakistan and China will be aimed to safeguard their economic interests, unlike the Indo-US strategic cooperation in the IOR positioned for the containment of China. Pakistan cannot compromise its maritime economic potential which is still untapped. Pakistan earnestly needs to benefit from its maritime economic potential. China also does not compromise on geo-economics interests for geopolitical adventurism.

Despite handing over the management of the port to a Chinese company, Pakistan maintains complete strategic autonomy over the port. This port can ensure the expansion of China's trade through another important chokepoint and will complement its new initiatives, new markets, and connectivity through the BRI. Gwadar port is also immensely important to become a gateway of trade for the Central Asian Republics and gives critical access to Middle Eastern, African, and European countries.<sup>18</sup>

It is true that when a country expands economically, its security needs also expand. China showed interest in Gwadar in 2002. These were the years when the world witnessed the economic take-off of China. China was becoming a commercial hub with increasing arteries of shipments to the outside world. It was China's foresightedness that it understood the importance of Gwadar even before the US opposition to China's rise. China has become conscious of the obstacles it can face amidst the growing anti-China alliance build-up led by the US. China needs to overcome its dependence on the straits of Malacca and Hormuz. The US propagation of China's threat is also provoking China to divert its market and also safeguard its mercantile security through sea lanes.

### **China's Plan for Diversifying Economic Markets**

According to *Global Times* a Chinese newspaper, China-US trade stood at \$755.6 billion in 2021 with China's

imports amounting to \$179.53 billion and exports to the US \$ 576 billion. In terms of volume, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is China's largest trading partner followed by the European Union. The US is the third largest partner. Japan is the fourth largest trade partner.<sup>19</sup> As a single country, the US can be assumed as the largest trading partner of China. As the data suggests, China's trade is mostly dependent on the US and its East Asian neighbours.

Amidst the US anti-China alliance framework in this region, it is wise for China to divert its trade to other regions. China's BRI project will also serve China's this interest.<sup>20</sup> China is also expanding its arms market. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) ranked China as the second-largest weapons producer from 2015 to 2019. Previously depending on Russia for weapons imports, China's weapons advancement is at par with the developed countries.<sup>21</sup>

Under the US security umbrella of safe trade and navigation through seas, China has extensively benefitted. After the rise of anti-China alliances with most states which have stakes in the Pacific and the IOR, China can face blackmailing in the aforementioned chokepoints.<sup>22</sup> China needs various measures to escape maximum damage to its economy in case of any strategic trap.

One measure is the diversification of the markets. China's economy is export-oriented. It is the largest trading partner of the US, EU, ASEAN, and Japan. However, due to the

evolving rivalry with the US, China is expanding its investment and trade to other larger regions. China has increased its economic engagements with Africa, Latin America, South Asia, and Central Asia. These alternative markets will help China to avoid any economic and strategic traps. However, China may no longer be able to depend on the security provided by the US to the SLOCs. China will also need its own maritime security architecture with like-minded countries. China developed its first overseas military port in Djibouti in Africa. Djibouti is an essential part of the BRI. This military base is meant to protect China's sea-borne trade. The location of Gwadar port is ideal for transportation to Djibouti.<sup>23</sup> Djibouti can provide better military security to China's trade because it connects "between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean and is a gateway to the Suez Canal."<sup>24</sup> There is a lot more to the security of SLOCs which include anti-piracy operations, joint intelligence sharing, and peacekeeping operations as the security of global trade is a shared and common interest of all countries.<sup>25</sup>

## **BRI and China-Pakistan Long-Term Strategic and Economic Ties**

Participating in China's BRI is natural for the regions which have enormous economic potential but lack the infrastructure to harness industrial and trade connectivity. The BRI also indicates that China can take the responsibility of setting new economic avenues in the continent as an

economic powerhouse in Asia. Apart from economic reasons, there were other driving factors too for Pakistan's inclusion in the BRI. In the past, when Pakistan was a close ally of the US, its strategic location had been important for geopolitical and security reasons. Such partnership is short-lived and ends when the desired target is achieved. Secondly, India's hostile posture toward Pakistan has hindered the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Economic integration within South Asia is hostage to inter-state disputes. China's economic connectivity project is the most viable option for Pakistan through which it can truly leverage its strategic location for economic outcomes.

