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**Great Power Rivalry in Indo-Pacific: Impact on CPEC and Functional Operations of Gwadar****Muskan Moazzam**

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**Abstract**

*The emergence of a new cold war involving great powers, particularly China and the United States, presents major risks to CPEC and Gwadar Port operations. These geopolitical crosswinds manifest through security threats, economic challenges, and geopolitical dynamics that have hampered the advancement of CPEC and Gwadar's prospects as a regional center. Security threats include destruction of infrastructure, cyber threats, and naval blockade as well. Economic, trade, investment, and competition risks are associated with other port projects. This has made the risk perception of investing in Gwadar to be high due to geopolitical tensions that may hinder its sustainability. This paper provides a comprehensive review of these complex threats and stresses that only strong security, diplomacy, economic diversification, and regional integration can protect CPEC and guarantee the success of Gwadar. The future of both projects is hinged on the ability to manage the geopolitical environment and the risks that are associated with great power competition.*

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific, CPEC, Gwadar, China, Pakistan, US.

**Introduction**

Historic competition between superpowers or great powers has always been a constant in international relations and has now come back as a hallmark of twenty-first-century politics. This is a situation where the superpowers engage in a struggle for dominance, resources, and control over the world, which increases the chances of conflict. Owing to increasing competition between USA and China in political, security, and economic affairs, the Indo-Pacific has taken on the form of the center stage of a major power rivalry.

Historically, the Indo-Pacific has experienced different forms of great power competition. The Cold War period was characterized by a struggle for primacy in the Indo-Pacific between the US and the USSR. This rivalry has become even more acute in recent decades due to the emergence of China, which aims at enhancing its economic and military influence and thus, is encroaching on the American hegemony.

The crown jewel of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has become an important link in Beijing's strategic planning. CPEC is a \$60 billion-plus project signed in 2014 for the construction of infrastructure facilities to connect the Gwadar Port on the Arabian Coast of Pakistan to the Xinjiang province in China. This massive plan includes a huge network of economic zones, spiraling network of roads, rails and energy infrastructure and aims at changing the face of Pakistan's economy and boosting connectivity in the region (Bilal, 2023).

The strategic significance of Gwadar Port cannot be overstated. Located in the Persian Gulf, Gwadar is a vital gateway to China for lessening its reliance on the Malacca strait for its import of oil from the Middle East. Moreover, Gwadar's strategic location gives China an enhanced maritime gateway to the Indian Ocean, enabling Beijing to project its naval power and safeguard its economic interests (Brewster, 2017).

However, the rise of major power competition in the area of Indo-Pacific has cast a long shadow over CPEC and Gwadar's functionality. The intensifying geopolitical competition between the two major powers, i.e. USA and China, and India's concerns about CPEC's implications for regional security has created a complex geopolitical environment fraught with risks and challenges. This essay will examine the multifaceted threats posed by great power rivalry to CPEC and Gwadar, exploring their potential implications for economic growth and regional peace.

The USA-China face-off poses a major challenge to the sustainability of CPEC and the operationalization of Gwadar port. These threats include various security, economic, and geopolitical risks that may hinder the achievement of the project's goals and escalate the tensions in the region.

These threats will be discussed in detail in the essay, and the effects that they may have on CPEC's infrastructure, economic sustainability, and security will be discussed. It will also analyze the impact of great power competition for Pakistan, China, and the South and East Asian region. Via a critical overview of the aforementioned threats, this essay will endeavor to explore the dynamics of the great power rivalry and its impact on the future of CPEC and Gwadar Port.

### **Great Power Competition**

The resurgence of major interstate rivalry has spurred a wealth of academic literature catering to the Indo-Pacific region, offering diverse theoretical perspectives and interpretations. Realist scholars, such as John Mearsheimer and Aaron Friedberg, emphasize the inherent nature of power competition in international relations.(Friedberg, 2011) They argue that China's ascent to the status of a revisionist power inevitably challenges the existing liberal order led by the USA, leading to a security dilemma and heightened tensions (John, 2001a). This perspective posits that great power rivalry is a structural phenomenon, driven by relative gains and the anarchic international system.

