

Journal of Social Sciences Research & Policy (JSSRP)**CPEC and the Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean: China's Maritime Strategy through Gwadar****Mr. Murad Ali**

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Abstract: While existing scholarship on the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has often highlighted its economic and developmental dimensions, comparatively less emphasis has been placed on its maritime and geostrategic implications, particularly the evolving role of Gwadar Port. To address this gap, a qualitative, theory-driven comparative case study design was adopted, relying on secondary data drawn from policy documents, naval reports, trade statistics, and peer-reviewed literature published between 2018 and 2024. Classical geopolitical theories—Mahan's sea power, Mackinder's Heartland, and Spykman's Rimland—were integrated with contemporary frameworks such as the String of Pearls and the Maritime Silk Road, allowing Gwadar's dual function as both an economic hub and a strategic asset to be systematically assessed. The findings indicate that Gwadar has enhanced China's access to Middle Eastern energy, reduced reliance on the Strait of Malacca, and extended the operational reach of the People's Liberation Army Navy, thereby altering the balance of power in the Indian Ocean. At the regional level, Gwadar has been shown to intensify Sino–Indian rivalry, heighten U.S. anxieties over freedom of navigation, encourage Gulf States to adopt hedging strategies, and provide Pakistan with both an economic lifeline and strategic leverage. Conceptually, the study contributes to international relations and maritime studies by demonstrating how infrastructure projects blur conventional boundaries between geo-economics and geo-strategy, offering a framework through which China's maritime rise and the emerging multipolarity of the Indian Ocean may be understood. In practical terms, it is recommended that Pakistan establish joint maritime security initiatives with Gulf States, that China emphasize Gwadar's civilian orientation to ease regional concerns, and that major powers pursue cooperative maritime frameworks in order to prevent further militarization of the region.

Introduction

The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is widely regarded as one of the most ambitious projects within China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), involving planned investments of more than US\$60 billion in infrastructure, energy, and ports (Small, 2015; Wolf, 2019). While CPEC has often been described as a

potential “game changer” for Pakistan’s economy, its implications have also been understood to extend far beyond development. At the core of the project stands Gwadar Port, a deep-sea facility located on Pakistan’s Balochistan coast, frequently referred to as the “linchpin” of CPEC. Owing to its position, Gwadar provides China with direct access to the Arabian Sea and the wider Indian Ocean (Zhao & Munadi, 2023), thereby transforming the project from a bilateral economic corridor into an integral component of Beijing’s maritime vision.

The Indian Ocean is recognized as a central arena of global geopolitics, carrying nearly 80% of the world’s seaborne oil trade while linking the energy-rich Middle East with East Asian and European markets (Cordner, 2011). Competition among regional and global powers has been intensified by the control exercised over chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca—routes upon which China’s energy imports remain heavily dependent (Lanteigne, 2008). Beijing’s vulnerability, commonly known as the “Malacca Dilemma” (Kaplan, 2010), has been widely emphasized, and Gwadar is seen as a possible solution, offering both an overland route to the Arabian Sea and a strategic foothold in the Indian Ocean.

The rapid modernization of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has further elevated Gwadar’s strategic value. What began as a coastal defense force has been transformed into the world’s largest naval fleet with blue-water capabilities (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2008; Zhao & Munadi, 2023). Increasingly, the PLAN is being deployed in the Indian Ocean, a region traditionally dominated by the United States and India. Although scholarly debate has largely concentrated on China’s activities in the South and East China Seas, less attention has been devoted to its western maritime frontier. Nevertheless, China’s involvement in counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, the establishment of a military base in Djibouti, and continued investment in Gwadar are widely interpreted as evidence of a deliberate shift toward extending its maritime reach (Kondapalli, 2018).

Despite an expanding body of research on CPEC, much of the existing literature remains fragmented. Most studies have been directed toward its economic, developmental, or political implications for Pakistan (Wolf, 2019; Ali, 2020), while comparatively fewer have explored the dual economic–maritime significance of Gwadar. This gap is notable in light of growing regional rivalry: Gwadar has been portrayed by India as part of China’s strategy to encircle its maritime domain, whereas the United States views it as a challenge to the Indo-Pacific security architecture (Pant, 2012). What has not been sufficiently examined is how Gwadar operates simultaneously as an economic enabler and a strategic lever, linking classical geopolitical theory to contemporary maritime competition.