It is believed that Gwadar is a potential strategic strongpoint for China as it will serve China's internal and external security through provision of an exit to the Indian Ocean. Although ASEAN is the largest trade partner of China, most of the ASEAN countries are allies of the US. India is also a strategic partner of the US.<sup>26</sup> China's reliance on Pakistan is increasing. "For China, the stakes attached with BRI are much greater and strategic in nature."<sup>27</sup> China's soft power externally and political stability internally heavily relies on its economic success story. China achieves its geostrategic goals through economic means. CPEC will provide a sense of security to China because 17 per cent of China's oil can be imported through Gwadar port. Similarly, China is also confident about Pakistan's positive view and support for its global status.<sup>28</sup>



Since China has embraced Pakistan for a long-term strategic and economic relationship, Pakistan should maximize benefits from China's economic potential. The transportation infrastructure can now facilitate Pakistan's commercial exchanges between the two countries. Pakistan's exports to China are also increasing since Pakistan joined the BRI. The agreement on the China-Pakistan Free Trade Agreement Phase 2 in 2019 is a step in the right direction for increasing trade between the two countries. In the year 2021-22, Pakistan exported goods worth \$2.78 billion during the 12 months of the fiscal year which showed an increase of 36.08 percent.<sup>29</sup> China has shown interest in increasing its imports from Pakistan. If Pakistan capitalizes on the opportunity, China can become the largest export destination for Pakistan.<sup>30</sup> Pakistan can also depend on China to increase its export capacity. In addition to the completion of the SEZs, China can transfer Pakistan's technology and also the knowledge of increasing Pakistan's industrial capacity and advancement of agriculture. Secondly, the relocation of China's sunset industries to Pakistan will also be a boost to Pakistan's economic growth.<sup>31</sup> Small and medium-sized enterprises in China have already increased investments in Pakistan since the main projects of CPEC have been completed.

According to China Index 2022, Pakistan topped the list of 82 countries as most exposed to China's influence.<sup>32</sup> It is expected that Pakistan will face more challenges in its relations with other countries. As it is widely believed that

“economically linked states with China will be under its influence and may likely align their policies with Chinese”<sup>33</sup>  
The positive influence in terms of Pakistan’s economic well-being will also serve China’s aims and positive projection of its regional integration.

## **Conclusion**

It was natural for Pakistan to benefit from the economic giant China as its neighbour with an already established strategic partnership when the prospects of economic integration in South Asia were already diminishing after Narendra Modi’s ascendance to power in India in 2014. For China, the strategic location of Pakistan fits in its long-term vision of external and internal economic security. China believes in geo-economic initiatives for achieving geopolitical gains. Therefore, BRI partnerships have a strategic value for China. With the rising risks to China’s interests amid the anti-China alliances, Pakistan’s importance is increasing for the former.

Gwadar port is immensely important due to the escalating tensions in the Asia Pacific region and challenges to China’s seaborne trade. CPEC and Gwadar naturally guarantee long-term mutual interdependence between the two countries. Gwadar qualifies more to be a regional hub port. The geo-economic potential of this region is interlinked. Pakistan’s largest interest in its geo-economic potential nullifies the wrong impression that Gwadar will become a

military port. China also wants to diversify its economic markets through CPEC. Therefore, China also shares this geo-economic interest with Pakistan. Since the economic interests with regard to Gwadar port are greater than the military interests, the chances of Gwadar port becoming a military port are minimal.

Pakistan is also walking a tight rope due to its economic and foreign policy challenges amidst the growing US opposition to China. Pakistan is being highlighted as more exposed to China's influence. The deteriorating economic situation of Pakistan will further accelerate the debt trap debate. In this situation, Pakistan needs strong favourable trade relations with China to stabilize its economy and realize the regional connectivity dream smoothly. China has both economic and technical resources to take Pakistan out of this situation.

It is time for Pakistan to maximize its benefits from this new phase of interdependent relationships in the form of economic stability. Successful operationalization of CPEC and Gwadar port as well as an increased volume of exports from Pakistan to China should be a priority in relations between the two countries.

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