



Pakistan-China Strategic Partnership: Capitalizing the Geo-Political Location of Pakistan

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Abstract

The focus of global politics is shifting from the West to Asia as China plays a significant role in the ongoing competition on the global chessboard. This competition between the USA, the most powerful economy of the world, and China, an emergent powerful economy of the world, compels China to secure uninterrupted energy supplies from the Persian Gulf region for its oil driven growth. In the recent past, China's new strategy has further cemented ties between Pakistan and China, who help each other in the changing geopolitical environment, through converging mutual interests. This paper highlights how geo-strategic positioning of Pakistan helps China fulfill its geo-strategic and geo-economic goals and how this development helps Pakistan to uplift socio-economic development and safeguard its strategic interests in the Indian Ocean.

Key Words: China, Pakistan, West, Strategic, OBOR, Economic, Indian Ocean

Introduction

China is focusing on four major geopolitical concerns: border and domestic security, maintaining sustainable economic growth, countering the US influence in Asia, and developing its image of a friendly neighbor in the region (Scobell, 2010). The geostrategic realities for China have much importance due to which its engagement in economic, military and diplomatic domain to maintain its socio-economic development for sustainability and safeguarding national and maritime interests. China has a unique place on the global map and shares its border with 14 small and large, developing and developed neighbours. China's main driving force behind its strategic relations with neighbouring countries is based on peaceful coexistence which it has applied since 1970s (Garver, 1993). China in the post-cold war era further cemented ties with its neighbors by strengthening mutual

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relationship with single principle of non-interference and mutual cooperation in order to achieve durable regional stability.

Being an oil driven economy, China from its inception has intended to secure its oil import routes and lines of communications in order to maintain sustainable economic growth. In the post-cold war, China's industrial expansion and rapid economic growth multiplied that compelled it to secure its uninterrupted power and energy supply to its industries. Realizing unique strategic location of Pakistan having long coastline and historic affinity with Persian Gulf states, China strengthened its strategic, economic and even military ties with Pakistan. Following reasons and converging interests have brought China closer towards Pakistan:

Trouble in South East Asian Region

America revived and strengthened its military relations in China's periphery right after 9/11, and in these renewed military relations the countries of the maritime region of Southeast Asia were given top priority. To maintain balance of power in the region, China alters its strategy to enhance relationship with border connected countries on "good-neighbourly policy" (Singh, 2013). As far as the issue of South China Sea is concerned which is also regarded as the utmost complex issue, China is using delaying tactics on the legal grounds and promoting cooperation with the party countries who are claiming their right on the territory of the South China Sea. China also tries to balance the American presence in different regions through empowering the concept of a multipolar world. The priority for China is to secure its sea-lanes of communications and give proper protection to its port cities in the region of Southeast Asia (Singh, 2013). From the Indian Ocean to China's Pacific Ocean ports almost about 85% of the Chinese energy supply pass (Brooks, et al., 2009). Chinese President Hu Jintao explained that the Chinese vulnerability in the Malacca and called it as "Malacca Dilemma" that pointed towards the Chinese energy supply reliance via squeezed sea lines of transport which might be choked by any opponent (Ji, 2007). China heavily depends upon crude oil that blockage can lead to severe loss to its economy, as it passes through Malacca and come from Middle East and Africa. It is quite obvious that China will not compromise on its energy security as it's the primary national interest of it and the top most priority of China's foreign policy.

Seeking Strategic Access to Middle East and Persian Gulf through Warm Waters

China is interested in expanding its economic interests and establishing shortest as well as secured lines of communication for seeking access to oil rich Middle Eastern and Persian Gulf regions. China is focusing on 'go out' strategy besides

converting the old routes by new infrastructure to secure its energy supplies by means of energy pipelines, roads and railways and invest heavily in the Persian Gulf States and oil rich countries (Lin, 2011). The start of 'go out' strategy is basically due to the threat China felt from U.S. blockade of its maritime supplies over Taiwan issue, but in contrast, China's energy requirement and industrial expansion require energy security and 'go out' strategy (Wang, 2017). It starts focusing on the Persian Gulf region mainly in the energy sector and increase trade and investment efforts there, just to secure on-going access to the Middle East.

