



Chabahar and Gawader: A Game of Strategic Energy Interests

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ABSTRACT- This study investigates the ongoing development of the two ports namely Chabahar and Gawader of Iran and Pakistan respectively. While the Chinese government financing Gawader of Pakistan, the Indian government is developing the Chabahar of Iran to balance it. This study further identifies the interests of the two regional powers, China and India in the Indian Ocean, Middle Eastern and North African countries concerning Chabahar and Gawadar. This objective of the study has been achieved by following a pragmatic research approach while using secondary sources of data collection. The findings of the research indicate that both the ports are supporting rather than opposing. It further concludes that the host countries could enhance their benefits from the ongoing projects and make it constructive for the benefit of the whole region through proficient and wise diplomacy.

Key Words: Chabahar, Gawader, Indian Ocean, Pragmatic, Diplomacy

I. INTRODUCTION

Unlike the 20th century which was mostly dominated by the United States in the form of Uni-polarity, is facing new trends and transformation in the 21st century. The decline of US power and economy in the wake of the 21st century due to its protracted and catastrophic stay in Afghanistan has left a void in the Asian region. To secure a prominent position in the South Asian Region, both China and India keen to occupy their respective placement as key powerbrokers in the region (Malhotra, 2018). The two giants with their emerging economies are head-to-head not only in the Indian Ocean but also in the Asian Region, West Asia, South-east Asia, and Central Asia. It is generally agreed that both China and India are the 21st-century key actors in this region and at the same time rising on respective power ambits (Ryan, 2012). The rapid increase in the defense budgets, expanding economic might, emerging world markets, high level of nuclear capabilities, and immense human capital put together both the countries emerging powers in the region as well in the global arena (Malone, David, & Mukherjee, 2010).

The Indian Ocean plays a pivotal role in the ongoing strategic energy game between China and India. About 82% of the energy requirements including gas and oil import of China are through the Indian Ocean.⁴ The famous Strait of Malacca, the busiest trade route of the world lies in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) near Singapore from where 85% of Chinese hydrocarbons, 15% of other goods, and over 25% of exports passing through this narrow strip made Chinese sensitive due to its geography and the presence of United State Navy 7th Fleet near Singapore (Lanteigne, 2008). Hu Jintao, the former president of the Peoples' Republic of China, in his statement, referred to the presence of the United States Navy 7th Fleet near Malacca the "Malacca Dilemma" (Zhong, 2016). This factor compelled China to develop several ports referred to as pigeonholes in the Indian Ocean. All these ports are supposed to secure China's energy flow and reduce her dependence on the Security Lines of Communication (SLOCs).

The Gawader port of Pakistan and an Oil Refinery Complex is amongst Chinese ongoing projects. The Chinese government through the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) connecting Gawader with the Xinjiang province of northwestern China. The Gawader Port not only provides China with a stronghold in IOR but also checks the Indian surveillance. It also provides China an easy and secure route to the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries for energy needs. Apart from this, the Chinese government had also established twin ports of Myanmar namely Kyaukpyu and Sittwe that are connected by a rail-road-waterway pipeline with the province of Yunnan account for 10% of Chinese power needs (Myanmar, G. N. L. O). All these ventures of China are seen by many scholars of international and strategic studies as the plan of India's maritime encirclement. Others contend that it is the Chinese strategy to keep India occupied in the South Asian Region (Scott, 2012).

On the other hand, India has great strategic, economic, and military interests in the IOR as well in the MENA countries. With 8th position in 2001, India rose to 4th position in 2007 for its trade with countries touching the shores of the IOR (Bryson, 2007). About 70% of Indian dependency on oil and gas imported through IOR from the Middle East. This may increase up to 90% shortly which further enhances Indian fears of securing its SLOCs in the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, India predominantly observing the Chinese development of Gawader Port located nearly the Strait of Hormuz that causing "Hormuz Dilemma" for India

in the Gulf of Oman (Brewster, 2014). For this purpose, to protect her interests in the IOR, MENA, and Afghanistan, the Indian government has initiated the Chabahar Port project with the collaboration of Iran in Sistan Baluchistan Province, on the Gulf of Oman.