This study seeks to address these shortcomings by offering both theoretical and empirical contributions. Theoretically, it bridges classical frameworks—such as Mahan’s concept of sea power and Spykman’s Rimland thesis—with modern perspectives including the “String of Pearls” and the Maritime Silk Road. Empirically, it highlights the policy implications of Gwadar for Pakistan, China, and other regional stakeholders. By situating Gwadar at the intersection of geo-economics and geo-strategy, the study underscores its role as a pivotal element within the evolving power dynamics of the Indian Ocean.

Literature Review

Theoretical Lenses

The study of Gwadar and CPEC in the context of Indian Ocean geopolitics has been informed by both classical and modern theoretical perspectives. Alfred Thayer Mahan’s (1890/1987) seminal thesis on sea power argued that control of maritime routes and strategic ports underpinned national power, with emphasis placed on naval strength, secure bases, and maritime commerce. His maxim that “whoever

controls the sea controls global trade and influence” has been widely cited and has often been linked to China’s maritime outreach through Gwadar (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2008; Yoshihara, 2021).

Mahan’s insights have been complemented by Halford Mackinder’s (1904) Heartland theory and Nicholas Spykman’s (1942) Rimland thesis, which together produced a continental–maritime synthesis of global power. While Mackinder stressed the pivotal role of the Eurasian Heartland, Spykman highlighted the rimlands as decisive in shaping international politics. In this light, Gwadar has been described as an embodiment of rimland logic, located at the intersection of continental connectivity (through CPEC) and maritime access to the Indian Ocean. Contemporary studies argue that China’s pursuit of CPEC should be understood precisely as an effort to merge land and sea strategies, reinforcing its long-term posture in the region (Kaplan, 2021; Zhao & Munadi, 2023).

Modern debates have also reframed these classical concepts. The “String of Pearls” hypothesis, which identifies Chinese-funded ports across the Indian Ocean, has been reevaluated within the broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Projects like Gwadar are officially classified as commercial, yet they are frequently perceived to contain dual-use features with latent naval applications (Brewster, 2014; Sullivan, 2020; Pant & Mohan, 2022). The BRI has been presented by Chinese officials as a vehicle for connectivity and “win–win cooperation,” though analysts have consistently noted the blurred line between geo-economics and geo-strategy (Pantucci & Lain, 2016; Rolland, 2021). Accordingly, Gwadar can be framed not only as an economic gateway but also as a strategic anchor in China’s evolving maritime architecture.

CPEC as an Economic Corridor

CPEC has been labeled the flagship of the BRI, with an estimated value of over US\$60 billion and encompassing projects in energy, transportation, and industry (Wolf, 2019). It is projected to ease Pakistan’s structural constraints in energy supply, connectivity, and industrialization (Ali, 2020; Haider, 2022). For China, however, the corridor is also seen as a lifeline: by connecting Xinjiang directly to the Arabian Sea, logistics costs are reduced and strategic ties with Pakistan are deepened (Small, 2015; Zhao & Munadi, 2023).

Nonetheless, CPEC has not been treated solely as an economic endeavor. It has been framed in recent scholarship as part of China’s broader geo-economic diplomacy, in which infrastructure lending and connectivity projects serve to integrate markets while also reshaping geopolitical alignments (Summers, 2016; Ghiasy & Zhou, 2022). In this dual sense, Gwadar is both a commercial entry point and a strategic fulcrum of China’s outreach.

Critiques of CPEC, however, have intensified. The so-called “debt-trap diplomacy” debate has raised concerns that Chinese financing may entrench dependency among developing countries (Kratz et al., 2019; Jones & Hameiri, 2021). While some recent works (Johnston, 2023; Hurley & Rosen, 2022) argue that evidence of intentional entrapment remains weak, issues of debt sustainability and governance continue to be flagged in Pakistan. Additionally, the insurgency in Balochistan has repeatedly been cited as a barrier to Gwadar’s economic potential (Wolf, 2019; Shah & Yilmaz, 2022). Hence, CPEC has been presented in the literature as both a driver of development and a source of heightened vulnerability.

