

Gwadar's strategic importance

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IT is not the commercial importance of Gwadar harbour and the veritable economic bonanza associated with its construction on the confluence of Central Asia, South Asia and West Asia alone, but also its location in a region of immense geopolitical importance that has attracted China to invest in it in a big way.

Gwadar is strategically located on the western end of Balochistan coast, on the opposite end of the Gulf of Oman and the Straits of Hormuz, which is an important route for oil tankers bound for Japan and western countries out of Gulf. It is 460km away from Karachi in the east and 120km away from Iranian border in the west.

When the deep-sea port becomes functional, various plans for important cross-national oil pipelines passing through the province would further enhance the region's strategic value. Chinese financial assistance and technical expertise would

be instrumental throughout the course of development of Gwadar port. The \$10 million package for this port is the largest ever offered by any country by far.

Gwadar port is important for China in both economic and security point of view. It will be linking western province Xinjiang with Pakistan. It is expected to become a gateway port for Central Asia and Xinjiang.

The United States considers Chinese presence in Gwadar a threat to its fleet in the Gulf and also to the crucially important chokepoint for the strategic oil trade to the Far East and Europe. Besides, the US military bases in the Gulf expect an interception threat to their communications by the Chinese from Gwadar. It is worth mentioning here that the US has often viewed the growth of Sino-Pakistan strategic ties with suspicion.

America and China have been, in a sense, in a state of cold war since the collapse of the former Soviet Union. After the Sino-Soviet strategic consensus, the US has been unhappy over the rapidly growing power and influence of China in Asia.

America's strategic advance into Afghanistan and then Iraq and stationing of US troops in Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Iraq, it is believed, are also aimed at containing China in Central Asia and the Gulf.

Conventional thinking about a possible confrontation between the US and China assumes that the geography of conflict will be off China's coast. In his book, "The New Great Game-Blood & Oil in Central Asia", the veteran war correspondent Lutz Kleveman makes an intriguing argument

that the primary challenge to US power in the region will in fact come from China's hinterland province of Xinjiang over the resources of the energy-rich Caspian Sea and the surrounding Central Asian republics.

Kleveman contends that the "New Great Game" players are Russia, the United States, China, Iran, India and Pakistan. The prize this time is control of the oil and gas reserves and the pipelines that will transport the product to the market. The various endpoints for these pipelines include Turkey, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, and China. The vital sea-lanes, particularly for shipping oil from the region to the outside world, pass by Gwadar. In fact, it would be the terminus of gas pipelines reaching from Daulatabad's fields in Turkmenistan or Pars fields in Iran.

Internally, China perceives a security threat from the separatist tendencies witnessed among dominant Uighur Muslim population in Xinjiang. Beijing is in fact working on a strategy, as part of its appeasement

Gwadar is strategically located on the western end of Balochistan coast, on the opposite end of the Gulf of Oman and the Straits of Hormuz and on the mouth of the Gulf. It lies just 624 nautical kms to the east of Straits of Hormuz, which is an important route for oil tankers bound for Japan and western countries out of the Gulf. When the deep-sea port becomes functional, various plans for important cross-national oil pipelines passing through the province would further enhance the region's strategic value. Chinese financial assistance and technical expertise would be instrumental throughout the course of development of the port.

policy toward Xinjiang, to open up and put the troubled region on a fast track development in order to bring to an end current frustration and a sense of deprivation and alienation among Uighur Muslims.

The Xinjiang autonomous region, a Muslim majority province, is located in the northwest of the country, covering an area of 1.6 million square kilometers, and having a population of 18.46 million. It is one of the least developed regions in western China. At present, the Chinese authorities are taking various measures to suppress and control the extremist elements in Xinjiang to speed up the development process. In the crackdowns launched during the past ten years, the security agencies have detained a large number of people for planning and engineering terrorist acts and subversive activities in the region.

China launched its new economic plan aimed at rapid development of its western province in 2002 consisting of 50 new projects. The plan also included a package of incentives for foreign investors. China will reportedly spend \$90 billion for speedy development of its western regions in next 10 to 15 years.

About \$200 billion had already been loaned to western regions including

Xinjiang for infrastructure development.

China recently signed a contract with neighbouring Tajikistan to open the first cross-border bus service. It will make Tajikistan the fifth country to have cross-border exit and entry transport with the autonomous region, together with Pakistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The operation of the bus line will go a long way in linking Xinjiang and other parts of China with Central Asian countries.

The southern tip of Xinjiang is far away (4,500 kms) to the eastern coast of China whereas it is only 2,500 kms from Gwadar port in Balochistan. From another point of view, the development of Gwadar seaport simultaneously reflects the China's policy of appeasement toward Xinjiang's masses and that of containment against the separatists in that region.

Proximity of Xinjiang to Gwadar also makes it feasible and cost-effective for China to carry out trade through this port which is close to the Gulf, Central Asia,

Europe and Africa.

China wants to convert its western region into a hub of economic and commercial activities.

China's eastern seaboard ports are 3,500 kilometers away from Kashgar, western China's main city, whereas the distance from Kashgar to the Pakistani coastal town of Gwadar on Balochistan coast is only 1,500 kilometers. Given this fact, there is an obvious huge cost advantage for China to use

Gwadar as the gateway port for its western region.

China is likely to finance a highway-link from Gwadar to the central Balochistan town of Khuzdar, on the RCD Highway connecting Karachi and Quetta.

Similarly, the upgrading of the existing road-link connecting Quetta to the Indus Highway via Loralai and Dera Ghazi Khan is under consideration of Islamabad and Beijing.

Under a memorandum of understanding (MOU) signed by the two countries, China will build a 90-kilometre highway-link connecting the Chinese side of the Karakoram Highway to the Russian-built highway network that already connects all the five Central Asian Republics (CARs). This regional highway network will directly be linking Gwadar to Xinjiang and the landlocked CARs.

Since outflow of goods from western China and Central Asia reaching Gwadar will pass through this overland trade route, Pakistan could earn millions of dollars a year in terms of port and cargo-handling charges and also as freight charges for import cargoes and export goods of the CARs and western China to/from Gwadar for shipment to world markets. ■