These strategic vulnerabilities of the IOR including important chokepoints referred to by various strategic analysts "Malacca Dilemma" and "Hormuz Dilemma" led the two countries into the ports politic to protect their energy bases throughout the Asian Peninsula. The prodigious Chinese investment in the deep seaport of Gawader in Pakistan prompted New Delhi to look towards further development of Chabahar located in the Gulf of Oman, almost 72 Km away from the Gawader Port. The two ports, after they became fully operational, shall have different imperatives for the two powers specifically and generally beneficial for the regional countries including Pakistan, Iran, war-torn Afghanistan, and the land-locked Central Asian Republics (CARs). This paper attempts to investigate the ongoing projects of Gawader and Chabahar and their significance in the ongoing game of strategic energy interests between China and India in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and MENA countries.

China's Grand Strategy at Gawader Port

On the occasion of the groundbreaking ceremony of Gwadar in March 2002, General Pervez Musharraf, the former President of Pakistan, summed up the importance of the port by saying:

"If we see this whole region, it is like a funnel. The top of the funnel is this wide area of Central Asia and also China's western region. And this funnel gets narrowed on through Afghanistan and Pakistan and the end of this funnel is Gwadar port. So, this funnel, futuristically, is the economic funnel of this whole region. All the top of this funnel, the broad top of the funnel, anything going into it or out of it, Pakistan and Gwadar port provides the real input, the inlet, and the outlet into it. It will also facilitate the development of shipyards and export of mineral resources of Baluchistan".

Gawader, situated in the province of Baluchistan, attracted much attention from regional and extra-regional powers alike in the current decade. The port's strategic significance can be gauged from the fact that it is located amidst the three immense significant regions of the world: the heavily populated South Asia, the economically rich and resourceful Central Asian Republics, and Western Asia (rich in oil). Its proximity with the Strait of Hormuz making it the game-changer port in the Sino-Indian strategic game. It has a 600 Km long coastal belt and at a distance of 400km away from the Hormuz Strait, accounted for 40% of the international oil tankers pass (Naseem, 2014)

Historically, Gawadar city was gifted to Muscat's sultanate by the Khan of Kalat in 1785 and was remained under their control till the mid of 20th century. It was in September 1958 when Pakistan leased Gawader and its hinterland at the cost of £3 million from Omani control. Pakistan identified Gawadar as a port site in 1964 (Anwar, 2010). Until the port was handed over to China on 18th February various major events took place at Gawader (Khan, 2013).

Gawader Projects witnessed many ups and down and later on the project was shifted to the Singaporean state-owned Port of Singapore Authority (PSA) in February 2007 (Goldstein & Pananond, 2008). Once again shifting the project to PSA couldn't fulfill the desires of the Pakistani authorities accompanied by certain issues to the PSA from the Pakistani side. The government's failure to deliver 550 acres of land to the port authorities for site development at Gawader. Finally, the PSA announced in September 2012 to transfer their shares in the project and left the site with immediate effect. Some of the milestones that were achieved during this period were the construction of one Bulk Cargo Terminal, one Grain Terminal, two Oil Terminals, one Approach Channel, and four Container Berths (Yousaf, 2013).

The PSA's lack of interest and its later withdrawal from the project lead to a renewed interest of china to take over the port, which it did in February 2013. The official transfer of the Concession Agreement from the Port of Singapore Authority (PSA) to the China Overseas Port Holding Company was carried out in the presence of President Asif Ali Zardari. Presently, the port infrastructure and services rapidly developing under the China Overseas Port Holding Company containing 3 berths, a Roll-on Roll-off 4.5 km long approach channel, an Outer dock, an inner dock, turning basin, one in number 100 m service berth, two gantry cranes for containers, five cranes for 16-40 tons load, related port infrastructure and port handling equipment while the port is only linked with Karachi via the Makran Coastal Highway (Khan, 2013).

