

Gwadar's strategic importance

By Talat Masood

EVER since the creation of Pakistan, China has been clearly Pakistan's strongest supporter in the military, economic and diplomatic fields. The relationship has transcended major changes in both governments. The people of Pakistan have demonstrated a sustained pro-China sentiment that has further strengthened the bonds. China has been an invaluable external source of military equipment and technologies to Pakistan, especially during the period when the United States and other countries imposed sanctions on this country.

Over the years a large number of collaborative projects in the field of defence have been completed that include manufacture of tanks, guns, missiles, patrol boats, communication equipments, trainer and fighter aircraft and construction of nuclear power plants. The Karakoram Highway linking the Chinese Xinjiang province is another landmark project between the two countries. Islamabad considers China a strategic partner and the Chinese have characterized their relationship with Pakistan as constructive partnership.

Semantics aside, maintaining a close relationship with an ascending power and close neighbour has always appealed to Pakistan's policy-makers across the political spectrum. On the other hand, China recognizes Pakistan's geo-strategic importance, its eminence among the Muslim coun-

five kilometer approach channel and will take vessels up to 50,000 DWT.

By virtue of its excellent location, Gwadar port is also visualized to become a regional hub serving incoming and outgoing commercial traffic of the Middle Eastern and Gulf countries, the Xinjiang province of China, Iran in the west and Sri Lanka and Bangladesh in the south and east.

Its location at the mouth of the Gulf and at the opposite end of the strategic choke points of Straits of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman enhances its strategic importance. Its development could favourably influence the geostrategic environment of the region and have an overall beneficial impact on Pakistan.

Additionally, the port should facilitate efficient exploitation of the exclusive economic zone of Pakistan, which so far has remained largely unexplored. The area is rich in fisheries and

process and winning the confidence of the local people. It is unfortunate that the government had given a low priority to this important aspect in the past.

Moreover, Islamabad should also ensure that the short-term interests of the land mafia and other vested groups do not damage the genuine interests of the Baloch people.

As of now, most of the infrastructural development is related to coastal roads and linking Gwadar with Karachi. The government should pay equal if not greater attention to developing road and rail links from Gwadar to the hinterland of Balochistan so that the Balochs equally share the benefits of development.

Benefit of the Gwadar port is also directly linked to the stability in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Another prerequisite would be the physical infrastructural development in these countries.

Linking Torkhum-Jalalabad and Chaman-Kandahar roads with modern highways will be in the mutual long-term interests of both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

According to some sources, Beijing also intends to take advantage of Gwadar's accessible international trade routes to Central Asian republics and Xinjiang. The plan envisages extending China's east-west railway from the border city of Kashi to Peshawar. The incoming and outgoing cargo from Gwadar can then be delivered to China through the shortest route from Karachi to Peshawar. The same road and rail network can also be used for the supply of oil from the Gulf to the western provinces of China.

Additionally, China could also gain rail and road access to Iran

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among the Muslim countries and its usefulness as an ally at the international forums. With the two countries enjoying such good relations it is no surprise that they have engaged in the development of the Gwadar port project.

The new port of Gwadar will supplement Karachi port and its Port Qasim extension, which was constructed in the late eighties. Karachi port handles nearly 50 million tonnes of cargo annually and with Pakistan's economy expected to grow at a minimum of six per cent annually, the volume of trade is projected to be around 75 million tonnes in the year 2015. The government has undertaken expansion programmes at both ports to enable them meet the growing demand of trading and commercial activity.

Nonetheless, there is still need for an additional seaport to handle peak season overflow of incoming and outgoing sea cargo and to cater to the transit traffic flowing from Central Asian states and Afghanistan. Equally significant is the defence requirement to repair and rebuild the redundant portion of the communication infrastructure. A single port complex is vulnerable during times of crisis or war.

The Gwadar project came about as a result of a Sino-Pakistan agreement in March 2002, under which China Harbour Construction Corporation will build the port. Beijing has provided \$198 million for the first phase of the project and Islamabad's contribution has been \$ 50 million. The scope of phase-1 includes construction of three multi-purpose berths each 200 meters long and capable of handling vessels up to 30,000 DWT.

As work is progressing satisfactorily, the first phase should be completed by early 2005. Phase two is planned for development by the private sector at an estimated cost of \$600 million and envisages the development of ten more berths and a

if the 600-kilometre long coastal line is fully exploited it could give a big boost to fish and crab exports and promote food-processing industries. Lying in the vicinity of oil-rich Gulf states, Gwadar could also be a potential source of offshore gas and oil exploration.

The existing highways on the Afghan border, connecting the border towns of Chaman and Torkham provide the shortest all-weather road and rail links to Gwadar. These will have to be brought up to international standards if the port's potential of becoming a major economic and commercial centre is to be realized.

Pakistan is already developing the road and highway network connecting Gwadar with its own major cities and ports through the 700-mile Mekran Coastal Highway.

The development of a comprehensive network of roads and other communication infrastructure would call for a lot of investment and would take a few years to complete. Similarly, rail and air services will have to be developed between Gwadar and other important commercial centres in Pakistan.

The development of the Gwadar port should benefit the overall economy of Balochistan and unlock its potential. Regrettably, the people of the area, and more so the tribal leaders, are not enthusiastic about the project and in fact some are actively opposing it. Their fears are that outsiders, whether foreign or domestic, will undertake development work and threaten the identity and livelihood of the local inhabitants.

Tribal leaders, who have monopolized power in this backward province are apprehensive of losing their hold over the people when the project materializes.

This would entail building consensus through a sustained and well-coordinated political

through Pakistan's international road and rail network. Use of Gwadar port by China should accelerate the growth and development of the port and the hinterland and enhance its overall commercial and strategic value.

The Chinese have all along denied that the joint project of Gwadar has any military dimension and have stressed that it is a civilian port, but being a major importer of oil from the Gulf and mostly routed through this sea-lane it has a justifiable interest in having secure and uninterrupted flow of oil.

Occasional goodwill visits by its naval vessels and increased trade and commercial activity with Pakistan are likely to raise China's profile in the Arabian Sea.

As a matter of policy, China has always assisted Pakistan in strengthening its defence capability. Beijing's involvement in the Gwadar sea port is primarily motivated by commercial considerations, but it also perhaps sees the advantages accruing to Pakistan and its own navy for having a friendly port of call close to the Gulf region. Together with this when a reliable network of road and rail links is established, it could benefit both Pakistan and China commercially as well as strategically.

From a defence perspective, Pakistan Navy would find it easier to operate closer to the Gulf. During times of crisis it could move its naval assets farther from any Indian naval and air threat.

In the event of an unfortunate war, the port of Gwadar would provide strategic depth to Pakistan's commercial and military vessels and be in a relatively advantageous position to operate against the Indian Navy.

Gwadar is, however, well within the range of land-air and sea-based Indian missiles.

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