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Gwadar's Strategic Paradox: CPEC and China's Geopolitics of Control by Other Means

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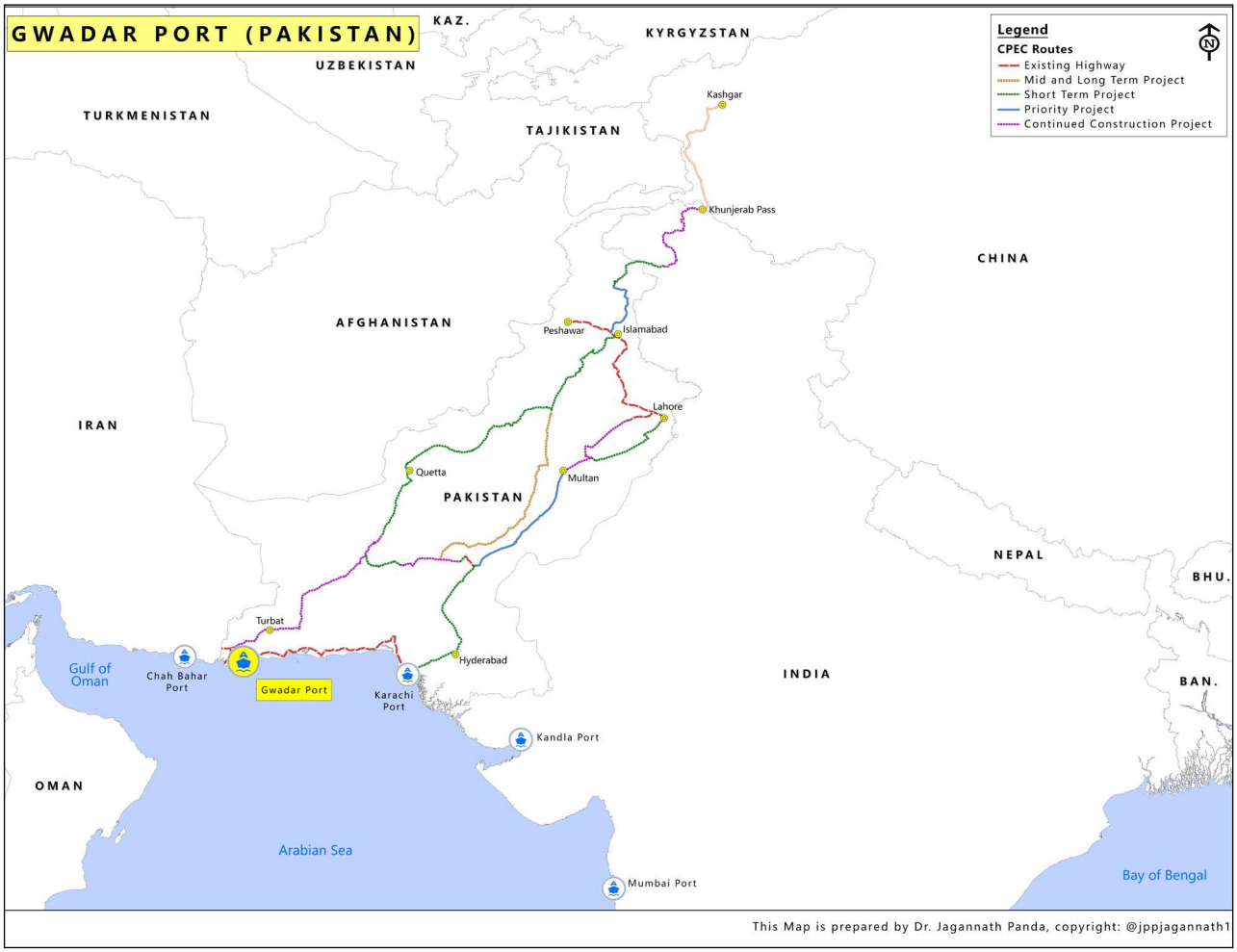
The port of Gwadar presents a strategic puzzle: despite operating under CPEC since 2016, it remains commercially underutilized, yet Beijing, Islamabad, and regional observers treat it as geopolitically consequential. Gwadar sits at the hinge of China's continental and maritime ambitions, illustrating how the BRI may reshape Indian Ocean security and broader Eurasian/ Indo-Pacific power distributions. This issue brief addresses the puzzle by situating Gwadar within the "silk cage" framework and classical geopolitics. It argues that CPEC's terrestrial logic advances China's goal of Eurasian hegemony through connectivity and managed dependence, while its maritime logic emphasizes Indian Ocean access, infrastructure, and long-term presence along key sea lanes. China's Global Security Initiative (GSI) further institutionalizes protection, security cooperation, and corridor governance with Pakistan alongside investment, preserving dual-use optionality even in the absence of significant cargo volumes and profits. For policymakers, the brief clarifies why Gwadar's value lies less in the port itself and more in what it means for China's Eurasian and Indian Ocean hegemonic goals. Accordingly, it outlines achievable policies—maritime domain awareness, partner coordination, and resilience measures—to constrain Gwadar's strategic value and reduce its operational usefulness as a node for Chinese access and force projection.

