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**Gwadar Beyond CPEC: Pakistan's Quest to Become a Regional Connectivity Hub**

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**Abstract**

*Gwadar Port has emerged as one of the most significant strategic and economic projects in Pakistan's contemporary history. Initially viewed primarily as the maritime centerpiece of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Gwadar has gradually evolved into a symbol of Pakistan's broader geoeconomic ambitions. Situated near the Strait of Hormuz and at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa, Gwadar possesses the potential to transform Pakistan from a strategically important state into a regional connectivity hub. However, the realization of this vision depends on far more than infrastructure development alone. It requires economic viability, regional integration, political stability, effective governance, and a secure operating environment.*

*This article examines Gwadar's significance beyond CPEC and evaluates its potential to serve as a regional connectivity hub. It argues that while Gwadar enjoys significant geographic advantages and occupies a strategically important location, its success depends upon Pakistan's ability to integrate the port into broader regional trade networks and transform it from a transit point into a comprehensive commercial, industrial, and logistics ecosystem. The article concludes that Gwadar possesses the potential to become a major regional hub, but only if Pakistan adopts a long-term strategy focused on connectivity, economic competitiveness, and regional cooperation.*

**Keywords**

*Gwadar Port, CPEC, Regional Connectivity, Geoeconomics, Maritime Trade, Pakistan, Central Asia, Indian Ocean, Economic Corridors, Regional Integration.*

**1. Introduction**

Throughout history, geography has played a decisive role in shaping the fortunes of states. Nations situated along major trade routes have often emerged as centers of commerce, influence, and prosperity. From the Silk Road connecting Asia and Europe to the maritime routes linking the Indian Ocean with the Mediterranean, connectivity has repeatedly transformed geographic locations into engines of economic growth and strategic relevance.

In the twenty-first century, connectivity has acquired renewed importance. As globalization deepens and regional integration accelerates, transportation corridors, ports, logistics networks,

and trade routes have become critical components of national development strategies. States increasingly seek to leverage their geographic positions to attract investment, facilitate trade, and strengthen economic competitiveness.

Pakistan occupies a unique position within this evolving environment. Located at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and China, the country possesses considerable potential to serve as a bridge connecting some of the world's most dynamic regions. Yet for much of its history, Pakistan's strategic significance has been viewed primarily through a geopolitical lens. Its role in major geopolitical contests often overshadowed the economic opportunities associated with its geographic location.

The development of Gwadar Port represents a significant attempt to redefine this narrative. Situated on Pakistan's southwestern coast in Balochistan, Gwadar occupies one of the most strategically significant locations in the Indian Ocean region. Located near the Strait of Hormuz, through which a substantial portion of global energy supplies passes, the port provides direct access to one of the world's busiest maritime corridors.

The launch of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor elevated Gwadar from a relatively small coastal town into a project of regional significance. Investments in port infrastructure, transportation networks, and supporting facilities generated expectations that Gwadar could become a major commercial gateway linking China, Central Asia, and the Middle East.

However, limiting Gwadar's significance to CPEC alone would underestimate its broader potential. Ports do not become successful simply because they are built; they succeed when they are integrated into wider economic systems and supported by efficient infrastructure, competitive industries, and vibrant commercial activity. The true measure of Gwadar's success therefore lies not in the construction of physical infrastructure but in its ability to facilitate trade, attract investment, and connect regions.

This raises a critical question: can Gwadar evolve beyond its role as a CPEC project and emerge as a genuine regional connectivity hub?

Answering this question requires an examination of both opportunities and constraints. On one hand, Gwadar's geographic location offers significant advantages. It provides access to the Arabian Sea, proximity to energy-rich Gulf states, and potential connectivity with China, Central Asia, and East Africa. On the other hand, challenges including security concerns, infrastructure gaps, governance issues, regional competition, and economic viability continue to shape the port's future.

This article argues that Gwadar possesses the geographic and strategic attributes necessary to become a regional connectivity hub. However, its success depends upon Pakistan's ability to move beyond infrastructure development and adopt a comprehensive strategy focused on regional integration, commercial activity, industrial development, and economic sustainability.