The region of Middle East is abundant in energy reserves (Mottaghi, Nouri, & Nasiri, 2013). Whereas Persian Gulf is full of natural resources. Approximately forty percent of world gas reserves and sixty two percent of world oil reserves, that's why it is reflected as the most significant region on the world map (Murphy & Gause-III, 1997). It is obvious that such abundant resources have attracted the great powers of world towards this region and China appears to be more strategist to exploit these resources. The development of Gwadar port by China is one the main strategies of China to seek a shortest and secured route to the middle eastern region in order to safeguard its energy supplies from the region. Before the construction of the Gwadar port, China always felt threatened from the Malacca Dilemma to secure its energy supplies from its energy driven economy (Sering, 2012).

China's Maritime Expansion via Indian Ocean

The effective strategy during war at sea would be to dismantle all lines of communication and maritime trade of the enemy which could be detrimental for those countries whose identity is 'Island' based where as less destructive for those states whose identity is 'continental' based (Vego, 2013). To avoid such situation during war, states develop peaceful and cooperative relations with their neighbours.

China is the only strong power in the region of South Asia. It aims to act in a way to maintain its surveillance on the trade routes. China's presence in the region of South Asia is based on its politico-strategic and economic interests. The government of China's main concern is to prioritize security to its energy import for which China's One Belt One Road is obvious. The leading economies of West Asia, South Asia, Europe and even Africa can only be approached through Indian Ocean. To maintain its influence in the Indian Ocean, China's OBOR has both geo-strategic and geo-economic prospects. In the present unipolar world, China is playing a significant role in making a new world order based on equal opportunities for all. This strategy could only be achieved if China is able to maintain its influence in the Indian Ocean.

Mearsheimernoted, that the China's military strength can become powerful when it gets stronger powerhouse in economic terms. Therefore, the military strength of China will be detrimental for the US interests in the region and obviously

for the neighboring countries as well. For waging the revised doctrine of China as a high technology of modern warfare in the seas and Chinese Navy is positioning herself as a blue Navy till 2020, trying to dock its two aircraft carriers in the Pacific as well as Indian Oceans (Bed, 2000).

The Chinese ongoing commitment to develop infrastructure in an efficient way as this policy of China depicting long-term intentions in the Indian Ocean. The evidence of the infrastructure development can also observe from the construction of Gwadar port which is located at the top of the North of Indian Ocean. By taking the Chinese interests in the region of the Indian Ocean, it will not be long enough for China to make possible its naval presence to secure its maritime and economic interests. As China have already obtained its approach to the Indian Ocean via Gwadar and Karachi port which are connected through Karakoram highway, second through Burma via port of Burmese and third from the Strait of Malacca.

For seeking the cost-effective access to the Persian Gulf, China is doing investment in Pakistan in Gwadar port development and other projects based on infrastructure development. Both Iran and India are having strong concerns on the Chinese heavy investment and presence in this region, this whole situation also attracted U.S. attention on this region. Second China is using Pakistan geostrategic location to gain access the CAR states through Gwadar port and the resources of the Central Asian States can find their best access through Gwadar port via Afghanistan, and this can only possible with the peace and stability in Afghanistan. The concerned states have already framed their policies in a way to counter the Chinese presence in the region as India is trying to build a Chabahar port in competition of Gwadar port. The Indo-US nuclear deal also a move to frame the strategic environment of this region significant.

The central place of CPEC is the Gwadar port, because the successful completion and implementation of the Gwadar port services in operational manners will make possible to convert this corridor as an energy corridor for China which is the main objective of China (Sial, 2007). Gwadar strategic location is very effective because it is located at the mouth of the Hormuz Strait and it bridges the world, one third trades and this port of Gwadar can best secure the security of China's energy routes (Kim, 2011).

Pakistan's Strategic Positioning & China's Strategic Interests

The trade in maritime depends upon two factors, one is the geographical location and second is economic self-sufficiency of the state (Vego, 1999). The development and economic growth are depending upon now a days on the dependence on international trade and to alignment with the global economy. The cost-effective way for the goods transportation is the sea and this can be observed through the current trade routes.