Introduction

Infrastructure being constructed around and through Eurasia by China is beginning to resemble a silk cage for India. This silken cage is composed of infrastructure nodes connected by economic corridors that are together framed as development projects. Yet roads, railways, technological dependencies, and ports can yield something more consequential than connectivity: a semblance of control—not through annexation, but through the steady embedding of influence and the gradual narrowing of partner autonomy. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the crown jewel of President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Beijing and Islamabad frame the corridor as a growth corridor vital to development. Scholars and pundits



alike across the Indo-Pacific beg to differ and interpret CPEC in stark geopolitical and geostrategic terms: as a mechanism for strategic leverage that explicitly links continental access to maritime reach.

In China's silk cage, not every partner becomes a client, nor is every project coercive. At times, this oversight and assistance—"control" by other means—are not only desired, but directly requested when regimes seek stability, protective capacity, or insulation from rival powers. This includes Pakistan, Iran, Myanmar, and (since 2022) even Russia. At other times, anxiety over perceived or real dependence generates pushback and adaptation. Central Asian states such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, for example, do not simply acquiesce, but preserve room to maneuver through strategies such as "omni-enmeshment," deepening ties with multiple external actors even under conditions of asymmetry.[1]

This is precisely why the silk cage metaphor is analytically useful: rather than assuming linear domination, it focuses attention on how corridors become geopolitical, how influence is institutionalized, and how sovereignty is eroded in pursuit of hegemony.

This brief advances one central claim: the impetus behind the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the silk cage it is producing remains consistent with the logic of classical geopolitics—namely, China's pursuit of advantage across Eurasia and the Indian Ocean.[2] The Chinese Communist Party has demonstrated an astute affinity for classical geopolitical thought and related strategies. This is reflected in the infrastructure projects, which "… masquerade under the guise of development assistance but in reality are used to better push [China's] appetite…" for control and hegemony.[3] In fact, this dynamic reflected in infrastructure projects

that masquerade as development assistance but in practice, expand China's leverage and strategic depth.

Nowhere is the terrestrial–maritime fusion of this strategy more visible than CPEC, the "flagship corridor" linking Kashgar, in western China, and the high Himalayas to Pakistan's Gwadar on the Arabian Sea and wider Indian Ocean (see map). CPEC's connective power for China is undergirded by both a terrestrial and a maritime strategy. First, it reflects British geographer Halford Mackinder's logic of Eurasian positioning by pursuing "Heartland" control not through conquest, but through connectivity, technology, and managed dependence.[4] Second, it advances American naval strategist, Alfred Thayer Mahan's logic of sea power, where control of maritime approaches, logistics access, and strongpoints shapes outcomes across the Indian Ocean system.

The article proceeds as follows. Section one lays out what control means in contemporary classical geopolitics: how the high ground and the heartland are translated into leverage without conquest, and relatedly how the logic of Eurasia's "Rimland," as theorized by Dutch-American political scientist, Nicholas Spykman, explains why India experiences the silk cage as both continental pressure and maritime vulnerability. Section two presents Gwadar as a case study to demonstrate its role as a supporting node in Beijing's broader Eurasian strategy, where leverage is accumulated through access, infrastructure, and strategic optionality—even when cargo volumes over the past decade make the case for a port less than convincing. The final section offers accumulated evidence of Gwadar enhancing China's operational and strategic reach in both terrestrial and maritime Eurasia, even as it is fostered under the guise of development and commercial infrastructure, and explains why this development and the wider CPEC project are existentially threatening to India and wider Eurasia.

