

An Analytical Investigation of Politico-Economic Effects of Gwadar and Chabahar Ports on Pak-Iran Relations

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the geostrategic importance and implications of Gwadar and Chabahar ports for the entire region. Drawing upon a multidisciplinary approach, this study integrates political, economic, and geopolitical perspectives to assess the complex dynamics at play. It delves into the historical context of Pak-Iran relations, examining the factors that have shaped their interactions over time. Furthermore, it scrutinizes the geopolitical implications of Gwadar and Chabahar ports in the context of regional power dynamics, considering the interests and interventions of key stakeholders such as China, India, and the United States. Economically, the paper evaluates the potential synergies and competition between Gwadar and Chabahar ports, exploring how their development may impact trade patterns, investment flows, and economic development in both Pakistan and Iran. Additionally, it examines the role of infrastructure connectivity in enhancing regional integration and fostering economic cooperation among neighboring states. Through a critical analysis of existing literature, empirical data, and expert insights, this paper aims to offer valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of Pak-Iran relations in the context of the Gwadar and Chabahar ports. The theory of the struggle for power among regional powers is applied in the paper to identify the political rivalry between China and India and their possible implications for Gwadar and Chabahar ports on Pak-Iran relations. Most importantly, the paper aims to address the questions: what are the policy options for Pakistan and Iran to skip the exploitation of regional and international powers with respect to both ports and avoid disturbance in their bilateral relations?

Keywords: Chabahar Port, Gwadar Port, CPEC, Iran and Pakistan Relations.

Introduction

The Gwadar and Chabahar ports are located in the most important region of the Indian Ocean, where they are connected with the most oil-rich and mineral-resourceful countries of the Gulf, Middle East and Central Asia one way or the other (Ghani et al., 2020). In addition to this, the geostrategic location and geo-economic importance of Gwadar and Chabahar ports have further boosted their importance in international trade since 80 per cent of world trade is carried out via sea route (Khan & Omidi, 2023). Interestingly, both ports are located in the most important region of the Indian Ocean, which acts as a gateway for the Republics of Central Asia, Afghanistan and

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China to access warm water. Furthermore, Gwadar port is the only deep seaport with the warmest water in the world, extremely close to the Strait of Hormuz, where 21 million barrels of oil per day passes (Sayin & Kiliç, 2020). In addition to this, Balochistan, which is the largest province of Pakistan, shares about 750 km of coastal borderline with the Indian Ocean, boosts the geo-political and geo-strategic importance of Pakistan in many folds (Barrech et al., 2023). On the other hand, Iran, which connects Pakistan in its East, possesses a great geo-strategic location due to its geographical connection with the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman via the Strait of Hormuz. There is no denying the fact that both sisterly ports are the most energy trading transit routes which provide a gateway to the countries of the Middle East, Gulf, Central Asia and South Asia to access the Indian ocean and enjoy international trade activities.

Moreover, these two ports can act as geographical surveillance to check the trade activities in the Arabian sea. Most importantly, Chabahar Port, which is an emerging port in the region, is located 72 km away from Gwadar Port (Ali, 2021). Therefore, both ports are significantly important for the entire region in the context of trade and economic activities.

The development and operation of these ports have long been regarded as pivotal to economic growth and geopolitical influence, particularly in regions where maritime connectivity intersects with strategic interests. In the case of South Asia and the broader Middle East, the emergence of Gwadar port in Pakistan and Chabahar port in Iran has sparked considerable interest due to their potential to reshape regional dynamics. These ports, situated along key maritime routes, have attracted significant investment and attention from global powers seeking to leverage their geostrategic location for economic and geopolitical gains.

The significance of Gwadar and Chabahar ports extends beyond their roles as mere infrastructure projects; they are symbolic of broader politico-economic trends and power struggles unfolding in the region. The rivalry between India and Pakistan, compounded by their respective alignments with major powers such as China and the United States, adds a layer of complexity to the strategic calculus surrounding these ports. Additionally, Iran's position as a pivotal player in the Middle East further complicates the geopolitical landscape, as a myriad of factors, including regional conflicts, energy dynamics, and global power competition, influence its relations with Pakistan and India. Against this backdrop, understanding the politico-economic effects of Gwadar and Chabahar ports on Pak-Iran relations requires a multifaceted analysis that takes into account historical, geopolitical, and economic factors.