Conversely, liberal institutionalists like G. John Ikenberry and Joseph Nye highlight the role of international institutions and economic interdependence in mitigating conflict.(Ikenberry, 2020) They suggest that integration of China with the international economic system and participation in international institutions could foster a harmonious and cooperative connection with the USA, reducing likelihood of conflict. This perspective emphasizes the importance of absolute gains and the potential for win-win outcomes in great power relations.

Constructivist scholars, such as Alexander Wendt, focus on ideas, norms, and identities which form great power behavior. (Wendt, 1999) They argue that perceptions of threat, historical grievances, and competing narratives can exacerbate rivalry, even in the absence of material conflicts of interest. This perspective emphasizes on the critical nature of social connotations associated with power and the importance of identity politics that are at play at inter-state level.

The literature on great power rivalry in the region of Indo-Pacific also encompasses a wide variety of local perspectives. Some scholars emphasize the importance of understanding the historical context of regional rivalries, particularly the enduring tensions between China and India, stemming from border disputes, strategic mistrust, and competition for regional influence.(Grunfeld, 2002) Others highlight the role of smaller states, such as those in Southeast Asia, in navigating great power competition. These states often adopt hedging strategies, balancing their relations with the two major powers simultaneously to maximize autonomy and security. (Medcalf, 2022)

The dynamic expanse of the Indian and Pacific Oceans which form the so-called region of Indo-Pacific, has been transformed into a focal point of geopolitical competition in the 21st century. This complex landscape is shaped by the interplay of diverse national interests,

strategic ambitions, and historical rivalries among major powers, creating a volatile environment fraught with potential flashpoints.

### **Strategic Interests of Key Players**

US, the traditional preeminent state in the region, aims at maintenance of its influence and uphold the global order in vogue that ensures open seas and open trade. Washington's strategic objectives for the region are anchored in containing China's rise, preserving its network of alliances and partnerships, and promoting democratic values. The assertive behavior of China in the South China Sea, its rapid military modernization, and its economic coercion tactics have elicited growing US concerns. (Campbell & Sullivan, 2019a) U.S. has strengthened its security cooperation with allies like Japan, India, and Australia by forming the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) to check the rising posture of China. It has also boosted its naval deployment in Indo-Pacific.(Beckley & Brands, 2022)

Conversely, the Chinese aspire to become the dominant regional power, challenging the U.S.-led order and establishing a Sino-centric sphere of influence. Beijing's grand strategy is manifested in its BRI. China's military modernization efforts, particularly its naval expansion, have also raised concerns among regional states(John, 2001b).

India, as a rising regional power, views China's growing influence with apprehension, particularly due to their long-standing border dispute and strategic rivalry. New Delhi seeks to maintain its strategic autonomy while balancing its relationship with both the Chinese and the Americans. India's concerns about China's encirclement strategy have led it to strengthen its military capabilities, forge closer partnerships with Australia, the USA, and Japan through QUAD, and expand its own regional footprint in terms of diplomacy and economics(Tellis, 2014).

Other regional actors also play significant roles in the emerging geopolitical landscape. A major U.S. ally, Japan, is concerned about the military buildup and territorial claims of China, particularly in East China Sea. Australia, another key U.S. ally, shares the US assessment of China's rise whereby it has been strengthening defense ties with different regional partners and the US. However, Canberra also seeks the maintenance of economic relations with China. Russia, while not directly involved in the U.S.-China rivalry, wants sustained influence in the Indo-Pacific and has been deepening its ties with China, particularly in the energy and military sectors(Abbondanza, 2022a). Meanwhile, ASEAN countries are caught in the great power competition, seeking balanced relations with both the US and China while preserving their autonomy(Abbondanza, 2022b).