Before this agreement, Indian Defense Minister A.K Antony put much reservation by claiming it China's string of Pearl that encircling India (Naidu, G. V. C). He further added that it will jeopardize the security of the western frontiers. As Indian concerns over Gawader port was not merely due to the China's factor but the port would give an edge to Pakistan over India in Central Asia as well as it will also provide a strategic depth in Arabian sea and release the burden of the two ports Karachi and Port Qasim, while opened to easily disrupt. Certainly, China's interests in Gawadar port are manifold. The recent 46-billion-dollar project of the Pak-china economic corridor project (CPEC) will connect the Gawader port to china's south-western border and will offer China direct access to the Strait of Hormuz, the Arabian Sea, and the Gulf of Aden (Dinesh, 2021). This connectivity shall not only decrease Beijing's dependence on Malacca Strait but

will also allow those Central Asia republics to access Pakistan's deep-water ports without having to rely on a politically unstable Afghanistan as a transit corridor.

IOR and Gawader Port;

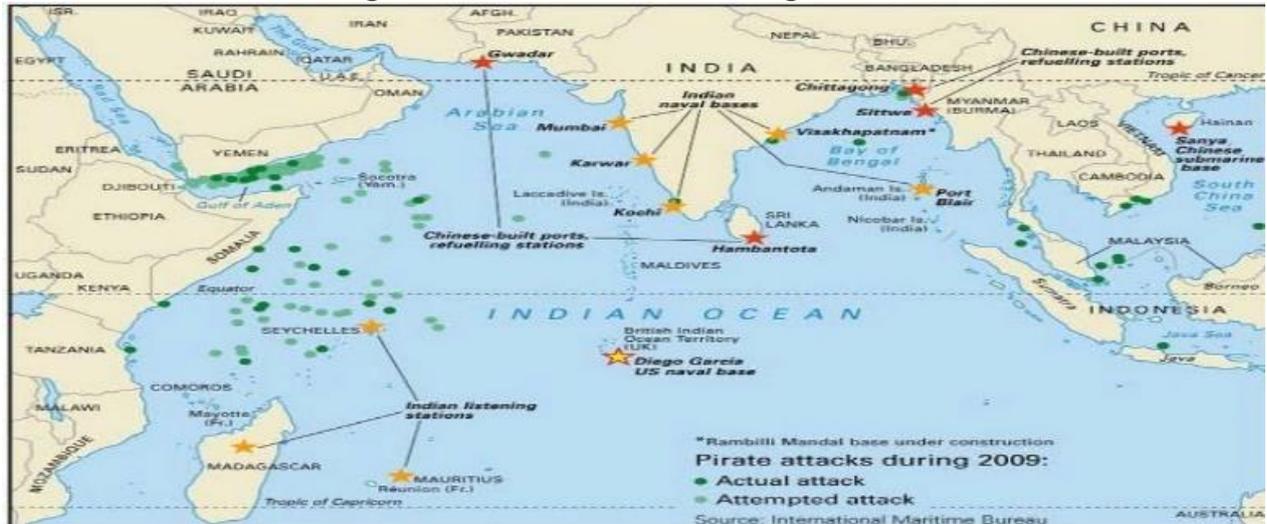
The fortune of the Indian ocean has changed dramatically (Pearson, 2006). There was a time when it was known as the 'neglected ocean' but now it is the center of the strategic activities as there are vessels, both nuclear and conventional, in the ocean. Apart from that, it has its own strategic, as well as economic significance as there are rare minerals, are present abundantly. Some of the important minerals are; the maximum gold extracted at the world level is 87.7%, the product of tin is 56.6%, the product of manganese is 28.5 %, the production of nickel is 25.2 % and the production of natural rubber is 77.3%. These goods contribute to the world's goods' highest tonnage. Littoral states reserve 65% of oil of the world, and the production of gas is 35% which passes through it. The presence of the United States is not the sole cause but India is also a tough challenge to the interests of China in the IOR region (Pehrson, 2006). China's importance to India is measured by the attentiveness it gives to India's rising maritime power. Chinese strategists proclaim India as the commanding force and according to them due to their great power and prospects they can become equal to China, they can easily counter their attempt to exercise control in the IOR. As discussed earlier, the Indian Ocean Region has much strategic importance for China due to its lucrative support in the area. The continuous and ever-growing economic development of China is greatly dependent on routes that are quite secure for energy supplies and also they conduct their trade through the IOR. While establishing influence to avoid all these vulnerabilities and to secure the sea line of communication, PRC espouses the strategy of developing seaports in the region. The Western Security Analysts refers to this Chinese strategy "String of Pearl" aimed at encircling India by using this policy (Khalid, Ijaz, & Gul, 2017). For Mohan, it is a "new game" challenging India's own sea lane of communications (SLOCs) and the general control that India has over the said region. On the other hand, Hu Zhiyong by dismissing all these forecasts call it an illusion fueled by paranoia instead that china's presence in the region shall bring economic prosperity and strategic security (Brown, 2014).