The geostrategic location of Pakistan in the region of South Asia is very significant due to the Gwadar port development, once it is operational the significance will increase more, and the expectation of the trade volume will increase in coming years. Mostly Pakistan's requirements of energy forty five percent fulfil with fuel oil. Pakistan strategically located at a very important position on the world globe. Its position is significant due to its presence between resource rich countries to the resource less countries. Moreover, the economic giants of this region also making its location significant as Pakistan encircled with China and India and the countries which are having lots of natural resources those are Afghanistan and Iran. Economic corridors have emerged in the recent years as an important tool of regional cooperation, integration and development in a globalized world under reciprocity.

Pakistan is developing the port of Gwadar with the collaboration of China in front of the Persian Gulf which is full of oil resources. This port will provide a cost-effective route to access Central Asian hydrocarbon resources to export in the world market. The only way to access Gwadar for CAR is the Afghanistan, which is facing the instability from decades. The positive and successful development in Pakistan and the stability and the balance of the South Asian region are the two fundamental interests for Beijing. This is only because of securing its geopolitical interests through Pakistan's geostrategic location. According to Khattak (Personal communication, October 19, 2017), China is in need to empower the underdeveloped regions of China, which are closely linked to Pakistan, and Pakistan is the only option for China to empower these regions through CPEC.

In a real sense, the political as well as the economic interests of China in Pakistan remained limited. It can be observed through those events when Pakistan needed aid from China, but China ignored to provide financial assistance and China has a minimum level of interests for promoting Pakistan economy. In 2008, when Pakistan was in financial shock, Pakistan asked China for aiding its economy, but China denied providing loans and forced Pakistan to take the amount of multibillion dollars from IMF which was obvious with the strict economic conditions (Perlez, 2008). At the end, China was ready to provide five hundred million US dollar loans. In short, China's main concern is the geostrategic positioning of Pakistan that basically attracts China's strategic interests to be capitalized in the region.

Gwadar Port may be able to allow China to watch over the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) lying just 460 Km away from Karachi, and to monitor the U.S. maritime placement in the Persian Gulf, as well as the Indian Naval Bases of Gujarat and Mumbai. It is estimated that approximately 60% of Chinese energy imports from the Persian Gulf will be carried through this route (Ashraf, 2015). Gwadar port will give China a strategic position in the energy rich Caspian Region. Gwadar port being in front of the Hormuz Strait will be very reasonable for China by which, it will get an opportunity to use the direct access to the Gulf of Aden

and Persian Gulf by merely traveling about 2500 Km on the existing Silk route. The management and usage of the Gwadar port under China may help to establish its availability near to the Hormuz and in the Indian Ocean.

According to Professor Kundi (Personal communication, October 15, 2017) strategic location of any country is very important. Due to the strategic location of Pakistan it is at the center of significant countries and regions. Pakistan has never utilized its location properly though CPEC is an opportunity to develop Baluchistan that remained under developed from the time of its independence. The Gwadar Port is connecting many regions and China is investing here. China has its own geopolitical and geostrategic interests in the region, but it must be Pakistan who must utilize this opportunity on the basis of its strategic location. China is a friendly State with common interests with Pakistan. Pakistan can balance its foreign policy with USA and decrease its dependence on USA by utilizing CPEC.

Converging Strategic Interests of Pakistan and China in the Region

Communal Strategic Approach towards India in the Region

During the major part of the 21st century, China's policy in South Asia was focused mainly on maintaining strong cooperation with Pakistan; the reason was an attempt to counter an Indian-backed insurgency in the Tibetan plateau, often called the Chinese heartland. To appease Pakistan, China did not recognize Bangladesh until October 05, 1975, the very day when Bangladesh was officially recognized by Pakistan. Both China and Pakistan have strategic relationship almost from 60 years. The strong defence relationship between Pakistan and China portray a sound relationship status to contain the regional influence of India and to distract the policies of strategic as well as military presence against China. The strategic bond of Pakistan and China showing its two-way fronts at the same time and making such strategic bond more strengthen to deter India from any act of war. Actually, China wants to counter India as it considers that India and U.S. want to counter China's presence in India Ocean and for this they are making nexus. The U.S. is trying to counter China from all sides and make hurdles, so China may not achieve its economic and especially energy objectives in the region (Li, 2002).