### **Potential Flashpoints**

The region of Indo-Pacific is rife with potential flashpoints that could escalate into conflict. The South China Sea remains a major source of tension amid conflicting territorial disputes and divergent economic interests. The construction of Chinese artificial islands and military installations in the Indo-Pacific has heightened tensions with other claimants and raised concerns about freedom of navigation(Kaplan, 2015). Challenging the claims of the Chinese, the Americans have routinely conducted naval operations aiming at free passage for all while ASEAN countries have sought to develop a code of conduct to manage the disputes. (De Castro, 2022)

The Taiwan Strait is another potential flashpoint, with the possibility of conflict over Taiwan's status. China's increasingly assertive stance towards Taiwan, coupled with the U.S. commitment to Taiwan's security, has created a precarious situation that could escalate into a military confrontation.(Bush, 2010) Any miscalculation or escalation in this scenario could negatively impact global and regional security.

The Indian Ocean has become a new arena for great power competition, with China expanding its naval presence and building strategic ports. This has raised concerns about China's intentions to dominate the sea lanes and potentially threaten India's security.(Grove, 2020a)

### **Implications of Great Power Rivalry on CPEC**

The large spectrum of infrastructure projects that make up CPEC such as roads, railways, ports, and energy pipelines are at risk of being threatened by great power rivalry. Interference, malicious attacks, and other negative activities may cause significant harm to infrastructure, which can result in delays, increased costs, and even project cancellation. Other security threats that could affect CPEC include acts of terrorism and separatism, which may seek to disrupt the project by capitalizing on the existing instability in the region and the grievances of the locals.

For example, a terrorist organization by the name of BLA, acronym of Baloch Liberation Army, active in the Balochistan province of Pakistan, has targeted CPEC projects several times, as it considers them as the manifestation of Pakistani and Chinese exploitation of Balochistan's resources. The threat of cybercrimes against CPEC's digital assets, including the communication and control systems, is also a concern because the attackers, state and non-state actors, may target these systems to sabotage the operations and steal valuable information.(Hussain, 2019)

Moreover, the growing naval competition between the USA and China, in the Indian Ocean, may increase the risks to maritime security, causing incidents such as collisions or near-misses between naval vessels, which could inadvertently damage or disrupt CPEC's maritime infrastructure.(Grove, 2020b) The potential for regional instability, triggered by conflicts or crises elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific, could also spill over into Pakistan, affecting the security of CPEC projects and creating an unfavorable investment climate.

### **Disruption to Trade and Transportation**

Great power rivalry could also disrupt the flow of goods and services along CPEC, undermining its economic viability and strategic significance. Naval competition and the potential for blockades could impede the movement of ships through the Indian Ocean and the Hormuz strait, a critical energy chokepoint. Such disruptions could significantly increase transportation costs, delay shipments, and create uncertainty for businesses, hindering trade and investment flows between China and Pakistan.

The potential economic impact of these disruptions is substantial. For Pakistan, CPEC is seen as a lifeline for its struggling economy, offering the promise of much-needed infrastructure development, job creation, and economic growth. (Farooq et al., 2022) However, disruptions to CPEC's trade and transportation could derail these economic benefits, exacerbating Pakistan's existing economic challenges and increasing its dependence on China.(Javaid, 2016)

For China, CPEC holds critical importance in BRI, aimed at expanding its politico-economic influence across the region and beyond. Disruptions to CPEC could undermine China's strategic goals, jeopardizing its energy security, hindering its access to markets in Africa and the Gulf, and tarnishing its reputation of reliability in terms of partnership for infrastructure development.(Beeson & Crawford, 2023)

### **Potential for Sanctions and Economic Measures**

The United States in its bid to checkmate China has relied more on economic measures including sanctions and tariffs on Beijing and its allies. Although CPEC has not been directly on the list of sanctions of the United States, the possibility of its inclusion in the future cannot be excluded. For instance, the US could freeze the assets of Chinese firms participating in CPEC projects or Pakistani firms that the US believes are supporting strategic and regional interests of the Chinese.

Additionally, USA could also exert its power in international financial bodies such as the IMF and the World Bank to either reduce or place conditions on the financing of CPEC projects. This could make it more difficult and costly for Pakistan to finance CPEC which might slow down the pace of implementation and lead to a higher debt level.