## **2. Gwadar's Strategic Geography: Pakistan's Gateway to the Region**

The significance of Gwadar begins with geography. Located on the Arabian Sea coast in southwestern Pakistan, Gwadar occupies a position that has attracted the attention of traders, strategists, and policymakers for centuries. Its location places it at the intersection of several important regions and trade routes, providing opportunities that few ports in the region can match.

One of Gwadar's most significant advantages is its proximity to the Strait of Hormuz. This narrow maritime passage serves as one of the world's most important energy chokepoints. A substantial share of global oil and liquefied natural gas exports passes through the strait, making it a critical component of international energy security. Gwadar's location near this route provides access to maritime traffic linking the Gulf region with Asia, Europe, and Africa.

The port's geographic position also provides direct access to the Arabian Sea and the broader Indian Ocean. Unlike many landlocked regions in Central Asia, Pakistan enjoys access to warm-water ports throughout the year. This creates opportunities for Gwadar to serve as a gateway connecting inland regions with international markets.

From a regional perspective, Gwadar sits at the convergence of four strategically important regions. To the east lies South Asia, home to nearly a quarter of the world's population. To the west lies the Middle East, a major source of energy resources and investment capital. To the north are Central Asia and Western China, regions rich in natural resources and increasingly integrated into global markets. To the south lies the Indian Ocean, one of the world's most important maritime spaces.

This geographic positioning provides Gwadar with a unique advantage. Rather than serving a single market, the port has the potential to facilitate interaction among multiple regions simultaneously. Such connectivity could generate significant economic benefits for Pakistan while enhancing its strategic relevance.

Historically, geography alone has never guaranteed success. Numerous ports possessing favorable locations have failed to achieve their potential due to inadequate infrastructure, poor governance, or changing economic conditions. Nevertheless, geography provides the foundation upon which economic and strategic opportunities are built.

For Pakistan, Gwadar represents an opportunity to capitalize on a geographic asset that has long remained underutilized. By connecting maritime routes with inland transportation networks, the port can serve as a critical node linking regional economies.

Beyond trade, Gwadar's location also enhances Pakistan's maritime significance. As global commerce increasingly depends upon secure sea lines of communication, ports capable of supporting logistics, shipping, and commercial activity become important components of national economic strategy. Gwadar therefore contributes not only to regional connectivity but also to Pakistan's broader maritime ambitions.

The strategic value of the port becomes even more apparent when viewed within the context of evolving regional dynamics. As states seek alternative trade routes, diversify supply chains, and expand connectivity networks, locations capable of facilitating these objectives gain increasing importance. Gwadar's geography positions it favorably within this emerging landscape.

### **3. From Port to Hub: Why Gwadar Matters Beyond CPEC**

While CPEC has undoubtedly transformed Gwadar's profile, the port's long-term significance extends far beyond its role within a single corridor project. The true challenge is not merely to develop a port but to create an integrated economic ecosystem capable of generating sustained commercial activity.

Many ports around the world possess modern infrastructure but fail to achieve economic success because they function primarily as transit points rather than centers of economic activity. Successful ports evolve into hubs that combine logistics, manufacturing, services, trade, and investment within a broader economic framework.

For Gwadar, this distinction is critical.

A port serves as a location where goods are loaded and unloaded. A connectivity hub, by contrast, acts as a center for trade, logistics, warehousing, processing, industrial production, and value-added services. The transition from port to hub therefore requires a broader vision that extends beyond maritime infrastructure.

One important dimension of this transformation involves logistics. Modern trade depends upon efficient transportation networks capable of moving goods quickly and cost-effectively. Gwadar's

success therefore depends not only on maritime facilities but also on highways, railways, customs systems, warehousing facilities, and digital infrastructure.

The integration of Gwadar with national and regional transportation networks is particularly important. Efficient connectivity with major urban centers, industrial zones, and neighboring countries would significantly enhance the port's attractiveness for investors and traders.

Industrial development represents another key component of the hub concept. Ports that generate substantial economic activity are often surrounded by industrial zones where goods are processed, assembled, or manufactured before being exported. Such activities create employment opportunities, attract investment, and increase economic value.

Gwadar's Free Zone and associated industrial initiatives seek to promote precisely this type of development. If successful, these projects could transform the port into a center of industrial activity rather than merely a transit facility.

