

Road to Gwadar: China's global reach and its implications for India

Anil Chpra
DNA (Mumbai)
November 18, 2015

Pakistan is all set to sign a 40-year lease with China allotting over 923-hectares of land for Beijing to develop a massive special economic zone in the deep-sea port of Gwadar as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, an ambitious US\$46 billion investment plan linking western China to the Arabian Sea that is an extension of the proposed 'Maritime Silk Road'. Goods from China would enter through the Khunjerab Pass in Pakistan occupied Kashmir, the world's highest paved border crossing at 15,000 feet above sea level, and transit 2000 kilometre south to the sea allowing China faster access to the Middle East, Africa and Europe. The multimodal, multidimensional corridor will comprise three parallel highways, railway links, oil and gas pipelines, and an optical fibre link spanning the entire country before reaching the south-western tip of Pakistan. China will build an export zone and construction of the Gwadar international airport will start within the next few months. Pakistan is also raising a special security force of up to 25,000 men to protect the facilities. Gwadar port had earlier been built in 2007 with technical and financial support from Beijing. In 2012, Beijing took over port operations. Islamabad is expected to collect millions in customs duty. Gwadar, at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, dominates the Strait of Hormuz, through which 20% of the world's oil is transported. A 1,800 km railway line is also planned to be constructed from Kashgar in China to Gwadar. 29 industrial parks, 21 special economic zones and power projects to produce 21,690 MW power could be a game-changer. Baluch nationalists have been protesting that the Pakistan government is conspiring to plunder the province's vast natural resources. Wealthy and connected Pakistanis are being accused of a major land grab exercise all along the corridor.

China has been concerned about Muslim Uighurs extremists from its neighbouring Xinjiang province being supported by Pakistan militant groups. Chinese also allege that intelligence services of countries like the United States, Britain, Saudi Arabia, India, Afghanistan and Japan are closely monitoring the progress of the projects, with many interested in thwarting the Chinese thrust to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean. The corridor is likely to transform the geopolitics of the region and be detrimental to regional strategies and core interests. Meanwhile, Pakistan alleges that the Baluch and Gilgit opposition to the corridor is funded by Indian intelligence. Pakistan has been a key to global politics in the backdrop of the US-Russia confrontation, the US-China rivalry, the energy politics of Central Asia, and proximity to active militancy zones of Kashmir, Xinjiang, Afghanistan and Baluchistan. China hopes that development of landlocked Xinjiang will contain the unrest. People's Liberation Army Navy will get strategic access to the Indian Ocean in detriment of Indian interests. China who is de-facto a third party in Kashmir since Pakistan ceded territory in 1963 will increase regional footprint and could increase muscle flexing. Pakistan is also likely to accede to Chinese Army request to deploy in northern areas to guard Chinese interests. In view of the high stakes of the project, Islamabad has assigned a division of the Pakistani army's Special Forces for protection.

India with its zero-sum mindset is deeply concerned over the project. Any enhancement of Sino-Pak relationship could damage India's aspirations to be the preeminent power in the South Asian and Indian Ocean regions. The Corridor running through the Karakoram affects India's claims over the territories of the Pakistan-controlled Kashmir and the Northern Areas. Three parallel corridors will give strength in depth and Indian military concept of slicing through the country will become redundant. India's policy

makers are also worried about a possible two-front war in future. Any Indian protests are unlikely to yield anything. India may instead progress its own BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar) corridor at a faster pace to stay relevant. India should also try accelerating the Chabahar port project located 170 km west of Gwadar in Iran that was partially built by India in the 1990s. As China surmounts the need to go through Malacca strait and begins overlooking the strategic entry into the Indian Ocean, India has a geopolitical dilemma looking for answers and alliances.

Source: <http://www.dnaindia.com/india/standpoint-road-to-gwadar-china-s-global-reach-and-its-implications-for-india-2146301>