Sanctions and other economic measures can also have a significant effect on the financing of CPEC. Pakistan has a large amount of external funding requirement for the CPEC projects and most of this funding is expected to come from China. Any interruption of this capital flow may lead to the project being abandoned and lead to questions being asked about the sustainability of the debt in Pakistan. Furthermore, the threat of sanctions may discourage private investors from investing in CPEC, which would in turn reduce the project's funding options.

#### **Impact of Rivalry on Gwadar Port**

Gwadar Port's strategic location, close to the energy hub of the Gulf and the narrow straits of the Indian Ocean, makes it a valuable asset for the secure transit of energy to China and its maritime ambitions.(Gholizadeh et al., 2020a) Gwadar provides China with an alternative passage thereby reducing reliance on the Malaccan strait for energy imports and reducing its vulnerability to potential disruptions.(Zhang, 2011) Moreover, the development of Gwadar as a deep seaport with commercial and military facilities enhances Chinese maritime access to the Indian Ocean, enabling Beijing to project its naval power and safeguard its economic interests.(Kardon et al., n.d.)

However, Gwadar's strategic significance makes it a potential target due to the US-China rivalry. The US along with its allies views the growing presence of China in Gwadar with suspicion, fearing that it could be used for military purposes and to expand China's influence in the region.(Grove, 2020c) India, in particular, is concerned about Gwadar's potential to encircle it strategically and undermine its security interests.(Rahman et al., 2021)

The Sino-American rivalry has already manifested in various forms of competition in and around Gwadar. The United States has increased its military footprint in nearby open seas, conducting joint exercises with regional partners and monitoring Chinese activities in the area(Hu, 2020) There have also been reports of U.S. efforts to disrupt Chinese investments in Gwadar and to encourage alternative port development projects in the region.(Syed & Ahmed, 2021)

#### **Potential for Military or Covert Actions**

The potential for Gwadar Port to become a target of military or covert actions is a growing concern. While direct military conflict between major powers is unlikely, the risk of limited strikes, sabotage, or cyberattacks cannot be ruled out. For instance, the U.S. or its allies could target Gwadar's infrastructure with precision strikes in the event of a regional conflict or crisis.(Quilop, 2015) Non-state actors, such as terrorist groups or proxies, could also be employed to carry out sabotage or attacks on Gwadar to disrupt Chinese operations and undermine its strategic value(Zhao & Munadi, 2023).

Cyberattacks on Gwadar's critical infrastructure, such as its communication systems, navigation aids, and port management software, could also disrupt operations and cause significant economic damage(Baloch et al., 2021a). The risk of covert actions, such as espionage and information warfare, is also high, as rival powers seek to gain intelligence on Gwadar's operations and vulnerabilities.(Baloch et al., 2021b)

The consequences of such actions could be devastating for Pakistan and China. Disruption of Gwadar's operations would not only hinder CPEC's progress but also damage Pakistan's economic prospects and undermine its relationship with China. For China, the loss of Gwadar would be a major setback to its BRI ambitions and could jeopardize its energy security and maritime strategy. (Zhao & Munadi, 2023)

#### **Impediments to Gwadar's Development: The Rivalry's Toll**

While Gwadar Port holds immense potential as a major economic hub and maritime gateway, the escalating great power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific poses significant impediments to its development. The geopolitical tensions between the US and China could create a challenging environment for Gwadar's growth, hindering its ability to attract investments, develop infrastructure, and establish itself as a regional trade and logistics hub.

**Hindrance to Development as a Major Port and Economic Hub**

The US-China rivalry casts a long shadow over Gwadar's prospects. The perception that Gwadar is a Chinese strategic outpost has been fueling concerns among other regional actors, particularly India, about its potential impact on the regional balance of power.(Zhao & Munadi, 2023) This perception has led to increased scrutiny of Gwadar's activities, including its commercial operations and security arrangements, which could deter potential investors and trading partners who are wary of being entangled in geopolitical rivalries.