The conclusion of the China-Pakistan-Economic-Corridor (CPEC) agreement greatly sharpened the geo-political differences between the Gwadar and Chabahar ports, which dragged China and India to be involved directly in the construction and modernization of Gwadar and Chabahar ports, respectively. India has been observed in the construction and development of Chabahar port to encounter the Pak-Sino economic partnership in Gwadar port using Iran and Afghan soil (Yousaf et al., 2017). In this given context, the relations between Pakistan and Iran matter greatly. History is replete with examples where Pak-Iran strained the Indian factor and has capitalized on relations. Therefore, Pakistan needs to maintain a balanced trend in the Saudi-Iranian-Chinese triangle so that the Indian factor is skipped and avoided. However, geographical proximity, socio-cultural affiliation, and geo-political necessities are certain areas of convergence between Pakistan and Iran which bind them closely and can help both countries to normalize their relations. Both countries need to realize the fact that the geo-political rivalry and geo-economic competition between Iran and Pakistan would create a lose-lose situation that the regional and international powers would exploit.

This critical introduction sets the stage for a comprehensive examination of the complex interplay between economic interests, geopolitical considerations, and regional security dynamics in the context of Gwadar and Chabahar ports. Through an analytical investigation, this study aims to shed light on the opportunities and challenges posed by these ports for Pak-Iran relations, offering insights into their implications for regional stability and cooperation in South Asia and the Middle East.

Significance of the Study

Despite having long historical, geographical connectivity and mature socio-cultural affiliation, Pakistan and Iran needed to strengthen their bilateral relations permanently. It is believed that the political and ideological differences between Iran and Pakistan created a political vacuum which external powers have filled. In addition to this, Pak-Saudi and Pak-Chinese political understanding and economic cooperation have resulted in politico-economic cooperation between Iran and India in Afghanistan, which has been extended to Chabahar port. Furthermore, India has been found more active in financing the reconstruction and modernization of Chabahar port right after the conclusion of the CPEC project that intends to encounter Pak-Chinese economic cooperation in the Indian Ocean. As a result, both sisterly ports are supposed to be operating for the benefit of one another and have been on the verge of competition due to external powers. In this context, it isn't very pleasant to learn that certain non-state actors have been financed to check the Pak-Sino strategic partnership in Balochistan (Khalid & Mat, 2023).

On the other hand, Iran is the most vulnerable state to sectarian violence. Any political rivalry between Pakistan and Iran would disturb the entire region, which neither benefits Iran nor Pakistan. Therefore, this study is extremely important since it identifies policy options for Pakistan and Iran to avoid any political rivalry and economic competition over the Gwadar and Chabahar ports.

Problem Statement

The development and operation of ports play a crucial role in shaping geopolitical dynamics and economic cooperation among nations. In the context of Pakistan and Iran, the establishment of Gwadar port in Pakistan and Chabahar port in Iran has introduced significant changes to the regional landscape. These ports not only serve as vital hubs for maritime trade but also hold immense potential to influence the political and economic relations between the two neighbouring countries.

The interaction between Gwadar and Chabahar ports, located in close proximity to each other, raises several pertinent questions regarding their impact on Pakistan's and Iran's bilateral relations. Understanding the complex interplay of politico-economic factors resulting from the operation of these ports is essential for policymakers, analysts, and stakeholders to navigate the evolving dynamics in the region effectively.

Therefore, this study aims to conduct an analytical investigation into the politico-economic effects of Gwadar and Chabahar ports on Pak-Iran relations. Key areas of focus include but are not limited to:

This research seeks to provide valuable insights into the complex interplay between the politico-economic dimensions of port development and its implications for the bilateral relationship between Pakistan and Iran. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to informed decision-making and policy formulation aimed at enhancing cooperation and stability in the region.