For Pakistan from beginning the major strategic threat is from India, when Pakistan see that China have also common strategic enemy and U.S. is changing its interests from Pakistan to India, it also moved towards China as both have a common national interest in this regard. For Pakistan due to its geographic location have limited options as it is dealing hostile neighbor on its eastern border. India is creating issues for Pakistan also on its western border and the U.S. is supporting India presence in Afghanistan without considering the geographic realities. India is creating hurdles for Pakistan in the region and trying to counter China and Pakistan by relying on U.S., but the reality is that it can only create instability in

region. This region is the nuclear powers region and nuclear retaliation is not in any states favour. Though India's attitude, let Pakistan and China to become closer allies in the region.

Countering U.S. Geopolitical Interests

Nevertheless, the beginning of the 21st century set in motion a rolling stone of events that were soon to shift the very focus of global politics. Starting with the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre, following Bush's anti-terrorism adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan, the world drifted towards a war for the maximum control of energy resources. As events unfolded, it soon became clear that the international powers would explore new horizons to ensure that they had the maximum stash at their disposal to master the 21st century's industrial and energy race.

The operation Neptune against Osama bin Laden and the flagging cooperation between Washington and Islamabad, the leadership of Pakistan to set up the dependence relationship with China, denoting China as a substitute partner to the US. Where the growing relation of Indo-US in the region by signing civil nuclear deals, so China already assisted over the years Pakistan with its nuclear and conventional military as well as military capabilities to contain India for emanating any kind of threat for Pakistan.

Right after Bin Laden operation in Abbottabad, PM of Pakistan visited China for assuring the China's importance as the strongest pillar of foreign policy of Pakistan. The unilateral conduct of the operation of Abbottabad against OBL without prior notification to the officials of Pakistan alter the behaviour of the military leadership of Pakistan with US. The repercussions of this operation through which Pakistan withdrew 120 military trainers of US from the country and turned it directions toward China, which always presented himself as 'all weather' ally. China welcomed Pakistan's response and assisted US for respecting the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of Pakistan and with this statement announcement, China also announced that China would enhance the delivery of 50 upgraded avionics and equipped aircraft of JF17 to Pakistan.

As far as the threat is concerned, US hasn't replaced Russia as a threat to China. Russia as a global threat remains core concerns for US. However, China is likely the priority of the US foreign policy for the 21st century and there is the probability China by having its progress and development notion, it can challenge the order of America in Asia. As China is helping Pakistan build Gwadar port to counter US influence in the region.

Secure Economic and Strategic Interests

In fulfilling the national security of any country which are linked with the sea, for them the ports play a very important role by providing them naval bases in

operationalize way. The number of bases and the proficient of naval preparedness enhanced the flexibility of forces to operate during war and peace time. The evidence of the successful attack of the Indian Navy in 1971 war on port installations and merchant shipping at Karachi. There are the strategic advantages for building naval bases on the west of Karachi and port development as well as the national security of the country. The first advantage is that it will provide the most efficient flexibility to Naval forces of Pakistan to operate from trilateral locations and these are Ormara, Karachi and Gwadar, and the dependence on the Karachi port will be reduced as its became vulnerable as it is closed to the India.

On the other side, CPEC can secure China's strategic as well as economic interests in the region, especially from South East Asian region conflicts. And China-Pakistan Economic Corridor provide it the shortest route to its western part form sea trade and provide an opportunity to pursue its geopolitical interests in the region that links directly with oil rich and natural resources rich states.