China’s Maritime Ambitions in the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific has increasingly been recognized as the focal arena of global strategic rivalry, and China’s maritime ambitions are reflected in its actions there (Medcalf, 2020; Pant & Mohan, 2022). Sea lanes such as the Strait of Malacca—through which nearly 80% of China’s oil imports pass—have been described as critical yet vulnerable chokepoints (Lanteigne, 2008; Kaplan, 2021). To mitigate this

“Malacca Dilemma,” alternative access points, including Gwadar, have been prioritized by Beijing (Garver, 2016; Zhao & Munadi, 2023).

The transformation of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has underscored this ambition. Once characterized as a coastal defense force, the PLAN has since been developed into the world’s largest navy with sustained blue-water capability (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2008; Yoshihara, 2021). CPEC is regarded by some scholars as facilitating these capacities by offering logistical support for PLAN operations in the Indian Ocean. While official Chinese narratives emphasize peaceful development and shared prosperity, academic critiques stress the possibility that ostensibly commercial ports such as Gwadar could evolve into naval resupply stations, thereby blurring the civilian–military divide (Brewster, 2014; Sullivan, 2020; Johnston, 2023).

Gwadar vs Chabahar

The Gwadar–Chabahar comparison has often been presented as a microcosm of India–China competition in the Indian Ocean. Gwadar, financed by China, provides Beijing direct Arabian Sea access, whereas Chabahar, supported by India, offers New Delhi alternative routes to Afghanistan and Central Asia (Pant, 2012; Brewster, 2018; Mohan, 2023).

Comparative studies have depicted both ports as more than commercial hubs, positioning them as strategic signifiers of influence (Ulrichsen, 2020; Shah & Yilmaz, 2022). Gwadar’s proximity to the Strait of Hormuz provides leverage, though insecurity in Balochistan has been cited as a persistent obstacle (Wolf, 2019; Zhao & Munadi, 2023). Chabahar, by contrast, has benefited from broader international support, though U.S. sanctions on Iran have slowed progress (Brewster, 2018; Pant & Mohan, 2022). This rivalry reflects the broader zero-sum logics of Indo-Pacific geopolitics, where connectivity projects are often seen less as cooperation and more as strategic competition.

Regional Responses

Regional responses to Gwadar have been shaped by strategic anxieties. India has consistently rejected CPEC’s passage through Gilgit-Baltistan as a sovereignty violation, interpreting Gwadar as a tool of Chinese maritime encirclement (Pant, 2012; Mohan, 2023). Efforts to strengthen its navy, deepen ties with the United States, and expand cooperation within the Quad framework (with Japan and Australia) have been pursued as countermeasures (Medcalf, 2020; Pant & Mohan, 2022).

The United States has also framed Gwadar within its Indo-Pacific strategy. Analysts have warned that the port, though officially commercial, could be converted into a PLAN logistics hub, challenging U.S. naval dominance and freedom of navigation (Kaplan, 2021; Rolland, 2021). As a result, Washington has sought to expand naval cooperation with allies and to promote alternatives such as the Build Back Better World (B3W) and the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) (White House, 2022).

The Gulf States have generally taken a more pragmatic position. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been reported to invest in Gwadar’s free zone and refinery projects as part of their diversification agendas while continuing to rely heavily on U.S. security guarantees (Ulrichsen, 2020; Al-Tamimi, 2023). Their approach is frequently interpreted as hedging: reaping economic benefits from Chinese projects without undermining their defense ties to Washington.

Research Gap

Although an expanding literature has examined CPEC’s economic and political aspects, less attention has been paid to Gwadar’s dual role as an economic and maritime strategic asset. Much of the existing scholarship has been confined to discussions of development challenges, debt dependency, or sovereignty disputes, without systematically linking classical geopolitical theories (Mahan, Mackinder,

Spykman) with contemporary Indo-Pacific frameworks (String of Pearls, BRI, Quad, PGII). Moreover, empirical investigation into Gwadar's operational capacity—its role in naval logistics, energy security, and strategic alignments—remains underdeveloped.

This study responds to these gaps by situating Gwadar at the intersection of geo-economics and geo-strategy, assessing implications not only for Pakistan and China but also for India, the United States, and the Gulf States. By bridging theoretical traditions with contemporary policy debates, the research advances a more integrated understanding of how infrastructure projects reshape maritime geopolitics in the 21st century.