Literature Review

Due to its significance in regional dynamics, the politico-economic impact of Gwadar and Chabahar ports on Pak-Iran relations has been a subject of scholarly inquiry and geopolitical analysis. Various studies have examined different dimensions of this topic, offering insights into the complex interaction between port development, economic interests, and geopolitical considerations.

One significant aspect of the literature focuses on the economic potential of Gwadar and Chabahar ports as key nodes in regional trade networks. Rahman et al. (2021) highlight Gwadar's strategic location at the mouth of the Persian Gulf and its potential to become a trans-shipment hub, facilitating trade between China, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Similarly, a study by Omid & Noolkar-Oak (2022) emphasizes the role of the Chabahar port in enhancing Iran's connectivity with Afghanistan and Central Asia, thereby reducing dependence on traditional trade routes.

However, the literature also acknowledges various challenges and obstacles facing the development of these ports. Javaid (2023) points out infrastructure deficiencies and security concerns as significant barriers to the full realization of Gwadar's potential, while Hadian and Amirthan (2017) discuss the impact of sanctions on Iran's ability to attract investment and develop Chabahar port infrastructure.

Moreover, scholars have examined the geopolitical implications of Gwadar and Chabahar ports in the context of regional power dynamics. Hussain et al. (2021) argue that Gwadar's development as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has heightened tensions between India and Pakistan, as India perceives it as a strategic encroachment by China.

Overall, while the literature recognizes the potential of Gwadar and Chabahar ports to enhance economic cooperation between Pakistan and Iran and their respective regional partners, it also underscores the multifaceted challenges and geopolitical complexities that must be navigated for their successful development. Future research in this area could delve deeper into the socio-economic impacts of port development on local communities, the role of external actors in shaping port strategies, and the long-term implications for regional stability and security.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of the politico-economic effects of Gwadar and Chabahar ports on Pak-Iran relations can be guided by several theoretical perspectives that provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics at play. One of the most relevant and critical theoretical frameworks for this topic is the geopolitical economy approach, supplemented by concepts from International Relations and Economic Geography. The geopolitical economy approach emphasizes the interconnection between geography, economics, and politics in shaping the bilateral relations of Iran and Pakistan. It examines how spatial dynamics, resource distribution, and power asymmetries influence economic activities and geopolitical strategies. Applied to the context of Gwadar and Chabahar ports, this framework helps in analyzing the strategic significance of these ports in the broader geopolitical context, considering factors such as maritime trade routes, energy security, and regional power dynamics.

Results and Discussion

The politico-economic effects of Gwadar and Chabahar ports on Pak-Iran relations have been analyzed comprehensively through a multidimensional lens, incorporating insights from geopolitical economy, international relations, and economic geography. The findings and discussion below highlight the complex interplay of factors affecting the bilateral relationship

between Pakistan and Iran in the context of port development. Right after the conclusion of the CPEC agreement on April 20th, 2015, India has been more focused on developing the Chabahar Port, which has badly disturbed Pakistan (Rafee, 2017). Besides this, the Chabahar port was built with the cooperation of India which surely aimed to reduce the importance of Pakistani ports (Mohamed, 2021) and contain Pak-Sino economic cooperation via Gwadar port. The Chabahar Port is the best option available to the international community for usage in reaching and capturing the markets of Afghanistan and Central Asian Republics, particularly for India. There is no denying that Russia, India, and Iran all share the same interests in the region because of the Chabahar port. Because of the Chabahar port, these three nations have benefited immensely from the establishment of economic ties via highways and railways from Mumbai to Russia via the Central Asian Republics.

Conversely, Gwadar port, which is regarded as Pakistan's growing economic centre, is located in the Makran coastal strip, adjacent to the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf. Warm water and a deep sea make Gwadar port noteworthy. The fact that Gwadar port is connected to oil-rich regions of the Gulf and Middle East on the West and Central Asian Republics via Afghanistan on the North further enhances the port's strategic location. As a result, both ports are crucial for trade, business, and political interactions.