The deep-sea port at Gawader, referred to by Scott as the lynchpin of china's presence in the region, while Ramachandran calls it "China's Pearl in Pakistan's waters" (Scott, 2008). But we can't simply bound Gawadar's significance in the IOR purely strategic or Maritime encirclement of India, because of the development of key ports by China where it has access to naval facilities at Marao (Maldives), Great Coco, Mergui, Zadetkyi, and Kyaukpaya, Hianggyi, and Hambantota (Sri Lanka) most of them are energy oriented. Following are some of the major Beijing objectives attached with the Gawadar project throughout the IOR.

- The greater magnitude dependence of PRC on the "Malacca Strait" in the IOR where PRC's bulk of energy container passes daily shall be drastically released, once the project has fully accomplished.
- The Gawadar-Kasghar connection under the CPEC shall reduce the distance from 10,000 km to just 4500km for Beijing that almost travels through the volatile IOR from "Strait of Malacca".
- The China-Africa trade connection could be made fastest and reliable once Gawader got operational.
- The future Naval Base at Gawadar shall boost up the surveillance capabilities of PLAN and will give an edge over the Indian Navy in the IOR.
- The Gawadar shall provide direct access for PRC to explore minerals in the IOR.
- This port will enable China to frustrate India at the Strait of Hurmuz.
- The Gawader will provide surveillance capabilities for China over Indian SLOCs.
- Presence at Gawadar shall minimize Pirate attacks on the Chinese ships in the IOR, persisting, especially in the Region of Somalia and Gulf of Aden.

The following figure shows both Chinese and Indian funded ports through Red stars and yellow stars respectively in IOR, except Chabahar port which will be thoroughly discussed in the latter part of this paper.