Geopolitics and Gwadar's place

The "flagship corridor" connecting China to the western Indian Ocean has three facets. The first is Mackinderian. Mackinder theorized that control of terrestrial Eurasia's "Heartland" by a country would give it the resources and territorial control required to eventually contest not just the "World-Island" of Africa and Eurasia, but the world itself—summarized in the maxim:

> Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland;
> Who rules the heartland commands the World-island;
> Who rules the World-island commands the World.[5]

In essence, the resource accrual—think a Eurasian Napoleonic France at the height of its power—would give the country the capacity to construct a fleet and maintain a military that would overcome any obstacles in its way.

In the twenty-first century, however, heartland "control" rarely looks like military conquest or imperial domination. It is more often pursued as control by other means, which China enables through connectivity, technology, and security dependence. Geography remains critical, and control of the high ground still matters. The Himalayas, in this sense, are not merely difficult terrain but a strategic asset: control of the high Himalayas provides the literal "high ground" that opens the door to Central and South Asia, particularly India, and can "tip the scales of power distributions" in Beijing's favor.[6]

CPEC is the most concentrated expression of this Mackinderian logic. It runs through the western Himalayas and adjacent ranges, seeking to link China's western Xinjiang province with Gwadar via a network of highways, railways, and pipelines. Strategically, the corridor's geography matters because it avoids the contested political spaces of Afghanistan in favor of Pakistan, while providing China with a direct route to the Indian Ocean and strengthening Beijing's ties with Islamabad—China's crucial ally in South Asia and India's arch-rival.

The second facet is Spykmanian, and it is essential for explaining why India experiences the silk cage

simultaneously as continental pressure and maritime vulnerability. Spykman showed the other side of the "Eurasian hegemon" coin by highlighting the strategic importance of Eurasian littoral states like India and Japan, as well as offshore balancers like the United States in countering the hegemonic ambitions of a Eurasian continental power in what became known as his rimland theory. In fact, Spykman's central insight was that a potential Eurasian hegemon could emerge from the rimland's strategic focal points:

> Who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world.[7]

India is not simply a continental rival to China, but a pivotal rimland anchor whose strategic position affects whether a Eurasian hegemon can consolidate advantage. It also explains why India's threat perceptions consistently fuse continental and maritime dimensions: CPEC is a dual challenge that "traverses India's territory" while Gwadar extends China's strategic presence into India's western maritime neighborhood, linking continental pressure with maritime vulnerability.

The third facet brings in the maritime dimension and Mahan's theory of sea power—but it can be stated most clearly through a Mackinderian sequence. In Mackinder's reading, the spaces within inner Eurasia were so vast, and their potentialities so great that a major power could generate a self-sufficient continental economy, separate from and not reliant on the maritime world.[8] The strategic implication followed directly. "The oversetting of the balance of power in favour of the pivot state, resulting in its expansion over the marginal lands of Euro-Asia, would," Mackinder argued, "permit of the use of vast continental resources for fleet-building, and the empire of the world would then be in sight."[9] In other words, terrestrial consolidation was not an alternative to sea power; it was the material foundation that could finance, supply, and sustain it.

This is where Mahan's mechanism becomes analytically

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complementary. Maritime primacy is not simply a function of possessing ships; it is built through the capacity to sustain fleets and commerce over distance and time—for example, through naval strength, merchant shipping, and, critically, the nodes and logistics systems that enable persistent presence and influence along major sea lanes.[10] This interaction of fleet capability with commercial throughput, maritime communications, and access arrangements allows forces to remain effective far from home waters.

Mahan repeatedly used the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars to demonstrate that maritime advantage is a system of endurance: secure lines of communication, dependable bases of supply, and the logistical capacity to keep fleets on station long enough to constrain an adversary's choices.[11] The point is not to force a one-to-one analogy, but to specify the land–sea sequence at the heart of China's strategy: the deeper Beijing's ability to consolidate influence across inner Eurasia, the greater the resource base and strategic depth it can mobilize—and the more meaningful an Indian Ocean outlet like Gwadar becomes for sustaining presence, projecting force, and shaping trade and energy routes.