For China, the CPEC project is the linking project opportunity with its provinces on the western side. The province of Xinjiang is having the distance of 2500 km from Gwadar and 4500 km from the east coast of China. This route will create the possibility for China to functionalise its some trade route from the port of Gwadar. The proposal for making a port on the coast of Makran opens the ways to build a port at Gwadar and this plan initiative taken after passing 25 years of the Makran coast development. The strategic location in the Indian Ocean occupy by the Gwadar port. For regulating the trade of this region as Gwadar can act as a hub port, which could transform the energy deficiency of Pakistan into the energy proficient country. The successful implementation of the project can contribute primarily in the economic revival of Pakistan and backed China economically as well as strategically in its geopolitical and geostrategic interests in the region.

The corridor of CPEC anticipated as a game changer for the whole region of South Asia and particularly to the Pakistan. The collaboration on CPEC to provide access to the China in the Arabian Sea, for increasing trade with the Middle East, Africa and Europe. The execution of the corridor, will create opportunity for Pakistan to cash its strategic importance in the region. This corridor would interconnect Central Asia, South Asia, Gulf States and North Africa in terms of energy and economic collaboration. CPEC is equally beneficial to China and Pakistan. The CPEC as China-Pakistan Joint Venture will prove to be of much significance from the futuristic point of view to further the objectives of their national interests by means of regional integration and enhancement of social, political and economic activities.

Durrani (Personal communication, October 05, 2017) argues that Pakistan remains dependent on U.S for its economic and strategic support and compromised its national interests in this regard. Now Pakistan is considering China to replace dependence from U.S and it is trying to introduce CPEC as game changer. But Pakistan again have unclear policies and has taken investment on interest and loan

that is not in favour of Pakistan, except that CPEC is strategic option for Pakistan. The only way to take advantage of this strategic option is through national interest base policies. This can help Pakistan to promote its own foreign policies instead of depending on other states.

Gwadar Port in the Region and Protection of Maritime Interests

The emerging trends of globalisation and push of global cargo with containerization, in 2010, and the trade volume reached to the 70% of world trade, the profit from ports exceeded for serving the domestic trade of the country. According to Coulter, in an era of economic globalization, ports are evolving from being traditional interfaces between land and sea to providers of complete logistics networks (Coulter, 2002). This is exclusively right for those countries who are having major hub ports and earning huge amount of revenues. Though, every port is not having an identity of hub port. For having hub port status, the conditions are necessary to meet that port which are; first, its geographical location, second either the port can handle smoothly the docking of large ships, third there should have the terminal facilities an extent level, fourth, there should be the ability to handle container operation efficiently and the last there should be the charges for cargo-handling attractive to the foreigner.

The Gwadar port and rest of Pakistan ports provide the shortest route as compared to the Easter side coast ports of China and this region ports. The ancient route of the Karakoram highway already connects western China with Pakistan. The infrastructure development of this ancient route and the connection with Gwadar through Khuzdar-Ratodero road can make most viable and shortest route for the region of Western China to access sea. The port development of Gwadar as a huge port of transshipment in the South Asian region will have a very important impact in the growth of Pakistan's economy. The important location of Gwadar on the entrance of Gulf, the high volume of trade from the Persian Gulf, and the possibility of any political conflict in the region of the Persian Gulf; favours the Gwadar port which is a source of major transshipment port and can alter the economic outlook of Pakistan. The Gwadar port will have the ability to accommodate and manage 4th generation ship container. These things are not, however, exempts from challenges. The core challenge is the resources in financial terms which will make such steps in the reality. For attaining such kind of steps to success, there is a need to empower private sector investment which already pursued but need to formalise it in a proper way. Another challenge is the port of Iran Chabahar and Gulf States, which would never to become party to the Gwadar port transshipment trade. Although, the port of Gwadar expectations to provide facilities in terms of industrial trade in more than twenty states and obviously have the capacity to dock oil tankers up to 0.2 million tons.

Gwadar significance is also flashing because all gas pipeline networks will pass through Gwadar, or the region, which is near to it that is Qatar-Iran or Iran pipelines to South Asia, though pipelines of the north-south energy of CAR will pass through the Gwadar port to the international markets (Narbaev, 2004). So, it is highly significant for both China and Pakistan's geopolitical interests in the region.