Figure 1. Chinese and Indian Funding Ports

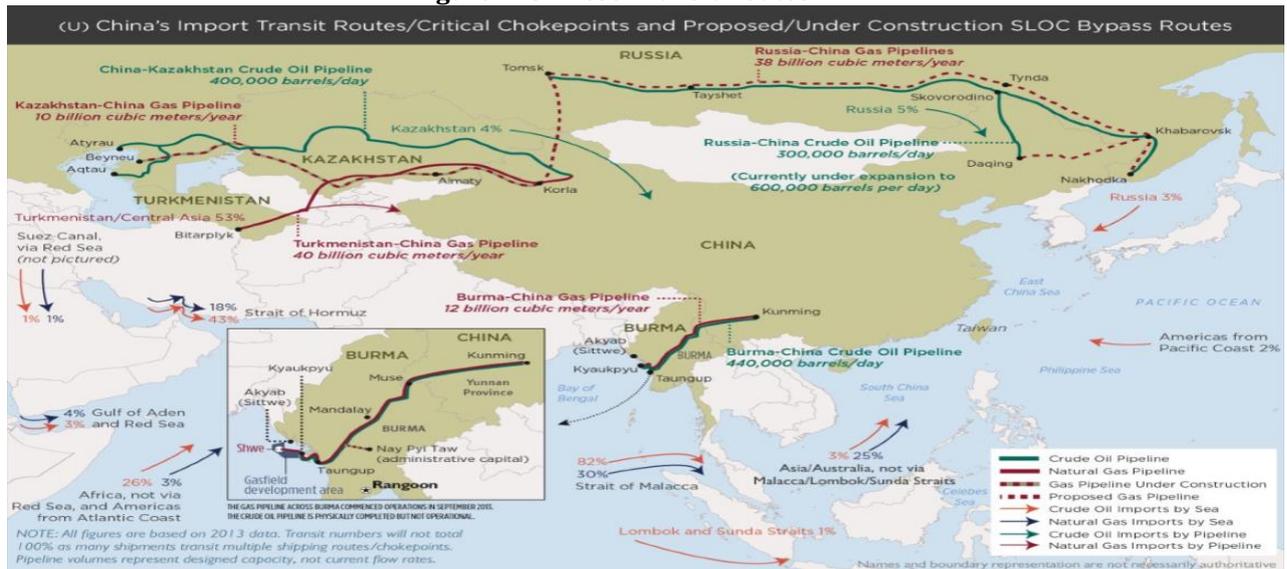


Gawadar Port and MENA

According to Afshin Molavi of the New American Foundation, China is an “energy panda” and this means that there is a need for the constant and secure flow of resources in the energy sector, the way a panda requires constant eating just to service (Molavi, 2011). Molavi further contends that since the 2000s Asia’s importance as the hub for trade for the Middle East region has grown significantly, as through this region oil is imported in million barrels on daily basis. Of the 11 million imported barrels of oil per day, six million barrels go to China each day (Molavi, 2011). Similarly, Zaid Haider writes, as China’s industry continues to grow apace, so does its energy needs (Shah, 2015). It is a fact that China heavily dependent on Middle Eastern Oil. Presently, the share of oil imported by China from ME is more than 50% which is expected to grow up to 70% by 2020 and continued to advance in the future. Among Middle Eastern countries, China is the largest energy supplier of Saudi Arabia (Liangxiang, 2005). China imports 20% of its crude oil from KSA. According to Chinese government reports the total volume of trade between China and ME countries \$222 billion by 2012. UAE is another huge trade partner of China. The China and Emirates trade volume may rise to \$100 billion by 2016. Many other countries of the ME region including Iraq, Kuwait, and, Yemen have provided a wide range of trading opportunities for China (Ziegler, 2006).

Keeping in mind the above-stated importance of the ME region, Beijing went on to develop Gawadar along with a corridor project worth 46 billion US dollars that will connect the Chinese western province of Xinxiang by road and railway to the Gawadar. After Gawadar operationalization, the flow of energy will get fast for Beijing from the ME countries. The significance of Gawadar for China is mostly due to its closeness to the important chokepoint “Strait of Hurmuz”, which is the world’s key, and primary oil shipping route accounts for more than 30 percent of the world’s seaborne oil exports (Gholz, Eugene, & Press, 2010). The Washington reports reveal that out of 51% of oil import by China from the Middle East, 42% of it passes through the famous Hurmuz Strait. Thus, the volatile ME region, currently prone to ISIS, and the presence of the US navy at this vital chokepoint made it susceptible to potential conflict. Similarly, the growing influence of India in the region along the Gulf of Oman and its Maritime cooperation with Tehran made Gawadar a “Strategic Game Changer” port in the region for Beijing, claimed by both Western and Indian.

Figure 2. Chinese Transit Routes



Indian Grand Strategy and the port of Chababar

The Port of Chababar, geographically in the Sistan and Baluchistan Province is the main Iranian port that provides direct access to the Indian Ocean (Khan, 2012). The Chababar port's strategic importance is not only due to its proximity of about 330 km to the Strait of Hormuz but also of its location as it is at the cross junction of the three regions namely South Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asian Republics. As the port location is ideal for the fragile economy of Tehran, it also gives Iran strategic leverage in Afghanistan and land-locked countries of central Asia over Gawadar of Pakistan. Similarly, India, fascinated by the immense strategic importance of Chababar of her friendly Iran, is the huge partner in developing the port throughout the last decade. The Chababar port with its more than 300 km marine border massively attracted Delhi in the current decade, once remained a part of the Indo-Iran International North-South Transport Corridor strategy (Sigdel, 2020).