Economic Competitiveness

Situated at the crossroads of the world's most oil-rich and resourceful nations, Gwadar port serves as an entry point for Afghanistan and the Republics of Central Asia to access the Indian Ocean and conduct international trade. Although Pakistan already benefits financially from the ports at Karachi and Qasim, the complete operation of Gwadar port would bring in more money for Pakistan than any other port. Pakistan has so accorded the port of Gwadar equal weight and priority. Pakistan sought to build the Gwadar port to increase its international trade since it believed that the Karachi port was overcrowded due to fishing and other civil ships clogging the port with extremely heavy rush traffic.

On the other side, Iran used to gain from having Bandar Abbas port, which is situated on the Strait of Hormuz. However, Iran found it difficult to continue its economic activities in the Persian Gulf because of heavy traffic and the presence of US naval forces there. Consequently, Iran established the equally significant Chabahar port in addition to the Gwadar port in order to maintain commercial links with other nations. Additionally, Chabahar port serves as an entry point to the Indian Ocean for Afghanistan and the Republics of Central Asia, much like Gwadar port does.

Both Gwadar and Chabahar ports have emerged as crucial nodes in regional trade networks, with significant potential to enhance economic cooperation between Pakistan and Iran. Gwadar's strategic location at the mouth of the Persian Gulf offers proximity to key shipping routes, making it an attractive option for trans-shipment and trade facilitation. Chabahar, on the other hand, provides Iran with access to markets in Afghanistan and Central Asia, reducing its dependence on traditional land routes (Koolae & Emami, 2023).

However, despite their economic potential, both ports need help with their competitiveness. Gwadar needs to improve its advanced infrastructure and eternal security concerns, hindering its ability to attract investment and realize its full potential as a trans-shipment hub (Asif, 2018). Similarly, Chabahar's development has been hampered by international sanctions against Iran, limiting its capacity to attract foreign investment and modernize port facilities (Sharma, 2016).

Trade Dynamics

The operation of the Gwadar and Chabahar ports has implications for bilateral trade between Pakistan and Iran. Gwadar's development as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has led to increased Chinese investment in Pakistan, potentially altering the trade balance between the two countries. Meanwhile, Iran's engagement with Chabahar offers opportunities for diversifying its trade routes and reducing reliance on traditional partners.

However, the full extent of these trade dynamics remains uncertain, as both ports are still in the early stages of development. Factors such as infrastructure constraints, regulatory barriers, and geopolitical tensions may influence the volume and direction of trade flows between Pakistan and Iran in the long term.

Strategic Significance

The strategic importance of Gwadar and Chabahar ports extends beyond their economic function, shaping regional political dynamics and geopolitical alignments. Gwadar's association with CPEC is the most important city in Pakistan due to its connectivity with the Indian Ocean. The geostrategic importance of Gwadar is beyond the region as it is becoming one of the largest economic hubs of Pakistan in the near future (Asif, 2018).

Similarly, Chabahar's development has geopolitical implications, particularly in the context of Iran's relations with the United States and its regional rivals. While India has sought to leverage Chabahar to enhance its connectivity with Afghanistan and Central Asia, the reimposition of US sanctions on Iran has complicated these efforts and raised questions about the sustainability of India's engagement with the port. Despite this fact, the port of Chabahar is extremely important due to its strategic location.

Infrastructure Development

Infrastructure development is critical for the success of Gwadar and Chabahar ports as key hubs in regional trade networks. Both Pakistan and Iran have launched initiatives to upgrade port facilities and improve connectivity to hinterland regions. However, progress has needed to be faster due to funding constraints, bureaucratic hurdles, and geopolitical challenges.

In Pakistan, the development of Gwadar has been closely linked to the implementation of CPEC projects, which have faced delays due to political instability in Pakistan (Ul Hassan, 2020). Meanwhile, in Iran, the reimposition of US sanctions has disrupted plans for modernizing Chabahar port and connecting it to inland transportation networks.