Conceptual Framework

This study conceptualizes the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Gwadar Port as strategic assets rather than mere infrastructural undertakings, positioned at the intersection of geo-economics and geo-strategy. Both classical geopolitical theories and contemporary debates inform this framework. Mahan's (1890/1987) sea power thesis emphasized that naval strength, overseas bases, and control of maritime routes were prerequisites for global influence. Gwadar, situated near the Strait of Hormuz, has been presented as a modern embodiment of these principles, offering China both commercial leverage and potential operational reach for the PLAN (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2008; Yoshihara, 2021). Similarly, Mackinder's Heartland theory and Spykman's Rimland thesis highlight how continental and maritime power is interlinked. Gwadar's position—at the nexus of inland connectivity (via CPEC) and maritime access to the Indian Ocean—has often been interpreted as a synthesis of these classical ideas.

Contemporary frameworks reinforce these insights. The "String of Pearls" hypothesis highlights China's network of Indian Ocean ports, many with potential dual-use applications (Brewster, 2014; Pant & Mohan, 2022). Gwadar is frequently described as one of the most significant of these, due to its proximity to Middle Eastern energy routes and its capacity to reduce reliance on the Strait of Malacca (Lanteigne, 2008; Zhao & Munadi, 2023). Meanwhile, the BRI emphasizes cooperation and development, yet has been widely analyzed as serving underlying strategic aims (Rolland, 2021).

Taken together, this framework positions Gwadar as a strategic hub where economic connectivity (via CPEC) converges with maritime power projection (via Mahan and Spykman), eliciting distinct regional responses—strategic alignment (Pakistan, Gulf States), rivalry (India), and containment (United States).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, theory-driven comparative case study design to analyze Gwadar's evolving role within Indian Ocean geopolitics. The design is guided by classical strategic frameworks (Mahan's sea power, Mackinder's Heartland, Spykman's Rimland) and enriched by contemporary concepts such as the String of Pearls, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and Indo-Pacific strategic alignments. This approach is well-suited for examining the multi-dimensional character of Gwadar, which simultaneously embodies geo-economic potential, maritime strategy, and regional power competition. By situating Gwadar alongside comparable port projects—including Chabahar in Iran, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Djibouti in East Africa—the study ensures analytical depth and breadth, enabling the identification of patterns and divergences across cases.

The analysis is grounded in secondary data, drawing from policy documents (e.g., China's BRI white papers, U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy reports, Indian foreign policy statements), naval and defense reports (such as U.S. Department of Defense assessments of PLAN modernization), statistical datasets (UNCTAD trade flows, Pakistan Ports Authority, Indian Ministry of Shipping), as well as peer-reviewed scholarship published between 2018 and 2024. These diverse sources are synthesized through thematic analysis, in which classical theories provide structural categories while contemporary debates guide the

interpretation of Gwadar's economic, strategic, and political functions. Comparative case analysis further benchmarks Gwadar's port capacity, throughput, and dual-use potential against regional competitors, while mapping regional responses (alignment, rivalry, or hedging) captures how states such as Pakistan, India, the United States, and Gulf monarchies reposition within shifting maritime dynamics. This multi-layered approach, combining theoretical rigor with empirical grounding, is particularly valid for strategic analysis because it balances descriptive evidence with explanatory frameworks, generating insights that are not only academically relevant but also policy-oriented in addressing the strategic implications of Gwadar and the broader CPEC corridor.

Analysis

Gwadar Port's Strategic Potential

Gwadar Port has increasingly been framed not only as an economic hub but also as a pivotal geopolitical node in the Indian Ocean. With the capacity to accommodate ultra-large crude carriers (ULCCs) of up to 200,000 DWT, the port is positioned as a future competitor to regional facilities such as Chabahar (Iran), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), and Djibouti (East Africa). In 2022, approximately 4 million tons of cargo was handled at Gwadar—a figure still modest compared to Chabahar's 8.5 million and Djibouti's 12 million tons, yet long-term projections indicate a capacity exceeding 300–400 million tons annually, rivaling Dubai's Jebel Ali (Pakistan Ports Authority, 2023).

