

Geo-Strategic Prospects of Gwadar Port: An Analysis of Protecting Sea Lanes of Indian Ocean

Inayat Kalim

“Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This ocean is the key to the seven seas in the twenty-first century, the destiny of the world will be decided in these waters.”

Abstract

The development of deep sea port, with all its associated projects, favorably influences the geo strategic prospects of Pakistan. The Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) connects the whole world and facilitates international trade. In peace times, these maritime routes function as key commercial trade routes and during war these routes turn out to be as strategic lines of communication between war zones. The prevailing strategic ambiguity in the surrounding regions has made the geo-politics of the Indian Ocean more dynamic and intricate among energy importing states as they are going through a critical security and political situation. Changing political dynamics of surrounding regions like prevailing security situation in the Persian Gulf, Iran-US tension over nuclear issue, conflict in Afghanistan, Indo-Pak different regional interests, China’s unprecedented economic growth and the US strategic tactics have made the geopolitics of Indian Ocean more dynamic and complicated. In this background, Sea lines used for global trade and energy transportation in the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea are critical for littoral states due to their cumulative geo-economic and geo-political impact on the world political scenario. This research paper intends to establish that sea transportation acts as a catalyst for economic development of a Pakistan and geo-strategic significance of Gwadar port serves as an indispensable factor to give strategic depth to the Navy for surveillance activities to ensure maritime defense and safe flow of oil from the Persian Gulf to China via CPEC.

Keywords: SLOC, Strategic Depth, Geo-Strategic, Maritime Power, Indian Ocean

Introduction

In the contemporary era, global shift from geo-politics to geo-economic and complex interdependence have made international actors realized about the significance of maritime security and Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) both on economic as well as on the political chessboard of the world. This realization is obvious especially after the advent of globalization in which states are bounded in a system of interdependence for better economic growth and productivity with complementary trading patterns of products and resources (Tahir, 2008). For a country whose economy fundamentally

*Author is currently heading the program of International Relations, COMSATS University Islamabad.

depends on seaborne trade is required to ensure security of SLOC. As these communication lines serve as major routes that expedite the dense shipping traffic bulks and facilitating transference of goods and commodity. By considering the key importance of SLOCs, these further enhance the valuable strategic significance of state(s) in a region. These SLOCs not only act as backbone in economy of the country but they also act as defensive shield during the time of conflict for the country. During natural calamity or man-induced catastrophe, every state becomes vulnerable and becomes heavily dependent upon the seaborne trade and SLOCs to continue its trading with the world (Khalid, 2012).

Role of Sea Lanes of Communication in Economic Development

The geo-economics and growing demand for energy have made the entire world especially oil-driven economies like China, United States, Japan, India and mostly European countries to prioritize protection of the main sea lines of communication (Ghosh, 2004). As South Asian states are also in the race of securing SLOCs for their developing economies because of their heavy dependency upon seaborne trade. So far as SLOC is concerned Pakistan and India possess crucial positions in the region. If there is a war between both states then it will not only disrupt the SLOCs and serve as a closure of chokepoints but also disturb the entire global economic system. That's why the nature of the relations of two arch enemies has always gained the attention of international community.

Beside the strategic importance of India and Pakistan, it is very pertinent to understand the significance of natural resources in region and the location of this ocean has been transformed into a geopolitical intrigue in a region. The geostrategic location of Gwadar at the apex of the North Arabian Sea facing this gigantic energy ocean has its own prominence in the economy and political dynamics of South Asia. However, the unique location of Gwadar bordering with five most resourceful regions of the world, namely Central Asia, South Asia, West Asia, South East Asia and Persian Gulf serve it as goldmine for regional and international powers (Ahmad, 2015). Gwadar Port being the third largest port of the world is situated on the Makran Coast and close to the Strait of Hormuz (Mazhar, Javaid & Goraya, 2012). The transport of goods on each day consists of 20-30 tankers pass through this chokepoint. The geopolitics of Gwadar has involved the strategic and military perspectives simultaneously. Its unique geographical location provides geostrategic imperatives to Pakistan in such a way that it is not only facilitating the state to keep an eye on each naval activities of eastern rival state but also enables it to check SLOC in the Indian Ocean (Sakhuja, 2013, p. 9). By keeping this in view, this justifies the permanent presence of the U.S. for enforcing its influence in political dynamics of South Asia for gaining its economic goals and China's strategic goals in the Arabian Sea to protect main arteries in the region.

