

## **China's Politico-Strategic Relations with Pakistan as an Indian Ocean Region Country**

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### **Abstract**

*Of late China has been forging strong political, economic and strategic relations with the countries of Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The aim and motivation that pushed China into these relations is to expand its strategic influence and subsequently achieve national interest in the region. China in order to raise its global power status, secure its seaborne trade, contain the influence of India, counter the US dominance, diversify its energy transportation routes is reaching out to almost all countries in and around the Indian Ocean. All this is being done by helping these countries in many ways like; developing the infrastructure of these countries, giving them loans and aids, supplying them with arms and ammunition, building their roads, railways and highways etc. Some of these countries which are beneficiaries of the China's reach-out in Indian Ocean are Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh etc and some other East African countries. With the passage of time, China's economic influence is growing even among the India's closest security partners. This economic influence of China will ultimately give her the political clout in the region as well, which will be over and above the one that India will have. This paper attempts to look into how China is establishing politico-strategic relations with Pakistan as an IOR country so as to advance its diversified national interest.*

Key Words: China, Pakistan, Indian Ocean Region, gwadar port, strategic interests.

### **Methodology:**

The historical-analytical approach has been used to look into the purpose and the evolution of China's politico-strategic relations with Pakistan. It attempts to examine how China-Pakistan axis was formed. In order to study this, paper primarily relies on secondary sources like books, journal articles, news items broadly related to the theme.

### **Introduction**

The relation between China and Pakistan specially started after 1962 border war between India and China. In 1959, Chinese maps showed areas of Pakistan in China; an obvious matter of concern for Pakistan, which prompted President Ayub Khan of Pakistan (in 1961) to send a note to the Chinese, though he never received any response. In the interim, Pakistan voted to grant China a seat in the United Nations which led to withdrawal of disputed maps by China in 1962 and a proposal to enter border talks in March. The step was welcomed by the people of Pakistan and negotiations between the two started, resulting in a Border Agreement between the two, signed in March 1963, also known as Sino-Pakistan Frontier Agreement or Sino-Pakistan Boundary Agreement, which was signed to establish the border between China and Pakistan<sup>1</sup>

After this boundary agreement between China and Pakistan, there was hardly anything between these two countries which could have proved to be an irritant in the relations. Even, in 1965 India-Pakistan war, China supported Pakistan, which was primarily fought on Kashmir. One more reason for strengthening of China-Pakistan relations after 1965 war was that US maintained even-handedness in this dispute which compelled Pakistan to look towards China.<sup>ii</sup> Thus, with the passage of time, the relations grew stronger. Despite, the different political systems and cultures like one being the Communist China and other being the Islamic Pakistan, they have managed their relations well. It is marked by durability as this relation has survived with shifting geopolitical and economic interests. At present, it has developed into full bloom high value strategic friendship. Pakistan remained a loyal friend of China and responded positively to every interest of China. Even after the improvement of relations between India and China, China has continued to help Pakistan in developing its nuclear weapons, capabilities and missile defenses.

China is making use of Pakistan in many ways like, broadening its diplomatic links, blocking India's interests in the region and also in countering the other major power influence. In reciprocity, Pakistan got loans, improved trade prospects, diplomatic support on Kashmir and a potential alternative for dealings with the United States, who has recently turned its back towards Pakistan by cutting down on the financial assistance and other diplomatic support. China-Pakistan axis developed more or less out of the shared hostility towards India and partly also for mutual benefits in trade, defense, nuclear matters and other diplomatic alliances. This friendship is described now as "all weather friendship" and "iron brothers". Today, this relationship has reached to the level where billions of dollars have been invested in Pakistan by China through the projects like China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

#### **China- Pakistan Axis:**

The main incentives for China in having relationship with Pakistan are;

- (a) because of China's ongoing problems in Xinjiang and its radical Muslim group,
- (b) to find a direct route to the Arabian Sea,
- (c) to counter India's global ambitions by covertly helping Pakistan against India and diverting India's military and strategic attention away from China,
- (d) to monitor the growing U.S presence in Central Asia.

Furthermore, Pakistan is a key muslim ally of China, acts as a China's gateway to the Islamic world. China is building Gwadar port in Pakistan, which will be of strategic significance to China in maintaining its strategic upper hand in the Indian Ocean.

China has made Pakistan as its most preferred littoral nation of the IOR and both the nations have strong relations in almost every field, be it political, economic, defense, science and technology etc. China is aware about the strained relations of Pakistan with India and the potential

of India to dominate the region. Keeping that in mind, China has accordingly exploited the fragile relations between India and Pakistan into its own favour by cultivating a cordial knot with Pakistan and bringing her into its own clout politically, economically, diplomatically and militarily. China is well aware of the fact that establishing close relations with Pakistan will serve China in realizing its national interests in both the regions, i.e., “South Asian Region” and “Indian Ocean Region”.

