

BOOK REVIEW

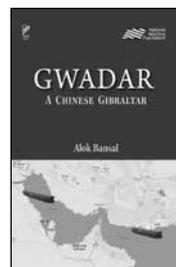
Gwadar: A Chinese Gibraltar

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Over the years, Gwadar has emerged as a topic of intrigue, frequently featuring in discussions on geopolitics and strategy. However, comprehensive literary works on this enigmatic port city have remained scarce—particularly by Indian authors. *Gwadar: A Chinese Gibraltar* by Captain Ashok Bansal (Retd.), published by Pentagon Press LLP this year, is a refreshing and much-needed contribution to this discourse.

Since Pakistan's independence, and especially after the 1971 War, which led to the creation of Bangladesh, and also resulted in the disruption of Pakistan's access to its most prominent trade routes to Karachi, the country has been increasingly wanting strategic deep-sea ports like Gwadar, located in the province of Balochistan, an area already marred by a long-standing sub-nationalist movement. These

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sentiments, combined with a mix of rampant poverty and rich natural resources, have further complicated the socio-political landscape. Recognising the strategic importance of Gwadar, China, on the other hand, has a vested interest in the port as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The specific project for the port's development was launched with two primary aims: one, to secure direct access to the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea without navigating through the South China Sea and the Malacca Strait; and second, to foster economic development in its underdeveloped western Xinjiang region.

The book is structured for an easy read, with an introduction, followed by well laid out seven chapters, It starts with the historical background of the Makran coast and Balochistan, followed by details of the Gwadar deep-sea port project, the security implications for Pakistan, significance for China, the impact on regional security, and, lastly, the implications for India. The book concludes with bold, insightful and pertinent recommendations as part of the conclusion, tying together the key themes of the book.

The introductory chapter presents the topic by discussing the strategic peculiarities of Gwadar's location and its implications for the region. It also delves into China's perspective on Gwadar, emphasising its critical importance as a link in the BRI, connecting Kashgar to Gwadar, and the benefits both Pakistan and China want to accrue from the project. It also highlights the concerns of the local population on how the port's development may benefit only China and some Pakistani elites rather than the Baloch people.

The first chapter titled, "Gwadar, Makran Coast, and Balochistan: Historical Evolution", explores Gwadar's evolution from an ignore dfishing town to a key geopolitical pivot. Now seen as a link point of Central Asia, Gwadar has seen successive conquests from Cyrus the Great, to Alexander, the Mauryan Empire, and, finally, the rule of the Khan of Kalat under the Sultanate of Oman. The chapter brings out its change under British colonial rule, which redefined the region's boundaries by drawing the Goldsmid Line in 1871 (between Pakistan and Iran) and the Durand Line in 1893 (Between Pakistan and Afghanistan). It also revisits Gwadar's 174-year control by Oman until its purchase by Pakistan in 1958, through British mediation. The chapter offers a convincing description of Gwadar's role in China's

BRI, proximity to the Strait of Hormuz and its potential as a trade and trans-shipment point. It also gives the details of the rich natural resources of Balochistan and their importance for Pakistan.

The second chapter, "Gwadar Deep-Sea Port Project: Pakistani Dream and the Present Status" brings out Pakistan's aspirations for developing deep-sea ports, away from Indian shores. The chapter traces Gwadar's transition from the neglect to a critical component of Pakistan's maritime ambitions, emphasising its role in enhancing naval capabilities and connecting regional trade routes. The construction of Gwadar port started in 2002, with the key milestone of Phase-1 being completed in 2007, which was financed majorly by China. It created three berths of 200m each at a cost of \$248 million. Phase-2, which started in 2006, remains incomplete due to logistical issues and instability. Finally, in 2018-19, Phase-2 was amended according to modified a terminal expansion plan to make the port functional and emerge from the cost and time overruns. It also discusses challenges such as the Baloch insurgency, water scarcity, and issues of power shortages, and connectivity, particularly its integration with the Karakoram highway to China's Xinjiang province. The chapter concludes by emphasising Gwadar's unrealised potential as a regional economic and strategic hub.