The concept of the blue economy further expands Gwadar's potential. The blue economy encompasses economic activities associated with oceans and coastal regions, including fisheries, maritime services, tourism, shipping, renewable energy, and marine resource development.

Pakistan possesses a coastline of more than 1,000 kilometers, yet its maritime economy remains underdeveloped relative to its potential. Gwadar offers an opportunity to expand maritime industries and diversify economic activity beyond traditional sectors.

Tourism represents another largely untapped opportunity. Gwadar's coastal location, natural beauty, and strategic significance create possibilities for tourism development that could contribute to local economic growth. Although security concerns and infrastructure limitations currently constrain this potential, long-term improvements could significantly enhance the region's attractiveness.

Energy connectivity also contributes to Gwadar's importance. The port could facilitate the import and export of energy resources while supporting regional energy cooperation. Given the increasing importance of energy security within international politics, such capabilities would enhance Gwadar's strategic and economic value.

Ultimately, the future of Gwadar depends upon whether Pakistan can successfully transform it from an infrastructure project into a functioning economic ecosystem. This requires a shift in focus from construction to commercialization, from connectivity to competitiveness, and from strategic symbolism to economic performance.

The next stage of Gwadar's development will therefore be determined not by the completion of physical infrastructure alone but by its ability to attract businesses, facilitate trade, generate employment, and integrate into regional economic networks.

#### **4. Linking Regions: Gwadar's Role in Regional Connectivity**

The ultimate success of Gwadar will depend upon its ability to connect regions rather than merely serve as a maritime facility. Ports derive value from the economic networks they support, and Gwadar's greatest strength lies in its potential to function as a bridge between multiple regions that possess complementary economic interests.

##### **China and Western China**

The connection between Gwadar and China remains the most visible aspect of the port's development. For China, particularly its western Xinjiang region, Gwadar offers access to the Arabian Sea and the broader Indian Ocean. Although maritime trade routes through East Asia will continue to dominate China's external trade, Gwadar provides strategic diversification and additional logistical options.

For Pakistan, the Chinese connection extends beyond transit trade. Chinese investment, industrial cooperation, technology transfer, and manufacturing partnerships can help transform

Gwadar into an economic hub. The port's future should therefore not be measured solely in terms of cargo volumes moving to and from China, but also by its ability to attract industries, logistics firms, and commercial enterprises linked to broader Chinese supply chains.

#### **Central Asia: Gwadar's Natural Hinterland**

Perhaps the greatest long-term opportunity for Gwadar lies in Central Asia. The region possesses abundant reserves of natural gas, oil, minerals, and hydropower resources but remains constrained by geography. Being landlocked, Central Asian states require access to efficient transportation routes and maritime outlets to fully integrate into global markets.

Gwadar has the potential to provide such access. By linking Central Asia to the Arabian Sea, Pakistan can position itself as a gateway between Eurasia and international markets. This would generate economic benefits not only through transit revenues but also through logistics services, warehousing, processing facilities, and commercial activity.

The realization of this vision depends largely on improved connectivity through Afghanistan. While political and security challenges remain, the economic logic of regional integration continues to favor greater connectivity between Central Asia and Pakistani ports. As regional stability improves, Gwadar's importance as a southern outlet for Central Asian trade could increase significantly.

#### **Afghanistan: From Buffer State to Economic Bridge**

Historically, Afghanistan has often been viewed through the prism of security and geopolitics. However, geoeconomic thinking encourages a different perspective. Rather than serving as a buffer, Afghanistan can potentially function as a bridge connecting South Asia and Central Asia. For Gwadar, Afghanistan occupies a critical position. Efficient transportation corridors passing through Afghanistan could dramatically reduce transit distances and create new opportunities for regional trade. Such connectivity would benefit Afghanistan itself by generating transit revenues, creating employment opportunities, and integrating the country into regional economic networks.

A stable Afghanistan would therefore strengthen Gwadar's prospects and contribute to Pakistan's broader connectivity ambitions.

#### **Gulf States and the Middle East**

Gwadar's proximity to the Gulf region provides another important advantage. The Gulf states remain among the world's most significant energy producers and investment hubs. They are also actively pursuing economic diversification strategies aimed at reducing dependence on hydrocarbons.