For this, China's Global Security Initiative (GSI) provides the doctrinal and policy language through

which this land–sea sequence is operationalized. The GSI prizes regime stability, opposition to external interference, and the protection of infrastructure and development corridors. But Beijing's disapproval of external state involvement in the domestic affairs of others only goes so far. In the case of CPEC as well as in BRI and SCO contexts, among others, this translates into deeper Chinese involvement in a host state's security environment: security cooperation, intelligence coordination, counterterrorism engagement, and protection of Chinese personnel and assets are institutionalized alongside investment. Gwadar illustrates how the logic of security and corridors, paired together, can provide access and operational spaces to exploit even when commercial viability remains limited. In effect, the GSI reframes CPEC from a connectivity project into a protected strategic system, legitimizing the security aspects of corridors and routinizing Chinese participation in partner-state security decisions.

Gwadar: Commercial Underperformance, Strategic Importance

Gwadar is an instructive case precisely because it is strategically salient yet commercially underwhelming. The port's foundation stone was laid by Chinese vice-premier Wu Bangguo in March 2002, and it was initially inaugurated by Pakistani President Pervez Musharaf in 2007. The port was incorporated under CPEC in November 2016, though control had already been transferred to the China Overseas Port Holding Company (COPHC) in 2013.[12] Financing for the port is commonly described as a mix of Chinese state-to-state concessional lending and multilateral channels, including the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), alongside other Chinese-backed funding mechanisms.[13] This has attracted scrutiny both inside and outside Pakistan, as have the commercial terms. Under widely cited revenue-sharing arrangements, COPHC receives most revenues generated by port and terminal operations and a large share of free-zone revenues. Even where official expectations anticipate substantial annual cargo volumes over time, these terms have contributed to perceptions within Pakistan that the principal benefits may accrue to China. Related concerns about debt sustainability and "debt-trap" dynamics have become part of the domestic debate, often informed by comparisons to Sri Lanka's experience with Hambantota and associated infrastructure projects.[14]

China's COPHC received a 40-year lease from the Pakistani government in 2017, just after Gwadar became operational in 2016. Utilization of the port and related infrastructure, however, remains severely limited and is still used largely for local artisanal fishing, as it has been for millennia.[15] Built in phases, Gwadar's Phase I infrastructure includes three multipurpose berths (about 602m of quay wall) and a Ro-Ro facility. Technical descriptions commonly cite the ability to handle bulk carriers of approximately 50,000 DWT (often linked to approximately 12.5m draught/channel constraints), even as actual annual cargo volumes remain very low in practice.[16]

Pakistan's pursuit of a viable deep-sea port at Gwadar dates to the 1960s and has been repeatedly justified by both capacity limits at existing ports and concerns about strategic depth. First, Pakistan's legacy ports face tightening physical and operational constraints. Karachi is constrained by urban encroachment and Port Qasim is disadvantaged by its upstream location and higher turnaround times. Gwadar is only 107 miles (172 km) from Chabahar across the border with Iran, itself a new port partly funded by India. Second, gaining strategic depth along the Makran Coast, farther away from India, has always been a goal of Pakistan's military and political elite.[17]

Despite its underperformance commercially, Gwadar retains strategic relevance given its location, its dual-use potential, and the depth of Sino–Pakistani ties. Pakistan, for example, maintains a naval presence at Gwadar through PNS Akram, which functions as a forward operating and surveillance base and hosts the headquarters of the Navy's Western Command.[18]

Reporting confirms episodic port calls and escorts by Pakistan Navy vessels at Gwadar, but does not provide a reliable, current roster of ships permanently homeported there. Beyond this, Gwadar's infrastructure can support very large vessels of China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), including amphibious assault ships and aircraft carriers. However, China does not yet have unmitigated access to the port due to important constraints. According to Vázquez, wartime use is uncertain because host-state permissions may be withheld to avoid belligerent status, and the operational value of such ports is often greater in peacetime—logistics familiarity, replenishment potential, and sustained presence—than in high-end combat support.[19] Gwadar is thus a strategic option for China, not yet a Chinese overseas naval base.

Gwadar and the Limits of Corridor Determinism

Despite its perhaps exaggerated promise, Gwadar remains a prisoner of its geography. Overland connectivity narratives promoted by Beijing and Islamabad—especially those presenting Gwadar as a stable gateway to China, Central Asia and beyond—remain structurally contingent on transit viability and the security–political conditions of the wider region.[20]

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This is the "illogic" embedded in many corridor stories: the strategic promise of connectivity is real, but its realization is persistently hostage to internal security dynamics and regional volatility.[21] These frictions are not abstract. Long before CPEC, Gwadar's development was already entangled with Baloch nationalist grievance and violence, including attacks that directly targeted Chinese personnel associated with the project.[22] The port's political economy—especially fears that benefits will bypass local communities—has therefore remained inseparable from insecurity and opposition on the ground. Nonetheless, these concerns have been alternately quashed or ignored by Islamabad and Beijing. As a result, Gwadar's most durable effects are likely to be geopolitical and security-related rather than commercial.