The third chapter, "Security Implications for Pakistan", highlights the port's strategic importance as a military and economic hub, particularly as an alternative to routes near the Indian border, following past blockades of Karachi during conflicts. It brings out Gwadar's role in reducing Pakistan's reliance on vulnerable ports, strengthening its naval capabilities, and developing the western part of the country. However, the development has faced resistance from the Baloch people, who feel marginalised and fear being excluded from its benefits. Additionally, Gwadar's location is vulnerable to illegal activities, including smuggling and trafficking, posing further security challenges. Pakistan, on the other hand, has responded by raising additional land and maritime forces fully sponsored by China to secure the routes from Kashgar to Gwadar and the region around. Despite its potential as a strategic asset, Gwadar's success hinges on addressing local discontent and security concerns while improving infrastructure and governance.

The fourth chapter, focused on “Significance for China”, examines the strategic importance of Gwadar for China, aligning it to Mackinder’s theory of Eurasian domination. Being the most vital point in BRI, Gwadar connects the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), linking the Xinjiang region to the Arabian Sea through an extensive corridor of infrastructure worth \$46 billion. This includes highways, railways, pipelines and energy projects throughout the route. Gwadar also supports China’s energy needs, offering alternatives to the vulnerable South China Sea/ Strait of Malacca, and granting direct access to the Persian Gulf. Geopolitically, it also counters the US and Indian influence in the Indian Ocean, strengthening China’s regional ambitions.

The fifth chapter, assessing “Impact on Regional Security” explores the regional security implications as a trade and energy transit point for Afghanistan and Central Asia, including Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. It also brings out how it competes with Iran’s Chabahar port, developed with Indian support, as well as Jabel Ali port of Dubai, sparking a geopolitical rivalry for trade and influence in Central Asia. Gwadar’s success could challenge Dubai’s dominance, potentially becoming a future economic hub for West Asia. This chapter examines the regional impact of the Gwadar port project, including the impact on major powers like the United States and Russia. The analysis highlights how the port’s development affects their strategic interests, including the US’ substantial troop presence in the Gulf region and Russia’s concerns over arms trade and transport logistics in the area.

The sixth chapter on “Implications for India”, argues that the development of Gwadar undermines India’s influence over maritime trade routes. Economically, India’s investment in Chabahar port may face challenges as Gwadar emerges as a competing gateway for Central Asia. It also complicates any potential maritime blockade by India, along with growing concerns over India’s own energy security. The biggest disadvantage is that it enhances China’s access to the Arabian Sea, shifting the South Asian balance of power in the region.

The concluding chapter sums up the book with some hard hitting recommendations for India to counter the growing influence of Gwadar port. These include aspects like monitoring Gwadar’s

infrastructure and traffic to assess CPEC's impact, supporting anti-CPEC movements to create financial and time strain, along with accelerating Chabahar's development by seeking US support and many more relevant points which can counter both Pakistan's advantage and China's maritime presence, overall returning balance of power in the region.

The 210-page book, with 28 pages of bibliography, amounting to 26 percent of total book volume, makes it one of the most comprehensive research works on the subject. There is some repetition due to interconnected topics within various chapters. One notable issue observed is the limited use of visuals, as the book contains only four black and white photographs. Two of these are of a paragraph each from telegrams/letters exchanged regarding the status of Gwadar, of 1939 and 1947 vintage, and the other two provide layouts of railway networks in Iran, making it a bit difficult to place the unique geography and strategic impact of the location of Gwadar port and the area around for a first time reader.

Overall, the book is a must read not only for the military leadership but also the policy-makers and the bureaucracy, apart from the historians and academia as it a remarkable effort to document Gwadar's strategic, historical, and geopolitical significance. It also gives an understanding of how nations committed to an idea, uncompromising in their stand, in relentless pursuit of truth and national interest may change the course of geographic limitations and history for eternity.