Moreover, the U.S. has actively sought to counterbalance China in this region through its Indo-Pacific strategy, which aims to strengthen relationships and alliances with states like India, Australia, and Japan.(Campbell & Sullivan, 2019b) This strategy, while not directly targeting Gwadar, could indirectly impede its development by promoting alternative port projects and trade routes that bypass Gwadar. For instance, the U.S. has been supportive of India's efforts to invest in the Iranian port of Chabahar for competition with Gwadar for regional trade and undermining its economic viability.(Campbell & Sullivan, 2019b)

The rising geopolitical tensions have caused an uptick in naval and military activity in the Indian Ocean region, which could create a sense of insecurity and instability that deters investors and disrupts trade flows.(Grove, 2020d) The potential for Gwadar to become a target in any future conflict or crisis further amplifies these risks, raising concerns about the safety and security of investments in the port.

**Traditional Security Threats to CPEC and Gwadar**

The traditional security threats to CPEC and Gwadar emanate from both the great power rivalry at large between the US and China and at the regional level from Indo-Pak rivalry. In the instance of a Sino-American cold war turning hot, the US and its allies could work in unison to damage the BRI of China. Western coalition Navies in such a scenario would play key role in damaging the maritime component of CPEC and BRI. Naval attacks and blockades would be employed for disruption of trade and hampering of port operations.

**Non-Traditional Security Threats to CPEC and Gwadar**

CPEC and Gwadar also face rising non-traditional security threats primarily from the likes of terrorist organizations such as BLA, BRAS, and TTP among others(Iqbal et al., 2024). These organizations attempt to carry out attacks on Chinese targets driven by either grievance in some part or in most parts by foreign hostile nations attempting to sabotage the CPEC and operationalization of Gwadar seaport. CPEC primarily being a maritime project with significant land components faces threats of asymmetric nature in the form of piracy and international terrorism as well.(Abbas et al., 2023)

**Potential for Competing Port Projects**

The development of competing port projects in the region, fueled by geopolitical rivalries, poses another significant challenge to Gwadar's success. Chabahar Port in Iran, just 72 km away on the western side of Gwadar, is being developed with Indian and Iranian investment and is seen as a direct competitor to Gwadar. (Omidi & Noolkar-Oak, 2022). Chabahar offers an alternative route for landlocked Afghanistan to access international markets, bypassing Pakistan, and could potentially attract trade and investment that would otherwise flow through Gwadar.

Other littoral Indian Ocean states, like the UAE, are also developing their port infrastructure, creating a more competitive environment for Gwadar. The proliferation of port projects in the region could lead to overcapacity and a race to the bottom in terms of tariffs and fees, making it difficult for Gwadar to achieve profitability and attract long-term investments.

Moreover, the development of competing ports could be accompanied by geopolitical maneuvering and strategic alliances that further marginalize Gwadar. For instance, India has been actively promoting Chabahar as an alternative to Gwadar, forging partnerships with countries like Afghanistan and Central Asian states to enhance its connectivity and trade potential(Pant & Yhome, 2020). This could lead to a bifurcation of regional trade routes, with

Chabahar serving as a hub for India and its partners, while Gwadar remains primarily linked to China's economic sphere.

#### **Naval Competition and Operational Disruptions at Gwadar Port: A Geopolitical Analysis**

The Indian Ocean has become a theater of intensifying naval competition, with China's growing presence challenging the traditional dominance of the United States and its allies. China's expanding naval capabilities, including its development of aircraft carriers, submarines, and advanced missile systems, have raised concerns about its intentions to project power and control critical sea lanes (Grove, 2020e).

Gwadar Port, a strategic asset for China, could become a target for naval blockades in the event of heightened tensions or conflict. A blockade, whether imposed by the U.S. or its allies, could effectively cut off Gwadar's access to international shipping, preventing the movement of goods and energy resources. This would not only cripple Gwadar's operations but also disrupt China's energy supply chains and undermine its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) ambitions (Gholizadeh et al., 2020b).

#### **Disruptions to Shipping and Trade**

Even in the absence of a full-fledged blockade, the increased naval competition in the Indian Ocean could lead to disruptions in shipping and trade routes. The presence of multiple naval forces operating nearby increases the risk of accidents, miscalculations, and escalations, which could disrupt commercial shipping and lead to delays and increased costs for traders and businesses (Medcalf, 2020).