Historically, the port of Chababar faced many complications during its development period. By the efforts of The Shah of Iran, the port's initial plan was started in the 1970s with the help of the USA (Ashwarya, 2017). This port got a new life after Iran-Iraq War but it didn't receive that attention in the late 70s because of the revolution in Iran. The port first operationalized in 1983 with the completion of four jetties. The tripartite agreement was made in 2001 among Iran, India, and Afghanistan under which in 2002 the construction of the first phase of Chababar port began with 86 million dollars in initial investment by the Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust (JNPT) and Kandla Port Trust (KPT) (Maruschke, 2019). Shortly after china decided to invest in Gawadar, an agreement was signed between Iranian President Khatemi and Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee to further develop Chababar port but remained stalled because of UN and western sanctions on Iran and questions about its commercial viability. India for the first time in 2012 exported wheat through Chababar to Afghanistan to repeal United States criticism (Price, 2013).

Figure 3. Chabahar Port Strategic Location



After India's renewed interest in the Chabahar, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh halted investment in the port due to the US disagreement. Later on, upon assuming office in May 2014, the Modi's government re-ordered investment in the project.

Chabahar Port and the Indian Ocean Region

In the early 16th century, Portuguese Governor Alfonso Albuquerque had opined that "control of key choke points extending from the Horn of Africa to the Cape of Good Hope and the Malacca Strait was essential to prevent an inimical power from making an entry in the Indian Ocean" (Mahy, 2011). Similarly, the highly influential K.M. Panikkar, pioneer Indian geopolitician, argued that "since India's future was dependent on the Indian Ocean, then the Indian Ocean must therefore remain truly Indian" (Rumley, Doyle, & Chaturvedi, 2012).

The post-independence politics of India kept it away from many countries of IOR due to its Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) that limited it to South Asia. It was after the cold war that prompted Indian strategists to put together a "looks East policy" to secure Indian stakes in the IOR concerning rising China. Under this policy, India made certain partners in IOR including Japan, Taiwan, and Australia are notables along with the USA to compete with emerging China in Southeast Asia and IOR.

Like China, India has not only economic interests but also has ambitions to secure a dominant position over the IOR due to its proximity and the most populous nation of IOR. While recognizing the importance of the trade through IOR, the Indian maritime strategic analyst declared in 2004 that controlling the key chokes in this region shall provide her an upper hand in international affairs, where the currency of military power remains a stark reality. The growing trade and energy rate that flows through IOR also alerting India to guard it.

All these motives, accompanied by growing Sino-Pak partnerships in the different sectors including the Gawadar port project, energy, and defense cooperation increased New Delhi concerns. Of All these projects, prominently the Gawadar port project and the latest multi-billion CPEC that will make China independent of Malacca Strait in the IOR, once considered by India as a useful bargaining chip in the Game of Power made India more anemic and prompted towards different agreements including Chabahar of Iran instead of US and EU sanctions on Iran (Garlick, 2018).

The Chabahar Port, located on the mouth of Oman Gulf is considered to be the most powerful tool for both India and the US after the lifting of nuclear sanctions on Iran. The proximity of the port with strategic Gawadar port, and its location out of Hurmaz strait shall maintain Indo-US supremacy over IOR. On the one hand, where it shall allow India to bypass Pakistan for trade with Central Asian Countries, on the other hand, it will allow India to check Sino-Pak activities in the Arabian Sea. Following are some of the implications of Chabahar for India.

- It will increase Indo-US and Indo-Iran maritime collaboration
- It will enhance Indian surveillance of China's vessels Passing through IOR
- It will be used as a naval base by India in case of any threat to her SLOCs in the IOR.
- It will release the Chinese ambition of encircling India through the "String of Pearls" in the IOR.

India's Interests in ME and the Port of Chabahar

Growing economy and energy demand compels India not only to look towards Central Asian countries but also to look west Asia (Wenmu, 2006). Middle east, whereas Delhi maintained stable relations with countries also a potential market for Indian goods and services. After the United States and China, India is now the world's third-largest importer of crude oil. IAEA predictions pretend that India will burn through 4.1 million barrels per day (mb/d) in the second quarter of 2015, edging out Japan's 3.8 mb/d. Besides India is also providing one of the world's fast-developing markets for Middle Eastern oil (Chen, & Chen, 2013).