Policy Implications

The politico-economic effects of Gwadar and Chabahar ports on Pak-Iran relations have significant policy implications for both countries and their regional partners. Pakistan and Iran must balance their economic interests with geopolitical considerations, navigating complex alliances and rivalries in the region.

Pakistan's cooperation with China through CPEC has brought economic benefits but also raised concerns, and it opened a window of opportunity for India to be involved in the construction and modernization of Chabahar port. Iran's engagement with India through Chabahar offers opportunities for economic diversification (Solhdoost, 2021) but also exposes it to risks associated with US sanctions and regional power struggles.

Overall, the analysis highlights the intertwined nature of economic, political, and security considerations in shaping the relationship between Pakistan and Iran in the context of port

development. Future research should continue to monitor developments at Gwadar and Chabahar ports and their implications for regional dynamics, with a focus on infrastructure investment, trade patterns, and geopolitical alignments. Effective policy responses will require a holistic approach that balances economic imperatives with strategic interests and regional stability.

Impact of Iran's railway from Central Asia to Chabahar via Afghanistan

Iran's ambitious railway project connecting Central Asia to the Chabahar port in Iran through Afghanistan carries significant implications for regional geopolitics, economics, and connectivity. This note delves into the potential impact of this infrastructure initiative on the broader region.

Enhanced Regional Connectivity

The railway's construction will bolster connectivity between landlocked Central Asian countries (such as Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan) and international maritime trade routes through the Chabahar port. The improved connectivity can facilitate the flow of goods, energy resources, and people, fostering economic integration and development across the region.

Economic Opportunities

The railway project opens up new avenues for trade and economic cooperation, benefiting participating countries by reducing transportation costs, transit times, and logistical hurdles. Access to the Chabahar port provides landlocked Central Asian nations with alternative routes for exporting their goods, reducing their dependence on traditional trade corridors.

Geopolitical Implications

Iran's railway initiative strengthens its geopolitical position by expanding its influence in Central Asia and Afghanistan, potentially challenging the dominance of other regional players. The project may also alter existing geopolitical alignments, prompting strategic responses from neighboring countries and influencing their foreign policies and alliances.

Potential for Regional Stability

Enhanced connectivity and economic cooperation facilitated by the railway can contribute to stability and peace-building efforts in conflict-prone regions such as Afghanistan. Economic development spurred by improved transportation infrastructure can address socio-economic grievances and mitigate sources of instability.

Competition and Collaboration

The project introduces competition with existing transportation corridors and ports in the region, necessitating adjustments in regional trade dynamics. However, there are also opportunities for collaboration among regional actors to optimize the use of transportation networks, promote joint infrastructure development, and expand trade opportunities.

Thus, Iran's railway project from Central Asia to Chabahar via Afghanistan has far-reaching implications for the region, including enhanced connectivity, economic opportunities, geopolitical shifts, and potential contributions to regional stability. While it may introduce competition, it also presents avenues for collaboration and mutual benefit. Effective management of these dynamics will be crucial for maximizing the positive impacts and addressing any challenges that arise from this transformative infrastructure initiative.

Challenges to Gwadar and Chabahar Ports

Sino-Indian political and geographic hostility, together with Sino-US economic divisions, The US-Indian cooperation in the Indian Ocean as a means of deterring the Pak-Sino strategic cooperation (Hussain & Abdyrahmanova, 2023). The Indo-US naval alliance would create disturbance for the entire region whose impacts would be felt worldwide. Moreover, the Pak-Sino closeness in Gwadar port would further jeopardize regional politics as India and the US think that China's access to the Indian Ocean through Gwadar port will have an impact on the global market, where China is expected to gain market share. Furthermore, there has been concern that China's access to the Indian Ocean could serve as a conduit for the spread of its communist ideology across the globe. Furthermore, the US and India think that China's presence in the Indian Ocean will negatively impact their economic and naval cooperation. India and the US have been responding to the CPEC project in different ways, sensing the threat posed by China's economy's rapid expansion (Rehman et al., 2022).

