

China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC): The Maritime-Strategic Dimension

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The much-awaited China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has been officially flagged off with the first consignment from China setting sail from Gwadar to the African and West Asian markets on 13 November 2016. The Corridor's newly built western route was chosen for the transit of the trucks all the way from Kashgar in China to Pakistan's South-Western port city of Gwadar. The successful transit has largely thwarted the fears on Pakistan's mainland security, to which the corridor is exposed. However, the maritime-strategic template, in and around the deep-sea port at Gwadar, is yet to receive a complete security cover from the significant threats in the area. Apart from the concerns such as piracy and terrorism, the proximity of the United States' and Indian presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) poses the most challenging security quagmire for the partner-states of CPEC.

The US\$ 46 billion project invites a greater payoff for Beijing with a reduced dependence on the Straits of Malacca to reach out to its markets beyond the Indian Ocean. An easy access to the Gwadar port and Strait of Hormuz through inland road and rail networks enhances the Chinese presence in the region. The viability of the port was demonstrated in the mid October 2016 with the docking of the first cargo vessel – *Zhen Xing Sung*. The Pakistan Navy (PN) has repeatedly acknowledged that the safety of the CPEC, Gwadar port in particular, is its top priority. The Third Marine Battalion (TMB) of the PN is in charge of the all-round security of the port. The PN's commitment to the CPEC was also palpable with the assignment of a naval and air convoy for guarding the cargo ships – *MV Al Hussein* and *MV Cosco Willington* – till they entered international waters. The days ahead are expected to see a quantum leap in the maritime traffic through Hormuz, towards which the PN is tightening its grip.

Nevertheless, the Indian preference of geopolitics over geo-economics continues to be a concern for Sino-Pak strategic cooperation. The inclusion of Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) as part of the corridor is the major factor which ignited a strategic dilemma in India.

Moreover, the US has been cautious about the growing proximity between Islamabad and Beijing. Washington appears to be worried over the emergence of Beijing as an alternative strategic partner for Islamabad in place of the former. Despite this concern, the US has indicated support for the CPEC collaboration between the two “all-weather friends.” However, the recently concluded Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) with New Delhi – which seeks to ensure essential logistic supplies for US armed forces at Indian ports and airport facilities – is indicative of the US intent to contain the Chinese expansion into the Indian Ocean. A combined push for Indo-Pacific strategy assures reciprocal benefits for India, while also containing Chinese influence in the Pacific sphere.

The US presence in West Asia in terms of its wider naval basing network would pose a major threat to the CPEC. Washington’s West Asian naval diplomacy is an important component in countering the galloping Chinese advents into the sub-region. Jebel Ali in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – the most-visited US naval facility – lies close to the Strait of Hormuz. Oman also finds a place under the maritime-strategic connotation owing to a large number of US Air Force bases. The US Fifth Fleet with its headquarters in Bahrain and a forward deployment base of the Central Command (CENTCOM) in Qatar also comes under perceived maritime threats for the CPEC ships that transit to the West Asian markets. Besides, the Chabahar port – a trilateral maritime venture among India, Iran, and Afghanistan – is conceived to be a major competitor and challenger to the Gwadar in geo-economic terms. It offers an easy access for New Delhi to reach Afghanistan and Central Asia by-passing the mainland Pakistan.

An early forecast of this strategic quandary was responded with a series of defence pacts between Beijing and Islamabad. Both countries have embraced stability and maritime security as the primary goals in this direction. The delivery of a Chinese patrol vessel *Basol* to the Pakistan Maritime Security Agency (PMSA), the inductions of Chinese Fast Attack Craft (FAC) into the PN and other such measures are indicative of force restructuring for an effective response to the threats to the CPEC/ Gwadar. Notably, in 2015, Pakistan’s Ministry of Defence Production (MoDP) inked a deal with China under a Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP) to build seven patrol ships. The two countries also conducted a combined naval exercise in November 2016, which involved Special Operations Forces (SOF), and was optimised for port and littoral defence. In cognizance of the volatile environments with regard to the CPEC/ Gwadar, one could expect substantial collaboration between the PN and the PLA Navy, including in terms of doctrinal changes and maritime strategy reorientations.

Being a project conceived and implemented in a tenuous and dynamic security environment, China and Pakistan are likely to be seized of unforeseen and uncertain geostrategic outcomes with regard to the CPEC. The only certainty is that the project would usher significant changes in the regional naval balance.

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