Its location, just 72 kilometers from the Strait of Hormuz—a chokepoint through which nearly 20% of global oil passes—has been described as a unique strategic advantage (Garver, 2016). Through the CPEC corridor, Beijing is provided with a direct overland connection into Xinjiang, thereby reducing dependence on the Strait of Malacca, which currently carries about 80% of China's imported crude oil (Kaplan, 2021). By offering this alternative, Gwadar directly addresses what has long been termed China's "Malacca Dilemma."

The design of Gwadar's infrastructure reflects potential for both commercial and military application. Deep berthing facilities (up to 20 meters), free-trade zones, and expanded storage capacity make it commercially attractive, but the same features can be interpreted as suitable for naval logistics. Analysts have suggested that the port could host replenishment and refueling operations for the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), enabling power projection into the Arabian Sea and western Indian Ocean (Kondapalli, 2018). Consequently, Gwadar has been increasingly viewed in Washington and New Delhi not merely as a commercial undertaking but as a latent naval outpost.

China's Indian Ocean Strategy

China's approach to the Indian Ocean has combined infrastructure development, economic integration, and naval modernization. The PLAN has been transformed from a coastal defense force into the world's largest navy, fielding more than 370 warships in 2023 compared to the U.S. Navy's 292 (U.S. DoD, 2023). Since 2008, PLAN task forces have been deployed to the Gulf of Aden for anti-piracy operations, signaling Beijing's capacity for sustained blue-water presence. Gwadar is expected to enhance these deployments by offering logistical support and potential forward-basing options near vital chokepoints. This expansion is often contextualized within the so-called "String of Pearls" strategy, which encompasses Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Kyaukpyu (Myanmar), and Djibouti. Each facility has been interpreted as capable of fulfilling both commercial and military roles (Brewster, 2014; Rolland, 2021). Djibouti already hosts China's first overseas military base, where PLAN amphibious and carrier deployments were recorded during 2021–2022 (Erickson, 2022). Gwadar, as the westernmost "pearl," is widely regarded as extending China's maritime presence deeper into the Indian Ocean.

The Maritime Silk Road—presented as a cooperative sub-initiative of the BRI—further integrates Gwadar into a broader network spanning Asia, Africa, and Europe (Pantucci & Lain, 2016). While Beijing emphasizes “win-win” connectivity, critics argue that such projects ultimately reinforce China’s leverage in maritime governance, logistics, and security (Pant & Mohan, 2022). As a result, Gwadar is best conceptualized not only as a commercial gateway but also as a strategic multiplier within China’s wider order-building in the Indo-Pacific.

Comparative Analysis of Ports

Table 1. To contextualize Gwadar’s strategic weight, a comparative analysis is presented below:

Port	Country	Depth (m)	Cargo Throughput (2022, million tons)	Strategic Role	Chinese Involvement
Gwadar	Pakistan	18–20	~4	CPEC hub, potential PLAN logistics base	High (China Overseas Ports Holding)
Chabahar	Iran	16	~8.5	India-backed, access to Afghanistan/Central Asia	None (Indian-financed)
Hambantota	Sri Lanka	17	~12	Indian Ocean shipping hub, dual-use potential	High (99-year Chinese lease)
Djibouti	Djibouti	18–20	~12	PLAN overseas military base, Gulf of Aden access	High (operational base)

(Sources: Pakistan Ports Authority, 2023; Indian Ministry of Shipping, 2022; SIPRI, 2023)

Regional Implications

India

Gwadar has been perceived in India as a component of Beijing’s broader strategy of maritime encirclement under the “String of Pearls.” Its proximity to the Strait of Hormuz has been regarded as a direct challenge to India’s energy security. In response, more than US\$500 million has been invested by New Delhi in the development of Iran’s Chabahar Port, explicitly framed as a counterbalance to Gwadar (Brewster, 2018). India’s navy—already the fifth largest in the world with around 150 major vessels—has also increased deployments in the Arabian Sea and has participated in Quad naval exercises alongside the U.S., Japan, and Australia (Medcalf, 2020). Thus, Gwadar has actively contributed to the securitization of India’s maritime strategy.