It is generally believed that in order to shift Iran on a similar page, it was India which convinced the US to conclude the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran so that Iran would get relief from economic sanctions. Such behaviour of India fortified not only Indo-Iran relations but also strengthened the Indo-US-Iranian alliance in the Indian Ocean which has been designed to deter CPEC. On the other hand, it would be extremely tough for Pakistan to balance its relations with China and the US. No doubt, China is a time-tested friend of Pakistan and the most appropriate country for Pakistan to help for the growth of Pakistan's economy; however, historically, Pakistan has been a strong aid recipient of the US.

On the other hand, Iran also finds it extremely tough to operate Chabahar port successfully without regional cooperation. India has undoubtedly been supporting Chabahar port with financial means; however, Indo-Iran cooperation in Chabahar port would mainly depend upon the Afghan and Pakistani factors. Moreover, the Taliban factor would give the Indo-Iranian Alliance a tough time in Afghanistan since Afghanistan is the only means of communication between India and Iran.

Recommendations

In order to secure their cordial relations and maintain their economic ties, Pakistan and Iran have to understand the politics around the Indian Ocean since the strategic location of the Gwadar and Chabahar ports have unique roles in world politics. Both ports are located at the entering point of the Strait of Hormuz, which connects the Persian Gulf with the Arabian Sea. Moreover, the said region controls two-thirds oil reserves of the world (Gul et al., 2020). In addition, the very region also enjoys the daily passage of 21 billion barrels of oil per day (Sayin & Kiliç, 2020).

Address Infrastructure Deficiencies: Both Pakistan and Iran must prioritize infrastructure development at Gwadar and Chabahar ports to enhance their competitiveness and attractiveness to investors. This includes investments in port facilities, transportation networks, and supporting infrastructure such as roads and railways. International assistance and collaboration with private sector stakeholders could help overcome funding constraints and expedite the modernization process.

Enhance Security Measures: Ensuring the security of Gwadar and Chabahar ports is essential to instill confidence among investors and facilitate smooth operations. Pakistan and Iran should collaborate on maritime security initiatives, including joint patrols, intelligence sharing, and capacity-building measures. Additionally, efforts should be made to address concerns related to piracy, smuggling, and terrorist threats in the vicinity of the ports.

Promote Regional Cooperation: Cooperation among regional stakeholders is crucial for maximizing the potential of Gwadar and Chabahar ports as hubs for trade and connectivity. Pakistan, Iran, and other neighbouring countries should explore avenues for enhancing regional integration through initiatives such as the Quadrilateral Agreement between Afghanistan, Iran, India, and Uzbekistan (QAIU) and the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). This could involve harmonizing trade regulations, improving customs procedures, and developing joint infrastructure projects.

Diversify Economic Partnerships: Both Pakistan and Iran should seek to diversify their economic partnerships beyond traditional allies and explore opportunities for collaboration with emerging economies and non-traditional trading partners. This could involve engaging with countries in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America to tap into new markets and investment opportunities. Additionally, efforts should be made to leverage multilateral platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to enhance connectivity and economic cooperation.

By implementing these critical recommendations, Pakistan and Iran can harness the full potential of Gwadar and Chabahar ports to foster economic development, enhance regional connectivity, and promote peace and stability in the broader geopolitical context. Effective collaboration and proactive engagement with regional and international partners will be essential to overcome challenges and capitalize on the opportunities presented by port development initiatives.

Conclusion

The Gwadar and Chabahar, which are located at a distance of 72 km from one another, are extremely important ports for the entire region since they connect the Indian Ocean with the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, where most of the world trade is carried out. Moreover, these ports provide a gateway to the countries of Central Asia, China and Afghanistan to access the Indian Ocean. Therefore, they are termed be Golden Gate and Golden Bird of South Asia. Owing to their geostrategic importance, both ports can earn billions of dollars, create job and investment opportunities, boost the respective national economies and, most importantly, act as surveillance for Iran and Pakistan for their national security concerns. Therefore, both ports need to avoid any political rivalry and economic competition in order to skip from the dirty intentions of regional and international opponents of the Pak-Iran nexus.

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