This creates opportunities for cooperation in areas such as logistics, energy, infrastructure development, tourism, shipping, and industrial investment. Gwadar could potentially serve as a commercial platform connecting Gulf markets with South Asia, Central Asia, and China.

Furthermore, Pakistan's long-standing relations with Gulf countries provide a foundation upon which deeper economic partnerships can be built. Increased Gulf investment in Gwadar would not only enhance the port's economic viability but also strengthen Pakistan's broader geoeconomic position.

#### **East Africa and the Indian Ocean**

An often-overlooked aspect of Gwadar's potential is its proximity to East Africa. The western Indian Ocean is experiencing growing economic activity, driven by expanding trade, urbanization, and infrastructure development.

Countries along the East African coast are increasingly integrated into global supply chains and seek efficient maritime connections with Asian markets. Gwadar's location positions it favorably to participate in these emerging trade patterns.

As shipping routes across the Indian Ocean continue to expand, Gwadar could evolve into an important node connecting South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Such diversification would reduce dependence on any single trade corridor and enhance the port's long-term sustainability.

### **5. Competing Visions and Regional Rivalries**

While Gwadar possesses significant potential, it operates within an increasingly competitive regional environment. Multiple states are investing in ports, trade corridors, and connectivity projects aimed at capturing the economic benefits of regional integration.

Consequently, Gwadar's success cannot be evaluated in isolation. It must be assessed within the broader context of competing connectivity visions and regional rivalries.

#### **Chabahar Port: Competition or Complementarity?**

The most frequently cited competitor to Gwadar is Iran's Chabahar Port. Located approximately 170 kilometers from Gwadar, Chabahar has received considerable attention as an alternative gateway linking India, Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia.

The two ports are often portrayed as rivals. However, this characterization may oversimplify regional realities. Given the scale of regional trade and the growing demand for connectivity, there is sufficient space for multiple ports to coexist and serve different markets.

Chabahar benefits from direct Indian involvement and access to Iranian markets, while Gwadar benefits from Chinese investment and integration into Pakistan's transportation network. Rather than a zero-sum competition, the future may involve varying degrees of complementarity depending on regional political and economic conditions.

#### **The India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC)**

Another important development is the emergence of the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor. Designed to enhance connectivity among India, the Gulf region, and Europe, IMEC reflects broader efforts to develop alternative trade routes and supply chains.

Although still in the developmental stage, the corridor illustrates the increasing competition among connectivity initiatives. For Pakistan, IMEC highlights the importance of ensuring that Gwadar remains economically competitive and commercially attractive.

Connectivity projects succeed not because they are strategically significant but because they provide efficient, reliable, and cost-effective services. Gwadar must therefore compete on commercial terms rather than relying solely upon its strategic location.

#### **Gulf Mega Ports**

Gwadar also faces competition from established ports in the Gulf region. Facilities such as Jebel Ali, Khalifa Port, and Hamad Port possess advanced infrastructure, extensive logistics networks, and established commercial ecosystems.

These ports benefit from decades of investment, efficient regulatory frameworks, and strong international reputations. In contrast, Gwadar remains in an early stage of development.

However, competition does not necessarily imply failure. Many successful ports coexist by specializing in different services and serving distinct markets. Gwadar's comparative advantage lies in its geographic location and its potential role as a gateway to Pakistan, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Western China.

#### **Great Power Competition**

The broader strategic environment also shapes Gwadar's prospects. The increasing competition among major powers has transformed infrastructure and connectivity projects into instruments of strategic influence.

As a flagship project associated with China's Belt and Road Initiative, Gwadar is often viewed through the lens of great power competition. This perception can generate both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, Chinese investment provides resources and momentum for

development. On the other hand, geopolitical rivalries may discourage some investors and complicate regional cooperation.

Pakistan must therefore ensure that Gwadar remains primarily an economic project rather than becoming overly associated with geopolitical competition.

### **6. Challenges to Gwadar's Transformation**

Despite its considerable potential, Gwadar faces several challenges that continue to impede its transformation into a regional hub.

#### **Security Concerns**

Security remains one of the most significant obstacles. Investors and commercial operators prioritize stability and predictability. Any perception of insecurity increases costs, discourages investment, and undermines confidence.

