



MARITIME SECURITY OF CPEC

By: Ali Abbas

The importance of maritime trade has always been vital throughout history because the majority of the world trade passes through maritime routes. The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, Commonly just Maritime Silk Road or MSR, is the sea route part of the Belt and Road Initiative which is a Chinese strategic initiative to increase investment and foster collaboration across the historic Silk Road. The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is an extension to the proposed Silk Road. The MSR will look at smoother connectivity for trade and economy especially for energy security. It is a proven fact that maritime security is connected with the economic development of any state. Whenever politico-economic stakes are higher in any project the challenges will also be higher in proportion. Likewise, the maritime component of CPEC and Gwadar Port also faces a number of challenges and threats, not only due to local and regional environment but also owing to Chinese connection.

Gwadar Port is the pearl of the CPEC, which enjoys a unique geo-strategic location. On one hand, it is located astride the strategic Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Gulf through which traverse the global maritime highways. On the other hand, it is also a stepping-stone for the energy-rich region of Central Asian Republics, to gain access to sea. Thus, Gwadar has the potential to become future hub with its dual role as a transshipment as well as a transit port. Now it is up to us to create essential facilities and infrastructure as

well as ensure its maritime security so as to fully benefit from this tremendous economic activity.

For Pakistan, over 90% of our trade by volume is carried out via the sea. The quantum of this trade is likely to increase once the Chinese transit trade start coming through CPEC/Gwadar Port. CPEC is likely to provide further impetus for the development of our maritime sectors such as enhanced shipping and port activities, ancillary services, financial institutions, shipbuilding, ship repair, fisheries, coastal tourism, etc. Such a boom can lead to creation of business opportunities and employment prospects.

The unfriendly forces, however, would endeavour to disrupt the functioning of CPEC and Gwadar Port for which Pakistan will have to continue to maintain its guard. To this end, we need consistent long-term policies, enabling environment and diligent implementation of a well-thought-out plan including all important factor of maritime security.

There are numerous challenges that are faced by the maritime component of CPEC including Gwadar port. We already know that US and India are in strategic partnership to contain Chinese presence in the Indian ocean. So in pursuance of their strategy any initiative involving China will be viewed with apprehension. These challenges automatically put CPEC, particularly its maritime component under stress. Being a potential competitor to regional ports, the CPEC route and Gwadar Port project also face some challenges even from the neighboring friendly countries. These neighboring countries perceive Gwadar as a potential competitor to their well-established ports of Chahbahar, Sohar, Dukum and even Dubai, due to which, Gwadar faces unreceptive treatment from these countries. To further add the current security situation in and around Afghanistan restricts its transit potential to central Asian states.

The sea and the maritime environment provide ideal platform for nefarious elements for their movements for illegal activities like human, narcotics, and weapons smuggling, etc. At the same time, it provides easy access to launch any terrorist or sabotage activity across the littoral seas. The incident of USS Cole in the past is a case in point. Hiring of illegal services of such elements by the actors who intend to sabotage the success of CPEC and maritime activity across Gwadar Port cannot be ruled out.

The success of the CPEC and the Gwadar Port project is linked to the safe and secure maritime environment in our areas of interest. Pakistan Navy, which has been entrusted with this responsibility, has already adopted suitable strategies to deal with the potential challenges to the maritime component of CPEC including Gwadar Port to safeguard it against asymmetric threats. The deployment of naval assets will be commensurate to assessment of potential threats and increase in trade and associated activities on the port. An important strand of seaward defence and security is keeping maritime area of interest under continuous surveillance and monitoring that can help mitigate threats from non-state actors and help generate a timely and well-coordinated response.

Some of the recommended measures at national level would include enhancement of the capacity of Pakistan navy and other maritime security forces i.e. PMSA, promote Collaborative maritime security arrangements to ensure secure oceans and free flow of trade and undertake measures that can lead to sustainable and peaceful use of seas to foster prosperity in the region.

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