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Protection of SLOC and Indian Factor

Today, the concept of security of nation state is evolved with time and now it gets complex and relative enough that every state has defined it in various ways based upon their priorities and interests (Bukhari, 2011). It is also evident from the history that the development and evolution of human society is deeply linked with the geographical environment. By analyzing the environment of the earth, the proportion of sea is largest as compared to other resources. While considering Indo-Pak relations that are mostly based on hostility and hatred having a historical background partition of Subcontinent. In real time, this hostility is further aggravated by the increasing importance of Gwadar port that has reduced the vulnerable situation of Pakistan in front of India and the Gwadar port enables Pakistan to watch over the sea lines of communications starting from Strait of Hormuz.

With the growing friendly relations of China and Pakistan, along with the collaboration of their naval forces and establishment of naval bases in Gwadar port, will further maintain a strategic check on the ambition of Indian navy. To keep a check on Indian Navy in Indian Ocean will enable Pakistan to halt the maneuvering in space for Indian Navy in the ocean. Gwadar with its unique location has number of other factors that has projected it as inestimable and strengthens the position of country in a region and against its rivals. The key features of Gwadar are:

1. It offers natural protection against weather and Indian threats.
2. It connects energy rich Central Asia and Caspian Region.
3. Gwadar Port adjacent to Strait of Hormuz and international SLOCs offers many harbor facilities including evincing the storage of sea resources, transshipment, shipment and trade (Malik, 2012).

Therefore, all trade activities carried out to and from Central Asian states will definitely avail the shortest and direct Gwadar route for cost effective reasons, it will ultimately benefit Pakistan and strengthen its economy that is increased up to multiple folds as compared to India.

War of 1971 and Geographical Vulnerability of Karachi Port

The vulnerability of geographical location of Pakistan was first evident in 1971 India-Pakistan war when Indian Naval forces seized the merchant fleet and a small area of naval fleet (Jan, 2013). In this manner the coastline of Pakistan particularly its naval ships at Qasim Naval Base adjoining to Karachi are also on the edge of Indian Navy's outbreak (Kalim, 2016, p 213). The Indian's capacity to disrupt supply chain of Pakistan at Karachi has long been a source of fear and threat for Pakistan (Jones, 2005). On the other hand, Pakistan's existing Navy with old technology along with the fact of its vulnerable geographical location acts as two big hurdles for countering the Indian threat. The location of India is also tactical and based on its security measures

for keeping its international shipping ports in safe zone like Mumbai which is situated too distant on its western shore. It is really necessary for Pakistan to relocate or to transform the location its main shipping ports particularly Karachi Port as compared to Gwadar port that is 725 km away from Karachi port. Pakistan should learn a lesson from its history that in past India had blockade the Karachi Port that had completely shaken its economy (Ramachandran, 2005).

India Blue Water Navy Ambitions

The extended strategic outlook of India that encompasses east, South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca to the north, Central Asia and to the south it extends to Antarctica, India intends to maintain a superior role as a leading power within the Indian Ocean basin with the support of Australia and U.S. (Fair, 2007, Kalim, 2016). For this reason, India has proposed itself as sea-power in South Asian region in order to raise as a world power from this region (Perkovich, 2004, pp. 130-33). However the geographical location of India in the Indian Ocean depicts its dependency on the sea for its trade and security as it lacks roads and land linkages to the rest of world. Meanwhile, in the presence of hostile relations with Pakistan and a challenging terrain, approximately 97 percent of its trade and business activities utilize the Indian Ocean route. From this, Indian vested interests in seas is obvious and estimable (Ammad, 2005).