Moreover, the fear of potential disruptions could deter shipping companies and traders from utilizing Gwadar Port, opting for alternative routes and ports that are perceived as less risky. This could lead to a decline in Gwadar's cargo volumes, undermining its economic viability and hindering its development as a regional trade hub.

#### **Policy Recommendations: Enhancing Security for CPEC and Gwadar Port**

Physical security should be enhanced by using a multi-layered security model. This includes the mobilization of more security forces, military and paramilitary, to guard and secure strategic assets and installations as recommended by some security experts. The placement of Special Security Division (SSD) forces along the CPEC route and the formation of the Pakistan Navy's Task Force-88 for the protection of Gwadar is a good start. In addition, surveillance systems like CCTV cameras and drones can be used to monitor vulnerable areas to prevent attacks. Other measures include the use of access control measures and perimeter security that can also reduce the chances of infiltration and sabotage.

Improving the exchange of information and coordination between the intelligence agencies is vital for effective counter-terrorism measures against threats to CPEC. Pakistan and China should form combined operation teams, conduct training sessions, and provide timely information on threats including those of terrorism, cyber warfare, and acts of sabotage. Working with regional and international organizations, including the SCO and the FATF, can also improve intelligence collection and counterterrorism measures. Furthermore, engaging with the local populations and tribal leaders along the CPEC route may help to identify potential security threats and ensure that local concerns are not leveraged by the militants (Cherney & Hartley, 2017).

The communication networks, control systems, and data centers that support CPEC are at risk of cyber-attacks that could disrupt operations, compromise data, and lead to substantial economic losses. To reduce these risks, both Pakistan and China should ensure that they adopt adequate measures in cybersecurity including firewalls, intrusion detection systems, and encryption technologies. Security assessment and review, risk analysis, and security testing should be performed frequently to detect and rectify the vulnerabilities in the system. Also, it is essential to increase cybersecurity awareness and training among the personnel working on the CPEC projects to avoid human mistakes and social engineering attacks.

#### **Diplomatic Initiatives: De-escalating Tensions and Promoting Cooperation**

While security measures are essential for safeguarding CPEC and Gwadar Port, diplomatic initiatives play a crucial role in de-escalating tensions, managing rivalries, and fostering a more conducive environment for regional cooperation. Both Pakistan and China, along with other regional stakeholders, should actively pursue diplomatic strategies that promote dialogue, build trust, and address the underlying sources of conflict.

#### **Multilateral Dialogues and Confidence-building Measures**

One of the key diplomatic initiatives that can contribute to de-escalation is the establishment of multilateral dialogues and confidence-building measures (CBMs). These platforms can facilitate communication and understanding between rival powers, allowing them to address concerns, clarify intentions, and explore avenues for cooperation. Regional forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) can serve as important venues for such dialogues, providing a space for all stakeholders to voice their perspectives and negotiate solutions (Khan, 2021).

#### **Promoting Economic Cooperation and Connectivity**

The economic cooperation and connectivity initiatives can also be effective in reducing tensions and maintaining the stability of the region. Even CPEC itself, which is aimed at infrastructure development and trade liberalization, can promote economic cooperation and establish mutual dependencies among the countries of the region.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), of which CPEC is a part, could also be utilized as an opportunity for cooperation. By encouraging multilateral investment and infrastructure development projects within the BRI framework, China can prove its good intentions of promoting the welfare of all nations, and not just to gain strategic advantages.

#### **Balancing Competing Interests and Building Trust**

It also means that diplomatic efforts should be aimed at mediating between the interests of the great powers and creating trust among the actors in the region. This means that there must be a more complex understanding of the security interests of all the actors involved to find points of convergence and cooperation. For example, the US and China could consider creating channels for managing crises and preventing conflicts in the Indian Ocean region, such as hotlines and communication procedures in case of a conflict.

As one of the influential countries in the region, Pakistan has the potential to help China and the United States find common ground and start negotiations. Thus, by keeping a neutral foreign policy and supporting connectivity projects, Pakistan can help the Indo-Pacific region become more stable and prosperous.