The concept of control by other means is an analytically useful term to understand this dynamic. Control does not necessarily entail outright territorial conquest, though it may. More broadly, it refers to the subordination of one political entity by another such that the weaker party's capacity to exercise sovereignty is materially constrained. Technological change has expanded the means through which such control can be exercised in ways classical geopolitical theorists did not fully anticipate. The provision of ICT infrastructure, coupled with long-term service and maintenance agreements, can generate asymmetric informational dependence. These dependencies enable the stronger actor to impose favorable conditions and shape trade terms, set standards, and/or institutionalize security arrangements that narrow the weaker party's autonomy.[23]

Applied to Gwadar, the central point is that what may be accumulated is not simply port activity, but structured dependence and strategic leverage for Beijing. This leverage takes the form of long-term operational control arrangements like the 40-year lease, corridor-linked service and maintenance ecosystems, and institutionalized security practices that entrench China's role even as the port remains commercially moribund. For Pakistan, this combination reorients

its security posture toward corridor protection and regime security, as safeguarding Chinese personnel and assets becomes a standing requirement rather than a contingent task. Thus, Islamabad's strategic autonomy is not eliminated, but it narrows as Pakistan's (over) reliance on Chinese capital, technology, and political support raises the political and operational costs of policy divergence.

Conclusion

Gwadar's strategic meaning is best captured by the classical geopolitical sequence developed earlier in this article. According to Mackinder, control of the heartland by other means does not substitute for sea power, rather it underwrites it by generating resources, strategic depth, and leverage across Eurasia that can later be converted into sustained maritime capability. For Spykman, this heartland leverage becomes strategically consequential only insofar as it can be translated into influence along the rimland and its maritime approaches. Indeed, Spykman saw Eurasian hegemony as likely to emanate from the rimland.[24]

It comes as little surprise, then, that Gwadar is experienced as an existential challenge by India. India is a pivotal rimland state—the fulcrum around which security and power distributions in the wider Indian Ocean region swing. Gwadar's strategic significance lies in how it links Chinese continental resources with Indian Ocean access and sustained presence. From a broader Eurasian perspective, the concern is not that Gwadar alone is consequential, but that it forms part of an integrated Chinese architecture of control by other means across the heartland and rimland of the World-Island.

The gap between Gwadar's commercial promise and its underperformance is therefore the core feature to be explained. For Beijing, Gwadar's value lies in its function as a maritime access node that also binds Pakistan more closely to China. It deepens and normalizes Chinese access and influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean while preserving the option of basing and power projection. Even absent a declared overseas base, the accumulation of operational familiarity, routine access, and corridor-linked security governance can expand China's options in the western Indian Ocean and lower the frictions of sustained presence.

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For India and like-minded Indo-Pacific partners too, the policy implication is to treat Gwadar less as a single facility to be "solved" and more as a node within China's wider silk cage architecture. India should prioritize persistent maritime domain awareness around the Makran coast and western Indian Ocean approaches, deepen coordination and cooperation with key Indo-Pacific partners, and invest in measures that reduce the coercive value of any single port node. Chabahar offers a partial counterweight, despite current constraints in Iran.

India's naval build-up must also continue. The Indian Navy is now a resident power in the Indian Ocean alongside the US Navy. Recent successes thwarting piracy and joint naval exercises with Indo-Pacific partners, such as the annual Malabar exercise, clearly demonstrate India's maritime capabilities and signal resolve to Beijing and Islamabad. Nevertheless, sustained engagement by Delhi that links both the

western and eastern Indian Oceans—from Mombasa to Malacca—remains desirable so as to dilute the dual-use potential of Gwadar for China and Pakistan. The strategic choice is therefore clear: by pairing India's naval build-up with sustained western–eastern Indian Ocean engagement and coordinated Indo-Pacific signaling, Delhi can keep Gwadar's dual-use utility constrained and operationally marginal, ensuring that deterrence, not encirclement, defines the regional balance.

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Endnotes

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