India is keen to formulate strategic policies that help preserve its nautical resources and SLOC to safeguard its strategic interests and ensure uninterrupted flow of trade. At least 30 Indian ships are always present in Indian waters along with greater number of transnational ships that are engaged in trade activities to and from Indian ports. With declining production of oil from existing fields, the dependency of country over the import of crude oil and petroleum products has been increased to a larger extent for meeting its energy requirements from the Persian Gulf region (Ammad, 2005). With the upcoming challenges of meeting the energy demands of country, India is eager to develop economic ties with CARs through the cooperation of Iran in order to approach this resources rich market. For gaining Caspian energy supplies, India has to face the drawback in the form of sharing and transporting with their traditional rival and disputant neighbor Pakistan (Ammad, 2005). With the constant efforts for gaining natural resources and attaining its vested interests in India Ocean, it will affect Pakistan severely (Kalim, 2016). The relations of India with other countries have mostly driven by security concerns as compared to economic motives. Therefore, India and Pakistan have long history of relations of contentions. Both the states have been gone through several political upheavals and fought three wars and several other military confrontation. Moreover, both the states are also balancing the power by forming alliance with other great powers and countries like that happened in 1979 during Soviet invasion in Afghanistan and after 9/11. India formed an alliance with Afghanistan against Pakistan in order to govern their foreign policy objectives only to counter the influence of Pakistan in Afghanistan, West Asia and to access the CARs

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via the gateway of Afghanistan. By keeping good relations with Afghanistan India also wants to get advantage of trade activities from Afghanistan. By keeping in view that, India already knows this fact that when Gwadar port is functional and becomes the hub of international trade activities, Afghanistan is the direct beneficiary for accessing it and utilizing it for its trade and development sector. In order to generate revenue for itself, India must provide the economic benefits to economically unstable Afghanistan and utilize it for its strategic depth in Gwadar.

India's Look East Policy and Challenges for Pakistan

India's 'Look East Policy' is directed to maintain its leading role in the entire Indian Ocean region. This incorporates strategic, military and economic collaboration that is based on sharing and caring policy with the states of Middle East, West Asia, Central Asia including Iran, Israel, and Afghanistan for its own interests (Fair, 2007). In order to secure its strategic influence and stronghold in Central Asia and Afghanistan, it has two airbases in Tajikistan (Kalim, 2016). The increasing influence of India in neighboring countries of Pakistan has given red signal to Pakistan for the probability to remain political and economically isolated within its neighboring countries as well as in the region (Robinson, 2011). India, on the one hand, building its close ties with Afghanistan by investing in its development sector and on the other hand gaining Iranian and Arab states support to seek access to Central Asia (Aaron, 2003). The win-win strategy of India may yield serious implications on the relations of Pakistan with these states. So, this is the alarming situation for Pakistan not only to secure its sea ports from enemies but also protect its relations from mistrust and suspiciousness with other states within the region (Fair, 2007). To protect Gwadar from Indian Navy, the government of Pakistan needs to take such step to relocate its ports as it was done at the time of shifting capital from Karachi to Islamabad (The best alternative, 2014). Although this port also provides the strategic depth to Pakistan firstly, the port would assist the country to adopt such nuclear assure retaliation postures that secure the nuclear force ensuring the avenging strike capability against adversary (Robinson, 2011). This aspect of port will also facilitate Pakistan Navy to locate their bases near port to effectively counter the intense violations of the enemy during war or conflict situation (Haider, 2013). Secondly, the far away distance of port location provides strategic time to Pak Navy to bear the loss on small scale in case of attack from enemy. Thirdly, the distance factor also presents the sea ports of Pakistan not an easy target to capture in front of its eastern enemy. However, according to the press release of the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR). Naval Strategic Force Command has decided to take a vital step in ensuring the security of sea ports. For this reason they will execute their services as custodian of the nation's second strike capability in these sea ports (Pakistan cites Second-Strike, 2012). These second strike capability strategy will only bring the desired results when Strategic Naval Forces are installed away from vulnerable Karachi Port to Gwadar Naval Base. The proposed idea for the establishment of naval base away from the Indian Navy is based on past lesson of