Strategic Opportunities for Pakistan via China's Alliance

The development of the hub port, also known as deep-sea port at Gwadar and the exploration efforts for the resources will promote more the maritime interests of Pakistan. For the development of Makran Coast, Pakistan asked US to finance the seaport in 1973, which ultimately declined. The US avoided financing the port. Due to the constraints of financial resources the project delayed for 25 years, till China came ahead to not only provide financial assistance to Pakistan but also willing to develop the port at Gwadar. The inclination of China towards Pakistan for utilizing its strategic location to serve its own strategic purpose. As the location of Gwadar port looks strategically important to access the Indian Ocean. Despite a fact being a maritime state with a long coastal line, Pakistan was not being able to utilize its strategic location and utilization of the sea with its resources.

The country which has a strategic location in the region like Pakistan, there is necessary to access the sea by having the geopolitics situation surrounding that area. The Major chunk of the international trade of Pakistan is dependent on the sea, however, by having such huge dependence the sector of maritime neglected all time just because of the ruling powers mindset prevailed in the region. The neglected act was due to the non-efficient infrastructure which was not suitable for shipbuilding industry, unexploited natural resources on off shores, declined merchant maritime. But now with the support of China, it must be considered as a strategic opportunity for Pakistan, which requires envisioned long-term policies to truly pursue this strategic prospect.

For maintaining national security and growth of economy in Pakistan, it is important to make efficient progress in the field of maritime sector. The sector of maritime can stimulate the economic base and diversify the growth of the economy in terms of economy. Powerful Navy of any country is not only important for securing its interest of maritime in case of any coercion and predation, but also important to fulfil the strategic interests of the state. Currently, the maritime sector of Pakistan is under process of exploiting it in a way to utilize it for the betterment of the economic growth.

The significance of Gwadar can be understood as this is the part of One Belt One Road under CPEC which would intersect different regions. Therefore, it is necessary for Pakistan to deal all challenges in CPEC construction and can convert the corridor into economic opportunity. The corridor development is not the

financial and economic aid, however, it's the investment for next 20 to 30 years. This is a proper time in which Pakistan can formalise its position in the emerging economies by utilizing its manpower and resources. The proper utilization can boost economy of Pakistan from 3 to 4 times compared to the present situation (Ijaz, 2016).

According to Professor Chughtai (personal communication, October 16, 2017) China and Pakistan are cooperating on a government level without including any political interests in their relationship that makes this relationship strong and long lasting. China is having great advantage of Pakistan's geography and its own transition cost will decrease. On other hand, Pakistan must change its focus from India as Pakistan's geostrategic location is providing it advantage of gas pipelines royalty as it can provide billions of dollars advantage to Pakistan. But Pakistan has no economic plan and it still have traditional U.S and India approach. Pakistan's geopolitics is blessing as well as curse, and it is due to its own policies.

The proximity of Gwadar port with Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf will enable Pakistan to monitor its SLOC. In fact, the area of Gwadar due to its geostrategic significance remained the concern of major military powers that want to focus on the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. As it attracted Portuguese, Greeks, Persians, Arabs, the British and Russians too (Global Security, 2013). It is the need of time to make use of the opportunities that will be created under CPEC in the better interests of the state. The CPEC as a game changer will connect more than 50 countries to this well-established economic hub, turning this region into an economic bloc at the first instance. It is expected that both China and Pakistan from Gwadar port will be able to play their role in the international sphere and specifically in the regional sphere.

Conclusion

The geopolitical environment and the geographic location of Pakistan left it with the option of sea dependence that can be envisioned as an opportunity for its survival and its economic revival. Gwadar port is a natural strategic warm-water deep sea port and no doubt it's a transit route in region. It is an opportunity for Pakistan to utilize its geostrategic location significance to stand on its own feet's without depending on allies. China is no doubt an all-weather friend and the geopolitical interests of both states are converging in the regions geopolitics. And most importantly, this strategic partnership is not of 'Stick and Carrot' policy like Pakistan and U.S. but allies that promote each other's national interests in region. For Pakistan this strategic opportunity can only be use in a best way by strong policies based on national interest priorities without any compromise over it. It must not be the one-sided game again as Pakistan have long history of bad experiences.

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