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Issue Brief

Gawadar and Chabahar: Implications for the Region

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Gawadar and Chabahar have unique geostrategic and geopolitical features and should ideally develop as sister ports. Both ports are situated near the Strait of Hormuz which holds two thirds of the world's oil reserves. Massive trafficking of the crude oil, estimated at 17 billion barrels, takes place every day through the Indian Ocean. Moreover, both ports are economically and strategically vital which provide conduits to the Indian Ocean, where about 100,000 ships traverse yearly and 70 percent of the world's petroleum trade passes.¹ If both these ports function parallel to each other, their potential would increase manifold and competition for regional domination would ensue. Iranian and Pakistani leadership have shown the willingness to make Gawadar and Chahbhar sister-ports not rival ports. Though, there are some quarters that doubt the Indian motives in building Chahbhar, it needs to realize that in this interdependent world economic cooperation can lessen the chances of confrontation.

The ongoing China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project is considered to be a game changer for the region. The corridor will not only connect the Gawadar port to Xinjiang, but it will also reduce geographical distances. Successful completion of the project will lead Pakistan towards prosperity and help it become economically strong.

On the other hand, the Chabahar port is located in South Eastern Iran. It is the only Iranian port which opens up into the Indian Ocean, Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf. It is a source of attraction for India because this port will open a gateway for India to Afghanistan, Central Asia, Turkey and Eastern Europe. By taking advantage of this port, India wants to bypass Pakistan and the CPEC project.

The recent visit of Indian Prime Minister to Iran on 23, May, 2016 resulted in the signing of 12 agreements between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Iranian counterpart Hassan Rouhani. A trilateral agreement was also signed between India, Iran and Afghanistan, in which India decided to give \$500million for the construction of the Chabahar port.

India, being an archrival, of Pakistan always uses such plans to restrict strategic space for Pakistan. This agreement is also a part of Indian planning to bypass Pakistan and to reduce the dependency of the Central Asian States and Afghanistan on Gawadar Port. During Modi's visit to China the Prime Minister took up the issue and spoke very firmly against the CPEC passing through AJK (Azad Jammu and Kashmir) is unacceptable.² India has openly stated, on more than one occasion, that it would go to any lengths to sabotage CPEC.³

Apart from setting up a special cell of Research Analysis Wing (RAW) to plan and execute anti-CPEC activities, India is also luring regional and world powers to join hands to develop Chabahar as a counter-weight to Gwadar simultaneously it is involved in the construction of rail and road links through Iran to link India with Afghanistan and Central Asia bypassing Pakistan.⁴ For this purpose, India is enhancing its cooperation with Iran and Afghanistan to attain regional domination.

The cooperation between India, Iran and Afghanistan could emerge as a threat for Pakistan. Controversies are spreading around Pakistan that, the three nation-bloc will affect Pakistan's plans for economic integration, restoration of international peace and maintenance of peaceful borders.

Iranian Ambassador to Pakistan Mehdi Honardoost, however, made it clear during his talk at The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad on 27 May, 2016 that the Chabahar agreement was not restricted to India, Iran and Afghanistan. The doors are still open for other states especially for Pakistan and China for cooperation. While focusing on the importance of Gawadar and Chabahar, he expressed that both ports should not be considered as rival ports, but they must be called as sister ports. They are very important for trade normalization and economic stability.

Consequently, it is time for Pakistan to understand that the time has come for it to put aside geopolitical differences and move into the era of geo-economics and towards regional connectivity. For this purpose Pakistan should try to strengthen its ties with Iran. The recent visit of President Hassan Rouhani to Pakistan is an evidence of strengthening ties. During this visit, six MoUs were signed between the two countries related to trade and other relevant issues and it was also decided to increase the level of bilateral trade to \$5 billion by 2021.

In the meantime, the most important area of cooperation for Pakistan and Iran is Gawadar and Chabahar which can open the door for positive change. Both nations must try to work together. The Iran-Pakistan pipeline project must be completed, as soon as possible. Gawadar and Chabahar must be linked with each other, because linking these two ports could open doors of success for both countries. Mr. Sartaj Aziz, advisor to the Prime Minister on foreign affairs, in his statement said that, "Pakistan did not see Chabahar as a rival and was in fact exploring the possibility of developing links with Gwadar."⁵ This shows how earnest Islamabad is to work with Iran. Along with road links, both countries need to focus on the energy sector and other areas as well.

Pakistan and Iran have to consider the strategic importance of these ports and instead of viewing each other as potential rivals must recognize the benefits of cooperation for both nations and the entire region. Both countries must use this opportunity to enhance mutual trust and reciprocity. Pakistan and Iran must not let any third power create hurdles and difficulties in their path towards cooperative development.

Notes and References:

¹ Ayaz Ahmed, "Gwadar vs Chabahar". The News, October 11, 2015.

² "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor 'unacceptable', Modi tells China". The Express Tribune, June 1, 2015.

³ Saima Ali, "The Challenging CPEC: Can Gwadar and Chabahar Remain Friends?". Voice of Journalists, May 29, 2016.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Imtiaz Ahmad, "Trade route linking Chabahar port a security threat to Pakistan". Hindustan Times, May 31, 2016.