The protection of infrastructure, transportation corridors, and commercial activity therefore remains essential. Sustained improvements in security are necessary to attract long-term investment and ensure uninterrupted economic activity.

#### **Infrastructure Gaps**

Although considerable progress has been made, infrastructure development remains incomplete. Modern ports require supporting ecosystems including highways, railways, airports, utilities, telecommunications, and urban services.

Without adequate supporting infrastructure, even the most advanced port facilities struggle to achieve their potential. Continued investment in connectivity and urban development is therefore essential.

#### **Economic Viability**

Perhaps the most important challenge concerns economic viability. Ports succeed when they attract cargo, businesses, and commercial activity. Infrastructure alone does not guarantee economic success.

Gwadar must demonstrate that it can provide efficient services, competitive costs, and reliable logistics. The port's future ultimately depends upon commercial performance rather than strategic symbolism.

#### **Governance and Institutional Challenges**

Effective governance is critical for attracting investment and facilitating trade. Investors seek transparent regulations, efficient customs procedures, predictable policies, and streamlined administrative processes.

Improving institutional capacity and reducing bureaucratic obstacles will therefore be essential for Gwadar's long-term success.

### **7. Can Gwadar Deliver? An Assessment of Opportunities and Constraints**

Gwadar's future can best be understood through a balanced assessment of its strengths and weaknesses.

Its greatest strength is geography. Few locations possess comparable access to South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Indian Ocean. This advantage is permanent and cannot be replicated by policy decisions elsewhere.

A second strength lies in its association with broader regional connectivity initiatives. As trade routes diversify and economic integration deepens, locations capable of facilitating connectivity will become increasingly valuable.

At the same time, significant constraints remain. Security concerns, infrastructure gaps, governance challenges, and regional competition continue to limit progress. Furthermore, the success of Gwadar depends upon factors beyond Pakistan's control, including regional stability, developments in Afghanistan, and global economic conditions.

The key question is therefore not whether Gwadar possesses potential—it clearly does. The more important question is whether Pakistan can create the conditions necessary to realize that potential.

History suggests that successful ports are rarely built overnight. They evolve gradually through sustained investment, commercial activity, and integration into regional trade networks. Gwadar should therefore be viewed as a long-term project rather than a short-term undertaking.

### **8. Policy Recommendations**

Several policy measures can enhance Gwadar's prospects as a regional connectivity hub.

First, Pakistan should prioritize commercial viability over strategic symbolism. The success of Gwadar ultimately depends upon trade volumes, investment, and economic activity rather than geopolitical narratives.

Second, connectivity with the national economy must be strengthened. Improved transportation networks linking Gwadar with major urban and industrial centers are essential.

Third, industrial development should receive greater attention. Special economic zones, manufacturing clusters, and logistics parks can generate sustainable economic activity around the port.

Fourth, Pakistan should pursue proactive economic diplomacy aimed at attracting investment from China, Gulf states, Central Asia, and other partners.

Fifth, governance reforms should focus on improving ease of doing business, streamlining customs procedures, and enhancing investor confidence.

Finally, long-term planning should emphasize human development, urban infrastructure, and local economic participation to ensure that the benefits of development are widely shared.

### **9. Conclusion**

Gwadar represents far more than a port or a component of CPEC. It embodies Pakistan's broader aspiration to transform its geographic location into a source of economic prosperity and regional influence. Situated at the crossroads of multiple regions and near one of the world's most important maritime routes, Gwadar possesses significant potential to emerge as a regional connectivity hub.

However, geography alone cannot guarantee success. The future of Gwadar depends upon Pakistan's ability to create a competitive, secure, and commercially viable environment capable of attracting trade, investment, and industrial activity. Connectivity must be translated into commerce, infrastructure into economic opportunity, and strategic location into tangible economic performance.

While significant challenges remain, the long-term prospects for Gwadar remain promising. As regional integration deepens and demand for connectivity continues to grow, the port is well positioned to play an increasingly important role within emerging economic networks. If supported by effective policies, sustained investment, and regional cooperation, Gwadar can evolve beyond its association with CPEC and become a cornerstone of Pakistan's geoeconomic future.

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