United States

From Washington’s perspective, Gwadar is situated within the Indo-Pacific Strategy, with emphasis placed on ensuring freedom of navigation and deterring Chinese naval expansion (Rolland, 2021). The U.S. Navy continues to maintain global dominance through its 11 aircraft carriers, with the Fifth Fleet—headquartered in Bahrain—tasked with securing Hormuz. Analysts have warned that if Gwadar were to be operationalized as a PLAN logistics hub, U.S. naval dominance in the Arabian Sea could be significantly challenged. Consequently, security cooperation with India, Japan, and Australia has been deepened by Washington, while alternative counter-BRI initiatives such as the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) have also been supported (White House, 2022).

Gulf States

Saudi Arabia and the UAE tend to view Gwadar less through the lens of security competition and more as an avenue for economic diversification. Riyadh has pledged US\$10 billion in refinery investments in Gwadar (Ulrichsen, 2020), while the UAE has actively sought to integrate the port into its regional trade

strategies. Nevertheless, reliance on U.S. military protection continues to be maintained, even as both Gulf States expand economic ties with China. This dual approach has been described as a hedging strategy, reflecting their balancing act in the midst of intensifying Sino–U.S. competition.

Pakistan

For Pakistan, Gwadar is framed simultaneously as an economic lifeline and a strategic asset. Integration into global value chains, the development of special economic zones, and enhanced energy security are promised benefits (Ali, 2020). Strategically, Gwadar strengthens Islamabad’s partnership with Beijing, serving as a counterweight to India’s dominance in the region. At the same time, persistent insurgency in Balochistan and increasing dependence on Chinese financing have been cited as raising concerns over sovereignty and long-term debt sustainability (Wolf, 2019; Shah & Yilmaz, 2022). Despite these vulnerabilities, Gwadar continues to be portrayed by Islamabad as the flagship of “all-weather” China–Pakistan cooperation.

Synthesis

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that Gwadar has transcended its identity as a mere commercial port. Its advantageous location, combined with Chinese investment and dual-use infrastructure, positions it as a fulcrum of Beijing’s Indian Ocean strategy. Although Gwadar currently trails behind Chabahar, Hambantota, and Djibouti in terms of throughput, its projected expansion and suitability for both civilian and military functions are likely to give it disproportionate strategic weight. Naval modernization within the PLAN, when paired with Gwadar’s facilities, is gradually reshaping the balance of power in the Indian Ocean, provoking competitive responses from India and the United States, cautious economic engagement from the Gulf States, and strategic embrace by Pakistan.

Discussion

The first research question examined whether the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Gwadar should be regarded purely as economic projects or whether they carry broader strategic and military implications. The analysis indicates that Gwadar has been positioned far beyond the role of a commercial port alone. Although Chinese discourse has consistently framed CPEC as an engine of development and regional integration (Pantucci & Lain, 2016), the port’s deep-water berths, logistics facilities, and proximity to chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz have been widely interpreted as aligning with naval infrastructure requirements (Brewster, 2018). This supports the argument of “strategic commercialism” (Sullivan, 2020), under which infrastructure projects are understood to serve dual economic and security functions. Conceptually, such duality reflects Mahan’s (1890/1987) thesis on sea power, where secure ports and overseas bases were emphasized as indispensable for projecting influence. Practically, Gwadar reduces Beijing’s dependence on the Malacca Strait, while simultaneously offering an alternative energy corridor and a logistical node for the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). Thus, the evidence strongly suggests that CPEC should not be viewed as merely economic but rather as embedded within China’s wider maritime grand strategy.

The second research question concerned how Gwadar alters regional power dynamics in the Indian Ocean. Findings indicate that the port is reshaping the geopolitical geometry of the region, shifting it from a U.S.–India-centered system toward a more contested multipolar configuration. Gwadar has been perceived by India as a component of Chinese encirclement, a perception consistent with Spykman’s Rimland thesis (1942), which stressed the importance of controlling littoral zones and chokepoints. Consequently, New Delhi has modernized its navy and expanded cooperation within the Quad (Pant, 2012; Medcalf, 2020). Likewise, Gwadar has been framed by the United States as part of its Indo-Pacific security concerns, particularly regarding the militarization of ostensibly commercial infrastructure and

challenges to freedom of navigation (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2008). In contrast, Gulf States have adopted a hedging strategy, engaging economically with Gwadar while continuing to rely on U.S. security guarantees (Ulrichsen, 2020). For Pakistan, Gwadar continues to be portrayed as both an economic lifeline and a strategic asset, reinforcing its place within a China-centered maritime order. These responses resonate with the “String of Pearls” thesis (Brewster, 2014), which highlights how Chinese port projects operate as strategic footholds in contested maritime zones.

