



India and Iran see Gwadar with disfavour

By Khalid Hasan

WASHINGTON: The under construction Gwadar Port is viewed with disfavour and suspicion by India and Iran, as they see it as a rival to Iran's Chahbahar Port that was built with Indian assistance and was meant to serve as Central Asia's conduit to warm waters.

According to an analytical article published in the current issue of the Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, Pakistani scholar Zia Haider, currently at the Stimson Centre in Washington, calls Gwadar as lying at the "heart of President Pervez Musharraf's

vision of prosperity for Pakistan", as it would transform Pakistan into a vibrant hub of commercial activity among the energy-rich Gulf, Central Asia, Afghanistan and China, as well as provide the Pakistan Navy with strategic depth along its coastline. It will also enable China to diversify its crude oil import routes and extend its presence in the Indian Ocean. China has contributed 80 percent of the funding and supplied 450 workers, apart from technical assistance.

According to Haider, the port fuels bitter discontent among local Baloch nationalists who believe that the benefits of the project will bypass them and who

maintain longstanding grievances against Pakistan's federal government. The port also presents a potentially irresistible target to Al Qaeda as payback for Pakistan's cooperation in the US-led war on terror. While Pakistan and China believe that the port will deliver significant economic and military gains, India, Iran, and the local Baloch view it as a potential threat to their economic interests and security, and Al Qaeda presumably rejects it as Pakistan's steppingstone to becoming a stronger, more prosperous state.

"Realising the Gwadar dream in such an inimical environment will not be easy; however, Islamabad can bolster its position

by adopting a two-pronged strategy," suggests Haider. First, it must recognise that the port's greatest opponent is its own people, the local Baloch, and it must assure them of their stake in a project of critical importance to national security. Failure to build a consensus on the port could result in its violent derailment and possibly preclude future Chinese manpower and technical assistance on development projects due to security concerns. Second, Pakistani officials should leverage the port to attract Chinese investment and to forge a vibrant economic relationship with China that reflects their strong politico-military relationship. For Pakistan to reap the dividends

of the Gwadar Port, the Baloch and Beijing need to be firmly anchored to it.

Two key regional players, Iran and India, Haider writes, see Gwadar as being built in their 'backyard'. India's new naval doctrine, released in 2004, specifically seeks to address its need to secure energy routes and counter the Chinese presence in the Arabian Sea. Indian Navy long-range planning officers have stated that as the depletion of the world oil reserves will bring more regional powers to the Indian Ocean, India needs to bolster its striking power and command-and-control, surveillance, and intelligence capabilities. The doctrine particularly high-

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our, says study

lights China's nuclear missile submarines and its ties with Indian Ocean rim nations, including Pakistan. Iran's response to Gwadar has been to construct its own Chahbahar Port and tacitly compete with Pakistan in capturing access routes and energy-related trade from Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Iran has an advantage as it enjoys closer relations with Central Asian states and Afghanistan than does Pakistan. Kabul is using Chahbahar at reduced rates. However, this "inter-port rivalry" may in fact prove to be beneficial by stimulating even greater trade in the region. "The competition and cooperation over the

Gwadar Port thus demonstrates the increasingly important and fluid linkages between countries in the Middle East and Central, South, and East Asia as economic ties are created," he writes.

According to Haider, "having been largely excluded from the decision-making process surrounding the port, the Baloch worry that the economic gains of the project will be siphoned off to the other provinces; the influx of non-Baloch in the region seeking employment will displace the Baloch and dilute their culture; and the Pakistan Army will continue to consolidate its military presence in the region by opening more cantonments".