China believes that making Pakistan stronger in terms of military and nuclear capability would definitely check Indian influence in the region and thus restrict it from harming China's interests in the region. The reality check of China's perception shows that the strategy adopted by China has worked well till date. Pakistan is located on the shores of Indian Ocean. This means that close cooperation with Pakistan will help China in securing direct access to the Indian Ocean, which China desperately needs for the securing the SLOC's through which more than 80% of Beijing's oil imports pass and reach to China.<sup>iii</sup> Also, China will get the shortest route to the Indian Ocean that will help it to bypass Strait of Malacca route to protect its supplies from being blocked by powers like USA and India. Further, China also realizes that Pakistan is helpful in a way to prevent any terror spillover into the China's territory particularly into the Xinjiang province of China where there is already a movement going on by Uighurs which China treats as secessionist in nature. Thus, China provided and is continuously providing all possible help to Pakistan in boosting its capability through economic upliftment, and augmenting its defense capability by providing it conventional and nuclear weapons.

China has been providing every sort of help to Pakistan in terms of huge economic packages in the form of loans and grants, undertaking the development of big infrastructural projects such as ports, high speed railways, roads and buildings, bridges, nuclear reactors and the supply of defense equipments such as tanks, anti-tank and nuclear capable ballistic missiles, artillery, guns, fighter jets, and training to military personnel, etc. China is the second largest trade partner of Pakistan<sup>iv</sup> with a total trade volume of \$ 13.7 billion approximately.<sup>v</sup> China has helped Pakistan to built a series of nuclear reactors at Chashma despite the fact that Pakistan is not signatory to Nuclear non-proliferation Treaty.<sup>vi</sup>

### **Gwadar Port: A Chinese Pearl in the Indian Ocean**

Gwadar is located in Pakistan's Western province of Balochistan, and is about 533 kms away from Karachi, 120 kms from Iranian border and 380 kms northeast of the nearest point in Oman across Arabian Sea. Gwadar port is located at the mouth of Persian Gulf, about 600kms outside the strait of Hormuz, near the key shipping routes in and out of the Persian Gulf.<sup>vii</sup> Gwadar port is strategically located between South Asia, Central Asia and West Asia. After two ports namely Karachi and Qasim, Gwadar will be the third commercial port of Pakistan. As the older ports have no scope of expansion, Gwadar provides an alternative. China has provided 198 million US dollar for the development of first phase of this port that was completed in 2006.<sup>viii</sup> Gwadar port has a capacity to handle bulk carriers upto 50,000 Dead Weight Tonnage (DWT). The port was leased by Pakistan Government for development to the “China Overseas Port Holding Company” for forty years in April 2017. According to Gwadar Port Authority vision statement,

“Gwadar deep sea port is the second great monument of Pakistan-China friendship after the Karakoram Highway linking Pakistan and China.”<sup>ix</sup>

### **Strategic Significance of Gwadar**

Gwadar port is strategically and commercially significant for both China and Pakistan. It represents an important strategic foothold for China in the Indian Ocean. It provides China direct access to the Indian Ocean. The port is strategically located at the confluence of Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea and is in close proximity to the vital Straits of Hormuz, through which an estimated 40 percent of the world's oil supply passes. With this direct access to Indian Ocean, China has succeeded in bypassing the Malacca strait which is dominated by other powers and can act as a choke point to block the supplies towards mainland China. Though, until now it is a commercial port but provides China with an opportunity to set up a naval base which can act as a vantage point for China so as to keep better surveillance on the US and Indian maneuvering in the Indian Ocean in general and Arabian Sea in particular. For Pakistan, Gwadar port is an opportunity of economic development and also strengthening of maritime infrastructure of the country. It will also help Pakistan in employing the youth of its restive Baluchistan province. From Gwadar port to Xinjiang the distance is 2500kms while it is almost 14,500kms through Malacca Strait. Thus it reduces distance by almost by 11,500 kms (this distance includes the distance between Gwadar port and Oman). At present it takes almost 20 days for oil tankers of China to reach the Gulf. But with the completion of high speed rail and road projects in Pakistan same oil tankers will take only 48 hours to reach Gwadar from the Eastern China.<sup>x</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The relation between India and China can be seen from the utilitarian perspective. It emerged out of need and moved towards being, what is called as ‘all-weather friendship’. The relation at present is described by some as, ‘taller than mountains, deeper than oceans and sweeter than honey’<sup>xi</sup>. Pakistan is the beneficiary of China in a way that it receives arms, ammunition, aid, loans and other diplomatic support from her. China in turn achieves its national interest by having a dependable ally like Pakistan in the South Asian Region as well as Indian Ocean Region. China's interest in Pakistan also lies in the fact that it helps China vis-à-vis India in many ways.

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