Qatar is the highest exporter of Liquefied Natural Gas to India with 82% followed by Nigeria, and Yemen with 7% and 6% respectively (Madan, 2010). Similarly, Saudi Arabia is the top crude oil exporter with 18% followed by other Middle Eastern states. Saudi Arabia exported 795,000 barrels per day to India recently a gain of about 4.6 percent in 2014. Next to Saudi Arabia, Iran is the most trusted partner of Delhi, also export a significant amount of oil and gas to India. At its peak in 2008-09, India was importing over \$1 billion worth of petroleum products from Iran, restrained by nuclear sanctions; India's oil imports fall drastically in the current decade.

India's Energy Interest faces vulnerabilities not only in the IOR but also in the Middle East for certain reasons. Its direct interests and connections with the GCC countries and Israel create a huge dilemma for Delhi while maintaining balanced relations. Similarly, the ISIS threat in the ME region shall be an obstacle for India to secure her high energy stakes in the region (Caballero-Anthony, 2005). Above all these, the current Chinese engagement in the Middle East Region as the last month trip of China's premier to Saudi Arabia and Iran proves enormous concerns for Modi's Administration. Consequently, in such conditions, when China prodigiously spending in Pakistan and her immense willingness to engage with Tehran and Iraq, it is the only crucial opportunity of "Golden Gate" that can release India's vulnerabilities throughout the ME region. Ansari pointing out that New Delhi had to quickly bestir it, said, "If they drag their feet, the market will not wait" (Chandran, & Chari, 2017). He further extends by pointing towards the Indian-backed port that "Chabahar port is just 44 miles away from Gwadar and is strategically situated between Pakistan and the Persian Gulf, making it especially valuable for checking any Chinese attempt to use Gwadar to deepen naval deployments in Middle Eastern waters". The Port of Chabahar, as expected by many in Delhi, shall water down china's influence in the ME region. Similarly, the Iran-Oman-India Gas pipeline that will connect Chabahar with India is also underway, which will provide New Delhi leverage in Tehran over the Iran-Pak-China gas pipeline through Gawader (Rafique, 2016). Research Analyst, Lindsay Hughes rightly refers to Chabahar as an indispensable opportunity by concluding that "opportunity of such magnitude does not present themselves often and it will be a tragedy if India does not avail itself of this one" (Scott, 2008).

II. CONCLUSION

The above findings indicate that the 21st century is the century of Geo-Economy and Geo-Energy whereas every country will seek and secure energy resources within and outside her respective regions. It will not be out of place to say that the two Asian giants, India and China, the latter one aspiring Global power status, will be the future power brokers in Global Affairs.

The two ongoing projects of Chabahar and Gawadar along with the development of Pipeline projects including the Iran-Pakistan project, India-Oman-Iran Project shall significantly decrease the energy demands of the two Powers. These economic activities not only bring economic stability to the whole region but will also substantially support the delicate economies of Pakistan and Iran. The war turns Afghanistan shall be the ample beneficiary of all these projects once internally stabilized. Land-locked Central Asian countries shall also approach through Gawadar and Chabahar into the Warm Water that will transform these ports into Economic Hubs and Global Energy corridors.

While many sitting in the New-Delhi and Washington claiming the two ports as rival ports profoundly lacking the very economical perspective of these ports. In short term, both Pakistan and Iran cannot bother with such types of claims harmful to their economic gains from the two ports. Similarly, China will never allow the two ports as competitor ports because this will halt her huge interests in both ports. While Javed Zarif negating the claims stated that both Chabahar and Gawadar shall be the future facilitator, not competitor refers by many in Western media.

Both pessimism and optimism exist regarding the two ports in certain corners, but in short term, the four partners of these two developing ports will strongly resist any pessimistic thoughts regarding the two ports. The fact is that both China and India never desire any intimidation to their huge investment alongside their gigantic future economic prospects from these two ports. Correspondingly, to achieve the maximum potentials of these ports, Pakistan and Iran had to realize the geopolitics of the Asian Region and use the

ports to cheer collaboration rather than competition amongst regional powers. Both Gwadar and Chabahar could be used as a pathway in promoting congruence and affluence in the region. Strong political determination and wise diplomacy will be needed to organize all stakeholders in the apt future.

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