Taken together, the findings make several contributions to ongoing debates in international relations. They demonstrate that connectivity projects such as CPEC blur traditional boundaries between geo-economics and geo-strategy. Gwadar illustrates the fusion of classical geopolitical concepts with contemporary great-power rivalry, as the theories of Mahan and Spykman are reinterpreted in light of China’s Belt and Road Initiative and Indo-Pacific competition. At the systemic level, Gwadar reflects a gradual shift toward multipolarity in the Indian Ocean, where the United States, India, China, and Gulf actors compete for influence. At the theoretical level, the port underscores how physical infrastructures—ports, corridors, and logistics hubs—are increasingly employed as instruments of power projection, thereby complicating the conventional divide between economic development and military expansion. Taken together, Gwadar illustrates how great-power competition is now waged not only through fleets and bases but also through corridors, connectivity, and dual-use infrastructures that redefine the balance of power in maritime Asia.

Conclusion & Policy Recommendations

This study has examined the strategic significance of Gwadar within the framework of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its wider implications for Indian Ocean geopolitics. It has been found that Gwadar should not be regarded merely as a commercial port but as a dual-use strategic asset capable of reshaping regional power dynamics. Owing to its location near the Strait of Hormuz, China is provided with direct access to Middle Eastern energy flows, while the overland CPEC route enables a reduced dependence on the Strait of Malacca. By embedding Gwadar within the “String of Pearls” and Maritime Silk Road frameworks, Beijing has effectively fused economic connectivity with strategic depth. The outcome has been a discernible shift toward a more multipolar Indian Ocean order, one marked by heightened Sino–Indian rivalry, rising U.S. concerns over freedom of navigation, and Gulf States’ efforts to balance Chinese economic opportunities with continued American security guarantees. For Pakistan, Gwadar has been portrayed both as an engine of economic transformation and as a source of geopolitical leverage, though issues of debt dependence, sovereignty, and persistent insecurity in Balochistan remain unresolved.

From a policy perspective, several actionable recommendations emerge. First, Pakistan should establish joint maritime security task forces with Gulf States to address counter-piracy operations, energy route protection, and disaster response, thereby embedding Gwadar within a cooperative regional security framework. Second, greater emphasis must be placed on local economic inclusion: revenues from Gwadar should be directed toward employment generation, educational programs, and infrastructure development in Balochistan, reducing the risks of insurgency. Third, it is recommended that Pakistan and China institute transparent governance mechanisms—such as joint parliamentary oversight of contracts and debt arrangements—to mitigate perceptions of sovereignty erosion. Fourth, China’s long-term interests would be better served if Gwadar’s civilian and commercial character were emphasized, with overt military uses being limited and multilateral dialogues on port transparency being pursued. Finally, India and the United States, while cautious about Gwadar’s dual-use potential, could reduce escalation risks by exploring confidence-building measures, including coordinated anti-piracy exercises

and energy transit agreements, so that the Indian Ocean does not become a purely militarized arena of rivalry.

At the scholarly level, this research contributes to the disciplines of international relations, geopolitics, and maritime studies by showing how classical theories—Mahan’s sea power, Mackinder’s Heartland, and Spykman’s Rimland—retain explanatory power when applied to contemporary infrastructure-driven strategies such as CPEC and the Belt and Road Initiative. By conceptualizing Gwadar as a bridge between geo-economics and geo-strategy, the study highlights how infrastructure can simultaneously operate as a driver of development and as an instrument of naval power projection. This theoretical integration enriches the literature on China’s maritime rise and offers a transferable framework for examining great-power competition in other strategic maritime regions. Taken together, the case of Gwadar demonstrates how ports and connectivity projects are actively reshaping the global order, making them indispensable sites of inquiry for understanding the transition toward multipolarity in the twenty-first century.

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