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1971 and Kargil war. Without the military and collaboration the security of sea ports and seaborne trade cannot be assured alone by naval forces (Nawaz, 2004). With the new trends of maritime power in current era as compared to past few decades and its role in economic development, the immense economic progress from seaborne trade is directly linked with the military intervention for ensuring the security measures of sea ports and safe and sound transportation of goods (Nawaz, 2004). Therefore the economic outcomes and military assistance are interlinked and interdependent. In comparison to Karachi port, Gwadar Port could provide stronger basis of strategic depth to Pak-Navy in order to stay powerful and combat the violations of enemy. This port has potential to enable Chinese to take their favorable and interest based position in the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea (Kalim, 2016). This port has gained the attention of government of Pakistan in recent years as they have planned to establish shipyard over there. This shipyard will function as building and development of Ultra Large Crude Carrier (ULCC) size and Large Crude Carrier (VLCC).

Growing Triadic Nexus and Challenges for Pakistan

In order to protect from the upcoming challenges from mounting Indo-US-Israel nexuses for strategic and security collaboration, both China and Pakistan have fear of deleterious effects of this alliance not only upon them but also considering it as is unfavorable for durable peace and development in the region. To balance such security, military and strategic collaboration, there is a dire need of strong similar collaboration between China and Pakistan to deter the poisonous legacy against them in the region (Bukhari, 2011). Both India and China are struggling hard for chasing each other in the race of dominance in the region. For this reason, both the states are working hard to gain multiple access to different resourced rich countries and to increase their influence in the region in order to counter each other economic power. Therefore, China has been invested around 248 million dollars almost 80% of investment of total expenditure in Gwadar Port. The reason behind this huge investment is to transit all its goods from Gulf to Indian Ocean, drop off at Gwadar and utilizing the Silk Road for transportation of goods back to Shanghai. Sino-Pak convergence of economic interests in Gwadar acts as a source of threat for India. India is taking interest in Chabahar port to confront China and as an easy gateway to Central Asia. Although, the unique location of India around India Ocean is great blessing for it but the race of gaining control of Indian Ocean between India and China still exists. Therefore the defence minister of China has confronted the supremacy of India in Indian Ocean that Indian Ocean is not India's Ocean. Growing Indo-US nexus in South Asia is being perceived by both China and Pakistan as a dire threat to their national interests in the region (Khondoker, 2015).

Conclusion

Today, protection of security of SLOCs, chokepoints, sea ports and ships has become a vital priority in every littoral state's strategic planning. The geopolitics of Gwadar has involved the strategic and military perspectives simultaneously. The geostrategic

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location of Gwadar port at the apex of the North Arabian Sea facing Indian Ocean is all set to play a significant geo-strategic role in the region as it is surrounded by resource rich Central Asian Republics, and it alone connects five regions of the world namely West Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, South East Asia and Persian Gulf. In present global order and regional political dynamics especially after 9/11, Gwadar port's strategic location to protect SLOCs becomes vital when the surrounding regions are in chaos like prevailing security dilemma in Middle East, deteriorating law and order situation in Afghanistan, emerging tension between China and US in Asia Pacific and US-Iran rivalry, Gwadar port alone emerges for Pakistan, China, Central Asian States and Russia to provide safe access to warm waters and beyond. For maritime perspective, Gwadar port's unique geographical location provide geostrategic imperatives to Pakistan and China in such a way that it not only facilitates both the states to monitor strategic and political maneuvering of India and US in the Indian Ocean but it also enables them to ensure the protection of the Sea Lines of Communications in the region.

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