

CPEC Drives China-Pakistan Naval Cooperation

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Date: 03 January 2017

An International Maritime Conference on China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Gwadar Port was held on [13-14 December](#) 2016 at Gwadar. It was organised by the Pakistan Navy and the Pakistan-China Institute (PCI) on the theme – ‘CPEC and Gwadar Port as Harbinger of Regional Integration and Maritime Economic Development.’ Officials from China and Iran were in attendance.

Under the auspices of the Conference, the Pakistan Navy unveiled a special ‘Task Force (TF)-88’ commissioned for the protection of Gwadar deep-sea port. The TF-88 would comprise of warships, attack helicopters, unmanned aerial vehicles and other surveillance assets. Pakistan has already established a ‘Special Security Division’ consisting of 20,000 personnel for security along the land route of the CPEC. The Pakistan Navy has also raised a Coastal Security and Harbour Defence Force for tackling threats along the coast and stationed a Force Protection Battalion at Gwadar for protection of Chinese workers. The establishment of TF-88 and associated security apparatus as well as the conference mark the intensifying China-Pakistan maritime and naval cooperation during the calendar year 2016.

China Shipbuilding Industry Corporation (CSIC), in October 2016, confirmed the sale of eight Type 041 Yuan-class diesel-electric submarines to Pakistan. These eight submarines will be commissioned during the next decade; four of these will be constructed in China and the rest would be assembled in Karachi. This deal is worth between US \$4 billion and \$5 billion and is the largest overseas arms deal for China. However, there are reports that Pakistan would have to repay cost of the submarines at a low-interest rate loan extended by China.

China and Pakistan have also conducted a series of combined naval exercises in 2016. Following the maiden exercise in September 2014, the Pakistan Navy and the PLA Navy conducted the second bilateral naval exercises in the East China Sea from 28 December 2015 to 03 January 2016. The exercise coincided with the seven-day visit to Shanghai by a Pakistan naval taskforce, consisting of a frigate and a supply ship. The third edition of the combined naval exercises was held off Karachi, on 11 January 2016, and included the ships of the participation 21st Chinese naval escort taskforce.

The fourth bilateral naval exercise was conducted in mid-November 2016 in the Arabian Sea. The five-day exercise comprised of harbour and sea-phases. It covered a wide spectrum of maritime and naval operations involving ships, helicopters, maritime patrol aircraft, boarding operations by special forces, air defence exercises, communication drills and several manoeuvres by the ships of both navies. The November 2016 exercise was noteworthy and focused exclusively on providing maritime security to the CPEC and Gwadar deep-sea port. The exercises highlight the increasing complexity in terms of size, ships and equipment involved, duration as well as complexity of exercises. Further, the increasing cooperative engagements between China and Pakistan to address security challenges to the CPEC denotes the importance attached to it.

Pakistan and China share a long-standing 'all weather relationship'. Cooperation in nuclear technology, ballistic missiles and other strategic support notwithstanding, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has become the linchpin of the relationship between the two countries. Under the CPEC initiative, China has promised to spend US \$46 billion to develop infrastructure projects like power plants, gas pipelines, expressways etc. from the Karakoram highway in Gilgit-Baltistan to the port of Gwadar in Baluchistan. The CPEC is also a part of China's strategy to overcome its 'Malacca Dilemma' by developing alternative land routes for its ever-increasing energy demand. The PLA Navy's increased engagement also augments Pakistan Navy's capabilities and is considered critical for enhancing maritime security in the region.

China's 'One Belt One Road' (OBOR) initiative has geostrategic value and is slowly gaining acceptance in South Asia with CPEC as the 'flagship project.' It is also developing ports in Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, which will complement the CPEC. These ports consist of dual-use facilities and can be used for military purpose as and when required. Besides its 'logistics base' in Djibouti, reports emanating from the Conference point towards China building a naval base at Gwadar to safeguard its economic and

strategic interests. This grand strategic initiative with significant commitment provides China a perfect opportunity to advance its presence in the Indian Ocean.

On 22 December 2016, the PLA Navy celebrated the eighth anniversary of the launch of its anti-piracy escort missions in the Gulf of Aden, successfully completing its 1,000 escort tasks. The PLA Navy has gained considerable experience from the anti-piracy and escort missions far from its coast and its submarines have docked more than once in Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Along with its rapidly modernising fleet, the steady expansion of China's activities is intended to shift the current naval balance of power in the Indian Ocean region. The presence of an extra regional power in its backyard has serious security implications for India. With Iran and Russia announcing their desire to join the CPEC, India needs to respond to the changing maritime balance in South Asia.

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