#### **Regional Cooperation**

Another important factor that can help manage the risks related to great power competition is regional cooperation. The countries in the Indo-Pacific region face similar problems and threats, including climate change, terrorism, and threats to maritime security, which need to be addressed through coordinated efforts. In this way, these countries can avoid conflict situations, strengthen stability in the region, and provide favorable conditions for economic growth.

Moreover, Pakistan can actively participate in regional integration processes, including the implementation of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline for the export of natural gas and the Central Asia-South Asia electricity project CASA-1000. Such projects can improve energy security, stimulate trade, and create economic entanglements among the countries of the region, thus decreasing the chances of conflict. (Bhattacharyay, 2011)

#### **Pakistan Navy to Safeguard CPEC and Gwadar**

In the prevailing geopolitical scenario, it is crucial that Pakistan Navy plays a key role in maintaining the security of CPEC and Gwadar. (Zafar, 2021) The sea lines of communication and trade around Gwadar is vulnerable to disruption owing to the ever present traditional and non-traditional security threats. Pakistan Navy has already deployed a Task Force dedicated to the security of CPEC and Gwadar but it is primarily concerned with internal,



domestic security. In order to confront the threats emanating from outside. But, for Pakistan Navy to play such a role, it needs to overcome its lacking in various aspects.

#### **Capacity Building of Pakistan Navy**

First, Pakistan Navy needs fiscal allocations commensurate with the importance of the task at hand, i.e. securing CPEC, the gamechanger for Pakistan. Pakistan Navy, traditionally, has been at the bottom of the pyramid of defense forces in terms of budgetary allocations. For Pakistan Navy to play its role in the security of CPEC and Gwadar, it needs an increase in its fiscal allocations.

Second, Pakistan Navy lags behind the competing regional navies, especially Indian Navy (Shahid, 2021) in terms of sheer numbers of naval assets as well as the technology available in terms of surface and sub-surface assets. To counter this, Pakistan and China have already been collaborating to equip the Pakistan Navy by supplying Pakistan latest Chinese Frigates and submarines. But, the pace of such transfers needs to increase amid intensifying threats from the maritime environment to CPEC.

Third, Pakistan's security landscape has to evolve to recognize the primacy of naval warfare as the core fighting space in the coming wars and conflicts. By recognizing the importance of strong naval presence to secure not only seaports but also the sea lines of communications and merchant shipping, Pakistan can effectively and commensurately equip the Pakistan Navy.

#### **Option of a Multi-lateral Naval Coalition**

Based on the model of naval coalitions working under the umbrella of Combined Task Forces (CTFs), Pakistan and China can build a similar naval coalition based on the members of the BRI and other regional or littoral states of the Indian Ocean region such as Oman, UAE, Iran, Sri Lanka, etc. Such a coalition would work together to combat maritime threats to BRI amid rising challenges. This coalition would complement the individual navies and plug intelligence and operational gaps where needed. Such a task force would also help in regional peace and stability.

#### **Conclusion**

The increasing competition between great powers in the Indo-Pacific region raises concerns about the future of CPEC and Gwadar Port. The complex challenges arising from this rivalry can undermine infrastructure, hinder commerce, discourage investment, and escalate regional tensions. Although CPEC and Gwadar Port have enormous economic prospects for both Pakistan and China, their sustainability depends on these issues' resolution.

These risks can only be addressed through a comprehensive strategy that involves a combination of the following. Physical security of the infrastructure, improved intelligence cooperation, and cybersecurity measures are crucial to protect CPEC and Gwadar from conventional and asymmetric threats. Soft power strategies like multilateral negotiations, CBMs, and economic integration can reduce tensions, regulate rivalry, and create a favorable context for cooperation.

The prospects of CPEC and Gwadar Port are thus tied to the shifting geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific region. Pakistan and China must take preventive measures to avoid turning these projects into sources of conflict in great power rivalry while enhancing the prospects of these projects' success and sustainability to become a foundation for regional cooperation and development.

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